CHAPTER 5

Shame and Religion

Religion is a deeply ambiguous phenomenon. It may enrich the life of believers, but it may also cause severe damage to the self and injure capacities for human flourishing, social interaction and personal development. Religion is not an independent variable, but works on the social, political, and psychological conditions that contribute to shaping peoples' lives. To those for whom religion becomes an ultimate authority, it encompasses life and sets the stage or defines the resources for self-realizing agency, be it liberating or oppressive. For some, religion is not only a vital part of life or a specific area, but an all-encompassing reality. Religion can, under given circumstances, have a strong impact on the capacity for self-realizing agency, and sometimes impede it with shame as a result.[370]

Religions relate to all the dimensions of human experience that we identified in the introduction: religions are not only about cognitive beliefs in peoples' minds. They have to do with social and cultural components, as well as psychological ones. We consider religions from a *pragmatic* angle. They are symbolic resources for orientation and transformation in the different dimensions of experience. They provide resources for order and stability in a world that is constantly on the threshold of chaos, as well as for personal transformation. Religions offer a way of life, and they provide humans with resources for a specific mode of being-in-the-world where life is seen from the vantage point of what one considers as ultimate. As such, religion constitutes a whole way of being that not only relates us to what befalls us in different ways, it also shapes our world, our experiences of ourselves, and the world we live in. Accordingly, we cannot separate the modes of being-in-the-world that religion shapes and

370 Cf. this with Tomkins' understanding of shame as the impediment and interruption of enjoyment, in Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness,* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2008), 388.

conditions from the symbolic contents of that religious tradition. This content expresses itself in identity-formatting elements, in rituals and stories, in beliefs about morality and the "afterlife," and so on. A mere functionalist approach to religion that views it as a social phenomenon like any other, without taking into account these internal and internalized dimensions and how they shape actual human experience, may consequently fall short of being able to describe what religion is and what it does. Therefore, we need to address contents in specific religions that may engender, contribute to, or reduce shame.

Concerning religion's positive aspects, in a postmodern, hyper-technical society, religion offer elements that still help people to identify significant values, to orient themselves, and to partake in practices for personal or social transformation. Perhaps religious elements do not serve a disciplining function so much as previously, at least not in all parts of the Western world. We have seen, for example, how attitudes towards homosexuality have changed considerably over the last decades, with the consequence of less shame for sexual orientation, and how interest in religion has shifted from an interest in doctrine and behavior towards attention to the aesthetic dimensions of religion. So, although in new forms, religions and spiritual practices still contribute to many peoples' personal and social development. Moreover, as we will argue, the continuing presence of religion also means that religious practices and elements of shame are nevertheless sometimes still interwoven – in familiar and not so familiar ways. Because religious elements based on pre-modern traditions live side by side with more personalized and individualized modern modes of religion, the role of religion in the present world is complicated. In this chapter, we will identify some religious elements that contribute to the emergence of shame. It is so because the symbolic world of religion provides a multitude of chances for a clash between contexts of agency and, concomitantly, chances for shame.

Shame within the porous parameters of religion and spirituality

In his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James argues that under every religious creed, there is the foundational experience or sense

that there is something wrong with us as we naturally exist and that the solution to this predicament is that "we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers."[371] As long as religious practices and symbols contribute to such experience, shame will potentially be interwoven with religion in a variety of complex ways.[372] The consequence of what James claims here is, namely, that the realization of something being wrong with one is part of what constitutes religious experience. Thus, religion, in his view, articulates what we have previously addressed as the clash between contexts of agency. Religious beliefs entail the constant presence of something that makes me aware that I need to change. The clash is even more predominant since religious beliefs are more or less internalized in the agent, and do not require a real other to be present. The most profound way to instigate the non-present other in the consciousness of an agent is to employ the symbol of God as the one who sees everything and judges all that humans do, according to God's standards of perfection.

From a religious perspective, everything that is is a sign of something else: of good or bad, of God's way, of being on the narrow path or not, of being clean or unclean, devout or infidel, pious or not, etc. Against this backdrop, religious standards may constantly contribute to the interruption of agency in ways that go beyond what is usually the case in secular contexts. Thus, religion may easily become oppressive. Nevertheless, shame in the context of religion works according to similar rules as those we find elsewhere.

