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Book Review: Shame:Theory, Therapy Theology

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stock, "the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (NRSV).
    2.   Thanks to Chris Meyers for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this review.

Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology, by Stephen Pattison. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. x and 315. $65.00

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Shame, by its nature, avoids the public eye. So also has it been with modern scholarly analyses of shame, at least in comparison to its near relative, guilt. This has changed in recent years, according to Stephen Pattison, Cardiff University practical theologian, as "a plethora of books with a huge variety of perspectives ranging from literature, sociology and philosophy to various kinds of psychology has emerged on the topic of shame" (p. 1). Still, a sufficient treatment of shame is lacking in theology, and he has written *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology* in order to meet this need.
    Is shame good or bad? An impressive history of ethical and religious thought weighs in on the positive side of shame's connection to morality. Aristotle, e.g., commends shame (*aidôs*), though he rejects Greek tradition by not considering it fully a virtue. Shame is a kind of fear of disrepute, which can serve to restrain young people from doing shameful acts.[1] Similarly, Thomas Aquinas treats *verecundia* as a positive element of character, a kind of preparation for virtue.[2] For Puritan moralists, shame, as an internalization of moral authority, is essential to moral education.[3] John Locke concurs: "Shame of doing amiss, and deserving Chastisement, is the only true Restraint belonging to Virtue. The Smart of the Rod, if Shame accompanies it not, soon ceases, and is forgotten, and will quickly by the Use lose its Terror."[4]
    In light of this tradition, Pattison's account of shame is striking, as he focuses on a very different notion of shame, and draws a very different moral assessment. He gives brief acknowledgement to shame's positive role (pp. 2, 84-85), but does not develop an account of it, or explore its relation to the negative aspect or kind of shame ("chronic" or "dysfunctional" shame) that is his almost exclusive focus. For Pattison, the relation between shame and morality is overwhelmingly negative. He draws upon literature that is primarily recent, psychological, and sociological in character, focusing on studies of "shamed" individuals whose psyches are damaged by traumatic personal experiences.
    Shame is a deeply personal book, drawing from Pattison's own experience of chronic shame, an experience he attributes in part to his involvement in the Christian faith. (This experience included a "sense of ontological guilt, fundamentally defiled identity and basic badness" (p. 7), and an experience of "ontological shame," i.e. "shame that relates to being human and finding oneself to be limited and mortal" (p. 181).)   Pattison sketches three objectives for the study, roughly corresponding to the book's three

parts: to provide an overview of the various understandings and approaches to shame and "try to make sense of the phenomenon" of shame; to "attempt to understand" chronic shame; and to "consider the relationship between the ideology and practice of Christianity and human experiences of shame" (p. 2). His success in reaching these objectives is mixed. Pattison's overviews of the psychological and sociological literature are helpful, particularly in making the range of data accessible to practical theologians. His efforts toward "understanding" shame, however, while illuminating in some aspects, fall short. Finally, while Pattison's discussion of Christianity and shame will aid in understanding how chronically shamed people may tend to interpret certain theological ideas and practices, it falls far short of making plausible Pattison's conclusion that orthodox Christian theology should be jettisoned.

In part I, Pattison extensively catalogues recent approaches to understanding the nature of emotions and shame. Apart from a few passages, Pattison's approach to the data may be fairly characterized as "explication without evaluation." His methodological commitments make it difficult for him to reach his objective of moving from summarizing a "kaleidoscope" (p. 59) of studies and positions to providing a clear and fruitful account of what shame is. Pattison lists and affirms the contributions of a variety of disciplines and approaches, favoring some form of a further, "social constructivist" methodological approach, one he characterizes as an epistemological stance that sees all experience as socially and linguistically constructed. He characterizes this approach as liberating, enabling us "to take all the insights and approaches [provided by the other approaches] . . . seriously as important languages about shame. However, it does not require a commitment to any particular world view. We can look at the various ways in which the concept 'shame' is used without being required to make a judgment as to whether one way of thinking or speaking about shame is 'more true' than another" (p. 60). This relativistic approach ultimately subverts Pattison's overall premise concerning shame, for, once adopted, it also follows that there is no basis for concluding that any single view of the *goodness or badness* of shame is any "more true" than any other. But Pattison takes it as read that chronic shame is bad, and that, e.g., insofar as Christianity's ideas and practices produce shame in people, they should be changed. These normative judgments are manifestly non-relativistic, but Pattison has ruled out any basis for making them.