James' claim above points to how religious symbols and practices can contribute to identifying, articulating, and even enhancing the sense of

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371 Cf. Jill L. McNish, *Transforming Shame: A Pastoral Response* (New York; Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013), 125–26. Referring to William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York; London: Penguin Books, 1985), 508.

372 The dynamics described by James here are also the reason why Lelwicka can see contemporary practices of eating and diet as parallel to more traditional religious practices, but also as enforced by central Christian narratives: "Elements of these three Christian narratives – the body's pivotal role in salvation, women's association with the sin-prone flesh, and the anticipated perfection of bodies in the resurrection – were recycled for centuries, inspiring practices and attitudes toward food and eating that reflected dominant concerns and beliefs in their historical contexts." Michelle M. Lelwica, "Losing Their Way to Salvation: Women, Weight Loss, and the Religion of Thinness," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America,* 3rd ed. edited by Bruce David Forbes; Jeffrey H. Mahan (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 269.

there being something wrong with us or what we are doing. This contribution may work in relation to already established senses of shame, but it may also engender shame where it was not present previously. Moreover, shame may also play a role when it comes to the possible access to solutions to this predicament: the connection with higher powers that is necessary for solving it is never established directly but is always mediated by practices in which others are involved. Hence, the individual who wants to overcome religiously mediated experiences of wrongness that lead to shame must still relate to people who either help facilitate such overcoming or contribute to its further existence. Thus, agency based on intentions and desires guided by religious conceptions to improve or change is exposed to the risk of further interruption in ways that may continue to allow for shame to be present.

Religion and spirituality provide quite specific contexts and conditions for coherent agency.[373] According to Ryan, they provide chances for the "experience of conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."[374] This definition is broad enough to apply to most religious traditions. Furthermore, by pointing to something beyond the individual, religions suggest an ultimate standard against which one can assess oneself, and this standard can provide guidance for a conscious decision about the direction of one's life.[375] Ryan, accordingly, sees spirituality as being about attentiveness to life, "an attentiveness which contains within itself a certain desire, a certain hopefulness, a certain anticipation."[376] Thus, spirituality and religion establish distinguished contexts for agency that are constituted by what is considered as ultimate. He writes, "Spirituality is attention combined

373 We occasionally juxtapose religion and spirituality in the following in order to visualize that our analysis is relevant for more than what is often called "traditional" or "institutional" religion. It also relates to less organized forms of spirituality. In all cases where there is reference to a (more or less) authoritative tradition, stewarded by a (large or small) community of believers, the potential for individual shame caused by the normative ideals, rules or expectations that emerge from the combination of tradition, community and individual conditions are present.

374 Thomas Ryan, "The Positive Function of Shame: Moral and Spiritual Perspectives," in *The Value of Shame – Exploring a Health Resource in Cultural Contexts*, edited by Elisabeth Vanderheiden and Claude-Hélène Mayer (Cham: Springer, 2017), 101.

375 Cf. ibid.

376 Ibid., 102.

with intention. Attention animated by desire, or attention become intention, awakens within us the awareness of a deepened relationship with ourselves and with others, with the world and with some greater sense of meaning."[377] This is the reason why religion and spirituality can intensify modes of living. Everything gains increased significance. Against the backdrop of this understanding, it is not at all surprising that religion and spirituality may also cause experiences of shame: whenever the actual context of agency constituted by this attention/intention/desire clashes with a different context, or the prescribed project fails, shame may be a likely result – although admittedly not a necessary one.

Spirituality and religion represent traditions and practices that are among the potentially most influential, relationally shaped contexts of agency in which a person can engage. Not only are religious groups places for feedback, socialization, moral formation, and discernment, but most religious contexts also provide the individual with the notion of an all-seeing eye and a constantly present deity which can be imagined as present at any given moment, and not only as present in clearly delineated contexts of agency. With regard to shame, that fact is important because it means that in any given context of agency there is a potential for being interrupted by one's own consciousness of how the divine considers who one is and what one does. Such interruption may not only cause shame, of course, it can also cause pride and joy, depending on what one does and what type of self-esteem one can maintain concerning one's being or doing. This double function testifies to the ambiguous role of religion: it generates joy, pride, and a deep sense of meaning, but it also mediates strong experiences of oppression, failure and shame.

We can look at some examples that show how shame and religion may be intertwined, and which can contribute to exemplify the formalized description that we referred to by William James above:

- A speaker in the church academy talks about how faith in God allows believers to see everything, including themselves, in a new

377 For a thorough analysis of the role of such ultimacy, cf., for example, Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Representation and Ultimacy: Christian Religion as Unfinished Business* (Münster; Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2020).

light and also enables them to see other dimensions of reality than those that would be possible without faith. He elaborates on the conception of "God as light" in order to convey this message. After the talk, there is a Q&A session. A woman in the audience responds like this: "I think this idea about God as light is terrible: it means that he sees me, and I feel so shameful for who I am!"

- A devout and pious teenage boy realizes that he has sexual feelings for other boys. His imam has told him that in Islam, homosexuality is considered a sin. Although he is not "practicing" his sexual orientation, he feels that there is something fundamentally wrong with him, and experiences increasingly more that it is difficult to relate positively to Allah: he feels shameful for his feelings and has a growing fear of Allah's rejection.
- One of the prominent leaders in a congregation divorces after many years of troublesome marriage. Suddenly, he realizes that he is not eligible for positions in the church anymore and that people are not inviting him home any longer. He feels that people are avoiding him and he is not sure if he is shameful himself, or if people are shameful on his behalf. His sense of belonging to the congregation starts to deteriorate.[378]
- A pastor preaches about how the death of Jesus on the cross atones for all the sins of humanity, and that the listeners can rest assured that their sins are not an obstacle for being accepted by God and receiving God's grace any longer. However, several of the people in the pew feel that her message is of no help to them: they still feel ashamed in the eyes of God, because Jesus had to die for their sins.

The above examples are sufficient to illustrate some of the various ways in which shame and shaming can interact with religious traditions – at

378 This example shows how shame is backward-looking and does not necessarily offer guidance for future agency: one is ashamed of something in the past, and there is no obvious constructive way to use shame or shaming in such contexts. The only exception would be if one was able to contemplate future actions and what they may imply in terms of shame: "I will not divorce again if it leads to this shame that I am now bearing." However, this use illustrates another problem with shame in this regard: shame may then prevent one from doing something that, in the long run, is healthy and important for one's well-being (namely, to get out of a destructive relationship).

least negatively. They are mostly taken from a Western, Christian context, but some of them, at least, should also be possible to recognize in other cultural or religious contexts. They also display the many factors that may be involved in shame and shaming: religious individuals, doctrines, symbols, practices, and communities are all possible candidates for being part of shaming practices that are intimately and insolubly tied to experiences with religion.

Our initial description of how shame is the result of an interruption of the manifestations of the self through an intentionally directed agency can illuminate the ambiguous ways in which religion may play a role for the self. It can also illuminate the possible relationship between religion and shame: religion contributes essential elements for self-esteem, values, and orientation in human life. It provides crucial ego-ideals with which the person can identify, and on which basis the individual can develop his or her sense of self.[379] By understanding oneself and acting in accordance with these (religious) elements, the self develops important features in its identity. Religious resources shape emotion, social behavior, and self-perception. It is important to note here that these religious elements (self-symbols, in a Kohutian sense, parts of which serve as ego ideals) become an integrated part of the self and are not easily exchanged for others. When people act based on such religious resources, it is because they find them meaningful, contributing to their agency in some way and to their long-term sense of well-being and social belonging. That point, however, does not exclude that religious imagery may also have been internalized in ways that sometimes conflict with these positive contributions.

For people to whom religion (as symbols, narratives, practices, social interaction, imaginaries and conceptions) is a part of their identity formation, it becomes a vital part of what guides their ways of being-in-the-world, their interpretations of experiences, and themselves. How

379 Cf. the description of the idealizing pole in our description of the self according to Kohut in Chapter 3 above. Ego ideals are understood here as more or less conscious ideals of personal excellence, which are based on a composite image of the characteristics of people with whom the individual identifies, initially the parents, but later on also other authority figures. Such ideals are crucial because much of shame that is elicited in a religious context comes about as a result of an experienced dissonance with these ideals, be it real or not, *and the concomitant desire to hide from this experience.*

deep religious resources go in terms of contributing to a person's sense of self and personal investment in orientation and transformation[380] may vary considerably. People who are religious can interact with religious resources in a wide variety of ways, both positively and negatively.