Pattison also rejects "over-simplifying approaches" that "would produce what would then seem to be a speciously monolithic clarity about the understanding of shame," abandoning "the quest for narrow definition, synthesis, normativity and theoretical exclusivism" (p. 62). Unfortunately, it is neither obvious just what these undesirable approaches actually amount to, nor what rejecting them actually requires. For definitions or rational accounts do not *need* to be overly narrow or simplistic; indeed, one may think that an overly narrow definition just is a *bad* definition – one that does not fully account for all that it needs to explain. Pattison, however, seems to regard "openness and humility" to require an abandoning of the quest for definition itself. He opts for a "methodologically liberating," broader approach, which he describes as a Wittgensteinian "family resem-

blance" theory (p. 61). Unfortunately, again, Pattison does not make clear what in this case the family resemblances actually are. His approach remains more a "kaleidoscope" of data and information than a prism of clarity and understanding. This methodology also leads to inconsistencies and gaps within Pattison's account, for he in fact eventually *does* provide what amounts to a rough definition of shame: "a condition that denotes alienation, isolation, defilement, depletion and pain, both individual and social" (p. 154), and he suggests his own "working understanding" of shame, as "toxic unwantedness" (p. 182). Both of these are suggestive. However, they sit in tension with Pattison's stated methodology, and when these accounts of shame do appear they are theoretically unmotivated and unjustified.

In part II Pattison turns primarily to the notion of chronic shame. He lists and describes 24 "main characteristics of shame," many of which include subsidiary characteristics. In chapter 5 he diverges from the explication mode, to articulate his own position. Here he considers the effects of shame on ethics and morality. "Chronically shamed people are pre-social and pre-moral . . . while they may often behave in socially acceptable and conformist ways, they will not really be capable of exercising reliable moral judgment and responsibility" (p. 124). Some of the possible moral results of chronic shame include anger and rage, addictions, sloth (indeed, the whole range of the seven deadly sins), and contempt for others (127). From an ethical perspective this discussion raises some interesting and potentially fruitful ideas. Here I was struck, however, by the disparity between Pattison's almost wholly negative view of the relation between morality and shame and the generally very positive view of it in the western ethical tradition, and the fact that Pattison simply does not develop the positive side or even explore its relation to his argument. Granted, this is not an ethics book; still, it covers important moral ground, and Pattison makes a number of moral claims about shame. His lack of deeper ethical analysis leaves a gaping lacuna that, at best, renders his moral conclusions *in*conclusive. I suspect that Pattison's approach evidences a broader (cultural) conceptual shift regarding shame (and related notions), not in the *terms* of the discussion, but in the background *framework* according to which the terms are understood – from something like an "ethical" conception of shame to a "psychological" conception.[5] Pattison's study reflects the psychological conception – it constitutes his starting point, and he construes the moral aspects of shame from within that stance.

Part III deals with shame and Christianity. Pattison surveys contemporary theological accounts of shame, deeming them all to be lacking, particularly in their recognition of the part that religion itself plays in engendering and exploiting chronic shame. On this score, Pattison's diagnosis of traditional Christian thought and practice is severe. According to Pattison, the "ascent of the monarchical deity [of Jewish and medieval Christian thought] and the rise of human shame are almost contemporaneous in Judaeo-Christian mythology" (pp. 235-6). The "God of the Old Testament" does not fare well: "The hallmark of divine laughter is of aggressive mocking, scorn and ridicule, not that of merriment and joy. This shame-producing laughter from a contemptuous, shameless God is not an encouraging

starting point for those who would wish theological ideas and images to address, reduce and alleviate human shame rather than to exacerbate it." Indeed, for Pattison, "The God of the Old Testament is a kind of all-too-human oriental despot who overtly exploits shame in the interests of bolstering his own power and control" (p. 236).

Beyond its references that are directly related to shame, Christian theology, even in its abstract ideas and doctrines, "may produce" responses of shame in shame-prone people. Pattison lists as problematic eleven divine attributes, a veritable summary of the historic orthodox understanding of God – e.g., that God is: wholly different from human beings; pure and holy; perfect, good and complete in "Godself"; omnipotent; omnipresent; and that God punishes wickedness and sin. These ideas contribute to, among other things, humiliation, unlovableness, inferiority, defilement, devaluation of one's embodied humanity, alienation from self and the divine, crushing one's sense of goodness, sense of falling short of perfection, lack of autonomy, and feelings of worthlessness, impotence and unwantedness (pp. 236-241). Pattison concludes personally that in order to resolve the problem of shame he must reject the historic orthodox Christian understanding of God: "If God is no longer all-good and all-powerful in the way that I used to think, I am no longer all-bad and passively helpless either" (p. 314).