The relationship between religion and psychological conditions should not be underestimated either. How individuals interact with religious imaginaries, practices, etc., and their possible experience of shame most likely depend on their experiences with caretakers in early childhood. To what extent interaction with parents or significant others has made them prone to feeling shame or not will most likely have an impact on how religious elements interact with the self. If the relationship has been good, resilience with regard to shame and shaming may be more robust than if their upbringing made them more prone to it. The most clearly negative or positive effects of religion are when religious resources are employed in and entwined with the development of the relationship to the parent/s.

However, as we shall return to, people may also turn to religious resources to overcome negative childhood experiences and conditions and use religion in ways that work against experiences of shame. Then they use religious resources in the way that James describes positively. Accordingly, we need to balance the above-mentioned examples and take into consideration the ambiguity of the relationships just mentioned. We will return to these positive features in the last section of this chapter, but need to make aware of it from the outset since much of what we are going to present in the following chapter deals with the negative aspects of religion and shame. Therefore, the following may contribute to a mainly negative picture of religion – which is not our sole intention.

Understanding religion to understand shame

How can we think of the relation between religion and shame more concretely? We can start by considering the following options:

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380 On the understanding of religion as practices of orientation and transformation underlying this analysis, see Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Religion as Orientation and Transformation: A Maximalist Theory* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

- Religion (through practices, rituals, symbols, teaching) may engender or produce shame
- Religion may enhance already existing shame or cause people prone to shame to feel ashamed
- Religion may reduce shame or offer a means to overcome it, for example, by providing resources for self-experience and participation in a community that run contrary to shame experience.
- Religious counseling, as with other types of counseling, can offer opportunities for distinguishing between shame and other feelings (such as guilt), or for conflating and confusing such feelings, making it harder to deal with them separately.

In principle, there is nothing exclusively distinctive or special about religion when it comes to how shame appears within its context. Religions do not work on a basis separate from the other conditions of human life. Therefore, the general conditions for (dealing with) shame come to the fore in religion as well. Moreover, since religion is an important part of many peoples' lives, it is useful to look more closely at how the relationship between religion and shame works. This approach may, in turn, allow us to see some of the more generic traits of this relationship in a new light. It may also be necessary for those who practice religion to become more aware of what may be at stake in this relationship.

Religions relate to all the dimensions of human experience that we identified in the introduction: religions are not only about cognitive beliefs in peoples' minds but have to do with social and cultural components, as well as psychological ones. When we consider religions from a pragmatic angle, it entails that we approach them as symbolic resources for orientation and transformation in the different dimensions of experience. They provide resources for order and stability in a world that is constantly on the threshold of chaos, as well as for personal transformation. Religions offer a way of life, and they provide humans with resources for a specific mode of being in the world where life is seen from the vantage point of what is considered as ultimate. As such, religion constitutes a whole way of being that not only relates us to what befalls us in different ways; it also shapes our world, our experiences of ourselves, and the world we

live in. Accordingly, we cannot separate the modes of being-in-the-world that religion shapes and conditions from the symbolic contents of that religious tradition. This content expresses itself in identity-formatting elements, in rituals and stories, in beliefs about morality and the "afterlife," and so on. A mere functionalist approach to religion that views it as a social phenomenon like any other, without taking into account these internal and internalized dimensions and *how* they shape actual human experience, may, accordingly, fall short of being able to describe what religion is and what it does. Therefore, we need to address contents in specific religions that may engender, contribute to, or reduce shame.

Religion is, nevertheless, rarely addressed in the growing literature on shame in present-day scholarly and scientific studies. In the literature we have reviewed while writing this book, religions and their role in relation to shame is, with a few exceptions, only mentioned in passing, if at all.[381] The cultural context, of which religions are a part, provides the environment in which shame and shaming are possible. Since shame implies a tacit or explicit evaluation of a person or their conduct, shame cannot be determined as a mere individually based phenomenon – it does not simply exist in the relation between the person and their deity but is always mediated through a third instance – the social world. Leeming and Boyle point to how the

> … evaluations are often achieved jointly with others and are shaped by available discourses that may construct failure or wrongdoing in ways that inevitably imply shame. Any continuity in these evaluations may arise from social rather than intra-individual processes. For example, within some religious communities unmarried mothers may find it difficult to avoid making attribution of failure to the whole self, leading to a continuing sense of shame. This would be likely where there is no image of acceptable single parenthood, and sexual activity on the part of single women is not only deemed unacceptable but is also considered a sign of a flawed moral character. This means that continuity of shame might depend in part on the particular social and cultural niche the person occupies. Evaluations of the self and attributions of responsibility that

381 The only exceptions to this claim are the few studies we can find about shame and sexuality in an Islamic context. However, in these studies as well, religion is not foregrounded.

> show some degree of consistency cannot, therefore, be assumed to be simply characteristics of the individual, nor should they be assumed to be set in stone and entirely explained with reference to early family functioning.[382]

We will have ample opportunity to develop the points mentioned in this quote in the course of the present chapter. Among other elements, it is important here to note how Leeming and Boyle point to how it is the social context that constitutes the acceptable images of different states of affairs, as well as the continuity of such evaluations. Thereby, they indicate that shame in a religious context is predominantly a social and cultural phenomenon generated by the accessible and inaccessible social roles or conditions. Thus, religions, as providers of repertoires of orientation and evaluation, and as reservoirs of interpretative resources, contribute in different ways to either engendering or hindering shame.

Shame for being and doing in a religious context

Religions not only determine how we may perceive and understand the "outside world" as well as our embodied condition, but they also provide the means for understanding oneself in a social and cultural context. They offer motivations for some types of agency and warrants to abstain from other types of acts and practices. Hence, religions provide symbolic resources for interpreting what the world is, how to act in it, and what it should be (normatively). In other words, religions provide ontological as well as moral orientation.

Sometimes, the combination of ontological and moral elements contributes to a special form of predicament in religion and spirituality: the shame that follows from quite natural conditions, like being a woman, gay or lesbian, or feeling anger when one is treated badly, or experiencing sexual desire. The normativity at work in religion may sometimes run up against these natural features, and the consequences can be devastating.

382 Dawn Leeming and Mary Boyle, "Shame as a Social Phenomenon: A Critical Analysis of the Concept of Dispositional Shame," *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* 77, no. 3 (2004), 385.

The lack of positive recognition of the workings of these fundamental features of human life contributes to religion and spirituality being at odds with conditions in human life that are inescapable. Thereby, a clash with normative contexts is not only unavoidable, but it may be perpetual as well, and shame may therefore be close at hand.

Martha Nussbaum's work on shame points to some features that are highly relevant in the context of religious life, and which are related to this point. She acknowledges the ubiquity of shame: "Shame is a permanent possibility in our lives, a constant companion."[383] Furthermore, when she defines shame as "a painful emotion responding to a sense of failure to attain some ideal state,"[384] this point is relevant for religion as well, since religion provides humans with ideals and chances for the idealization of the self, others, and personal behavior to a large extent. Religious symbols or ideals thereby offer chances for experiencing self-worth through the relation to and fulfillment of these ideals, whereas they may also provide chances for experiencing shame when conditions for experiencing self-worth are not present, or when the relationship to these ideals is compromised. The actual articulation of such ideal standards and the employment of them in relation to how people are and what they do creates the potential for shame and shaming in religion.[385] As Silvan Tomkins points out in one of his phenomenological descriptions of shame, "there appear to be a multiplicity of innate sources of shame, since there are innumerable ways in which excitement and enjoyment may be partially blocked and reduced and thereby activate shame. Man is not only an anxious and a suffering animal, but he is above all a shy animal, easily caught and impaled between longing and despair."[386] Religious resources fit in well in the picture of what contributes to such processes.

The above suggests that religions may not be reduced to morality only and to a self-perception that tells you that something you did was right or wrong. Religions also point to how some states of affairs may be right or

383 Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 173.

384 Ibid., 184.

385 We will return to some of Nussbaum's reflections in the conclusion to this chapter, where we address the more constructive features of religion's understanding of the human condition.