Further contributing to responses of shame, on Pattison's account, are inadequate accounts of the nature and relations between humility, pride, and self-esteem, and unclarity about the nature and validity of self-concern in Christianity theology and ethics. He concludes with specific suggestions for addressing the problematic issues in theology and practice, informed by the dominant metaphor of the inclusiveness of the Son of Man who came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (p. 309). As noted, this involves, for Pattison, a rejection of the orthodox Christian conception of God (Epilogue).

This discussion raises important practical and relational questions concerning how theological ideas and practices may tend to be "heard" and "seen," especially by those carrying extra emotional baggage. These questions, however, may be distinguished from questions about what the ideas and practices actually *mean* and whether they are *true* or *valid*. The latter questions have historically been considered primary. However, Pattison seems eager to jettison them, or to conflate them with the former – as indeed his methodology might suggest, when applied to theology. "Theology is a set of polysemic images, metaphors, similes, narratives and myths . . . Because Christian ideas and images are polyvocal, pluralistic and susceptible to many interpretations there is seldom one absolutely 'correct' interpretation . . . Theological images and ideas are human artefacts that emerge from a particular socio-political and historical milieu . . . often reveal[ing] more about the human beings who constructed them and their world view and assumptions than they necessarily do about the nature and being of God" (pp. 232-233). Thus, Pattison appears to think, one may justifiably abandon core beliefs of Christian theology when one concludes that believing them may engender shame in those who are shame-prone. An obvious problem with this stance is that it is self-defeat-

ing (why not consider *this* view of theology to be merely a human artifact that says more about Pattison than about the nature of reality?)

Moreover the negative self-esteem implications that Pattison enumerates simply do not necessarily follow from the Christian doctrine of God. His account rests upon a kind of ontological zero-sum economy in which, if X has a certain amount of power or value, then Y thereby lacks power or value to that extent. If God is all-good and all-powerful, then I am all-bad and passively helpless. But this view is no more adequate in theology and metaphysics than it is in economic theory or any other area. Michael Jordan's skill in basketball does not *ipso facto* reduce my skill; only I can do that. True, if Jordan is the world's *best* basketball player, then, analytically, I cannot also be the world's best basketball player. But all that follows from that, by analogy, is that if God is the *supreme* instance of goodness and power, then I cannot also be. But how is this a problem?

More seriously, from the standpoint of traditional Christian theology, Pattison's approach has the effect of (following Voltaire's quip) seeking to make God in our own image, on the basis of what we think enhances our self-esteem. Does this not, in effect, constitute a shaming of God? "How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?" (Psalm 4.2).[6]

The ingredients for a much more plausible, self-esteem-enhancing ontology are available to Pattison within the historic Christian tradition itself, in the orthodox doctrine of creation, especially as it is understood along the lines of Augustine and Aquinas in their understanding of the metaphysics of goodness. On this view, God, the maximally perfect being, and ground of all other being and value, out of the overflow of his goodness, chose to create fully real natures, which themselves possess great value *as* created things, are good insofar as they exist, and are created by God to develop and flourish fully as instances of their kinds. Unlike Pattison's view, which holds the very nature of ultimate reality and value hostage to the vagaries of one's sense of self-esteem, this account provides a robust metaphysical grounding for value, as well as an objective warrant and direction for authentic self-realization. Further, with respect to the important issues he raises with regard to humility, pride, self-esteem, and self-concern in Christian theology and ethics, Pattison would do well to explore the rich resources within the Christian tradition of Thomas Aquinas, who grounds his ethics in a flourishing-based ethical structure that accounts for both self- and other-concern in plausible and biblically faithful ways. Aquinas's understanding of the relations between pride and humility is complex and nuanced, bringing together both a healthy humility and a healthy, fruitful appreciation of oneself and one's gifts.[7]

NOTES

1.   *Nichomachean Ethics* 4.9, 10.9.
2.   *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, 4.17; *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae.144.
3.   See J. D. Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 35.

4.   Cited in ibid., 35.

5.   This kind of distinction is developed in D. F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 34-35.

6.   The biblical tradition does express concern for the kind of shame or humiliation Pattison addresses. See Deuteronomy 25.3, where legitimate punishment should be severe, but not inhumane, where it will humiliate or degrade the guilty party.

7.   See D. A. Horner, "What it Takes to be Great: Aristotle and Aquinas on Magnanimity," *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998), 415-444.