386 Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, 387.

wrong, be it in the individual's physique or inner life, in their moral disposition, their presence in the community, or in the cosmic order. Religion rests on ontological definitions and expresses ontological qualities. Hence, we can make a fourfold distinction between how religions *may* contribute to, or may impede, the development of shame (or guilt).[387] It may be for reasons of agency, or for reasons related to who you are. Then we arrive at this figure:

	Ideals for agency	**Ontology**
Engendering shame	Doing wrong	Being wrong
Impeding shame	Doing good	Being good

Of course, the above should not be taken as strictly delineated categories, as they may interfere with each other, for example, when permanent guilt for doing wrong leads to shame. They can be applied to other elements in human life than religion, as well. We nevertheless argue that in a religious context, these different options may serve to amplify each other because of the strong intertwinement of agency ideals and ontological elements in religion. For example, when young couples engage in sexual acts because they are attracted to each other, those who have had a strict religious upbringing may not only feel good about such practices. They may also feel that what they are doing is shameful, and may also feel ashamed about who they are, what they feel, and what they are reminded of having done. This example is not relevant in the area of sexuality only, though. It is similar to other cases where what you feel and what you do are intertwined in ways that are not deemed acceptable by peers or recognized as the good way to be and the right way to feel and act.

The intertwinement of religious symbolism and ideals for agency makes it even harder for people who are prone to shame to separate between these two dimensions. If someone has done something that they feel is wrong in the eyes of God, their experience of God may not only be negative in relation to the actual conduct, but they may feel permanently condemned when they think of God, because of God's omnipresence in their life from which they cannot separate themselves. Moreover, some

387 Cf. how this setup may correspond with our previous elaborations on shame and guilt, in Chapter 2, pp. 47–51.

types of religious imagery may perpetuate negative self-experience in ways that may hinder religious people from overcoming their shameful status. We analyze some of these later in this chapter.

Furthermore, other modes of power may operate in religious circles than those we usually reckon with in a modern Western context. To understand how shame works in a religious context, the relational focus that we argue for throughout this book applies even more here. The problem with shame in a religious context is that one must locate it in systems and situations in which the social exercise of power is involved. Only then can we also understand more about how and why individuals are susceptible to institutional shaming.[388]

Fundamental features: the past and (its) authority

Most religions have emerged out of traditional societies and cultures where shame was (and still sometimes is) part of what constitutes and regulates normative features of the society. Their origin shapes their content, also with regard to shame. The fact that religious traditions are dependent on references to the past and to authorities in other periods of history makes it hard to leave shame behind as a feeling, and shaming as a practice, as something that belongs only to the past. The past still plays a vital role in many religious contexts, not least in the appeal to religious authorities that require respect and obedience. Shame and shaming is, therefore, always a possibility since shame often belongs to the reservoir of resources on which religions rely.[389] It is used in different ways: either as a disciplining element (as in the shameless Arabian daughters) or in rituals that expose it with the aim of overcoming it.

Religious resources that can lead to the development of shame may tell us something that is not always obvious about what it is to be human: as relational beings, humans are interwoven with, guided by, and connected

388 Cf. Clough, *Shame, the Church and the Regulation of Female Sexuality*, 35.

389 There are clear references to shame in the texts of the major religions, and some of these religions also have obvious practices of shaming.

to history. Even though we may think we live in a society in which shame is not the most obvious feature (and many modern Western humans may tend to think so), the fact that the roots of religions in most cases go back to historical periods in which shame was an integral part of the societal order, is of relevance here. When the individual develops his or her identity with the help of these resources, he or she taps into ways of thinking about the self that may not be obvious to the modern mind. An obvious example is how some Christians sometimes learn to think about their sexuality in terms of being clean or unclean, or how other religious traditions understand certain types of food as unclean or some types of clothing as more appropriate than others. Such evaluations go back to a time when those categories represented acceptable and widely shared ways of thinking. But hardly any person who grows up today with no link to ancient religious resources for self-understanding will think, for example, about their sexuality or dress code in terms of such categories.[390] However, for those who do, the link back to traditional categories of self-assessment can be debilitating and shame-producing.

Within a religious framework, topics related to morality, discipline, social belonging, acceptable feelings, and desires, as well as acceptable thoughts and values, are amalgamated into a unity.[391] It makes it tempting to say that religions, with regard to shame, do not add much to our identification and analysis of shame in contexts that are not shaped by religion. However, even postmodern secular contexts carry the implicit values and frameworks of our shared past. Thus, unarticulated remnants of a cultural-religious past may still manifest themselves through current shame responses. Accordingly, it makes good sense to analyze the specific mechanisms of shame inherent in religious traditions.

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390 The underlying premise of this example is that shame is related to that which is impure. For how this notion of impurity remains the case in religious contexts, one only needs to search for "Shame, impurity" on the internet – and see how Catholics struggle with it. Cf. also Burrus, *Saving Shame*, Introduction.

391 This amalgamation has profound and complicated consequences for how to address the relationship between religion and morality. For an interesting comment to the relationship between religion, morality and shame from the point of view of elements not thought through sufficiently in the so-called "new atheism," see Tony Lynch and Nishanathe Dahanayake, "Atheism and Morality, Guilt and Shame: Why the Moral Complacency of the New Atheism Is a Mistake," *Philosophical Investigations* 40, no. 2 (2017).

Due to the amalgamation just mentioned, religious traditions sometimes give the features of shame a stronger impact on personal life and the collective order. Therefore, we cannot and should not neglect or pass over too quickly the role shame has in religion or reduce it to features that we can detect in similar ways in other contexts. Religions often do go to the roots of personality development, and the combination of religion/spirituality and shame may, therefore, be of crucial importance for understanding how religious traditions influence a person's identity.

The fact that religious traditions are exactly that, that is, traditions, therefore exposes their adherents to possible experiences of shame in ways that are not so obvious in other contexts. That the past has an authority to which one is expected to be obedient, and which is the basis of more or less constant self-scrutiny, is an unfamiliar thought in a modern context. Failure to live up to standards, and, accordingly, opportunities for shame, are already present here. Similar mechanisms are at work in the explicit and implicit codes of conduct and requirements for conformity that shape religious communities and groups; to not know these codes, or to go against them, or not to conform to the expectations of your religious peers, may also cause shame.

A specific condition for shame is the relation to religious authority figures who often serve as substitutes for parents. Their role is to provide religious adherents with a necessary feeling of safety, recognition, ideals, and guidance. Religious authority figures, many of whom have a designated role as members of the clergy, never have a mere individual role but represent the stability, the normative framework, the trust, and the guidance that everyone needs to become socialized into a religious community. They are stewards of the past and guides to future practice. To be in opposition to them, question their authority, or not obey their guidance, may cause responses that lead to shame or shaming, as when an individual does not live up to the standards that she or he recognizes as the right ones. Since the past is stewarded by authority figures on whom one is dependent for being recognized and accepted by, religious leaders and authorities are in a position of power: they can easily shame people or exploit their position in ways that lead to shame in adherents. Religious adherents with low self-esteem are dependent on their positive

evaluations, and the greater their need for recognition, the easier it is for authorities to take advantage of them – which, in turn, can lead to exploitative practices and abuse that produce even more shame.[392]

Religion and idealization

The person who feels shame experiences that he or she is not living up to the ideal standards he or she thinks apply to him or her. Religion delivers such standards efficiently. The words of Jesus, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew, 5;48), are words that set high, if not impossible, standards for religious believers. No one is perfect, and one of the preconditions for becoming a mature person is to realize that this is the case. However, religious teachings and practices may often conceal this fact and contribute to an idealization of adherents, authorities, or, of course, God or the divine. Thus, the impossible standards become "the norm" against which one measures oneself. What does it mean for the understanding of shame in religion?

One main point is that religion contributes to the double perspective on oneself and one's agency that we have outlined earlier: thus, agency rooted in immediate interests, intentions, and desires is always at risk of being interrupted by standards of perfection. When religion manifests impossible standards, it also contributes to the clash between contexts

392 The ways in which the clergy has sexually abused children and others, and hidden behind a veil of silence, and used the shame of the victims as a way to shield themselves, offers an appalling example of how such authorities, considered as representatives of God by their peers, have misused their position for such purposes. The power at play in such abuse should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon, though. Miryam Clough, referring to the Roman Catholic Church, argues that "in a church whose symbolically constructed reality is based on the denial of both the natural human drive for sex and of innate human fragility, yet which conveys its core tenets through rhetoric and ritual that make mortality salient, it is perhaps no surprise that men's abuse of women and children is proving to have been extensive. Neither are we to be surprised that studies have identified that high numbers of Roman Catholic priests suffer from emotional immaturity or psychological disturbances and that many have unresolved psychosexual problems. Whereas for many Catholics marriage buffers the death threat associated with sex, this is not available for priests and religious. Further, by emphasizing independence and self-sufficiency for males, gender-role norms have limited the ability of many men to comfortably experience intimacy, thereby restricting emotional development and provoking shame when these ideals are not met." Clough, *Shame, the Church and the Regulation of Female Sexuality*, 124–125 (references excluded).

of agency, since the immediate and actual context of agency is measured against the perfect one.

Idealized states do not only present impossible ideals. According to psychoanalytic theory, individuals who have trouble facing difficult feelings of failure or incompleteness mobilize so-called "splitting" as a defense to overcome what they feel is an unbearable situation. The polarization that results from such splitting leads to viewing events or people as either totally bad or good. At this point, religious imagery comes in as relevant because it allows individuals to see something as exclusively good. This strategy is called idealization. This strategy attributes exclusively positive qualities to one's religion, the group, the individual, the authority or teacher, or to the divine, as well as to oneself when one is part of this group or is recognized by this idealized teacher.[393] Such idealization contributes to ignoring problems and prevents criticism of the idealized instance and maintains one's positive self-esteem and pride in oneself. However, the problem is never solved in full, since the negative or harmful elements that cause the need for polarization remain present although split off from where one places one's identity and focus.

Idealization can also provide the means for further shame – as when one is ill or not able to display the signs of success that are expected of believers, as in the so-called prosperity gospel religion. Here, shame may also increase because the responsibility for lack of success or health is placed on the individual – as someone who does not conform to the expectations of belonging to the community.

The opposite of idealization is devaluation. Religious imagery offers sufficient means for the strategies of both idealization and devaluation. The more clear-cut the distinctions are between good and bad, insider and outsider, the more religion may (but need not) contribute to the idealization that is quite natural at an early stage of childhood development. However, such dichotomization is usually overcome and replaced by the capacity for experiencing ambivalence if the child's development has not been interrupted by trauma or neglect. If the latter is the case,

393 Note how this then also allows idealization to play a role in the narcissistic efforts to feel good about oneself.

idealization may be a working strategy also in adult persons – and contribute to the unrealistic self-perception that makes one's imperfections causes for shame.

Here we can relate our understanding of religion to elements that were developed in the previous chapter on psychology and shame: Not all idealization is problematic. Kohut sees idealization in childhood as a healthy mechanism. It is the task of parents to provide appropriate opportunities for idealization and mirroring in the child. Then the child can overcome the natural, initial grandiosity that makes him or her dependent on others to provide his or her self-esteem. When this is done appropriately and provides the child with what Kohut calls optimal frustration, the child's idealization of self and of others can gradually diminish, and more realistic perceptions of the self and the world can emerge. If this grandiosity is not overcome, the chances that shame will appear remain more likely.

James W. Jones has developed these insights with specific reference to religion. He underscores that all religion contributes to the idealization of everyday objects. Such idealizations provide much of the transforming power of religious experience and are central to religion in general. Jones underscores how the dynamic of idealization can account for the ambiguity in religion.[394] To what extent religious imagery, resources, and practices contribute to a healthy and realistic perception of self, others, and the world, or simply underpin already existing patterns in the self that manifests arrested development, lacking the capacity for ambivalence, is, therefore, an open question. It may do both – although seldom at the same time.

As already indicated, idealization is closely related to the capacity for tolerating ambiguity, and to the phenomenon of splitting. Since religious imaginaries are employed in a way that "divides the world into completely opposed black and white camps in which things are either all good or all bad," splitting the world thus can only be dissolved by developing the capacity for ambiguity, in which that which was formerly understood as perfect or ideal becomes perceived in a more nuanced light.[395]

394 Cf. James W. Jones, *Terror and Transformation: The Ambiguity of Religion in Psychoanalytic Perspectives* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 6.

395 Ibid., 58.

Against this backdrop, idealization, as promoted by religious resources and practices, can be seen as the result of the need for certainty in an insecure and precarious reality. A religiously diverse situation contributes to such insecurity. The presence of other religious views and orientations makes it harder to perceive one's religion as the sole or accepted alternative.[396] Jones holds that the remedy for idealization is to acknowledge one's finitude.[397] Thus, he provides an important corollary to Nussbaum's argument for the realization of imperfection as a remedy for shame.[398] Interestingly, some religious imagery provides opportunities for such acknowledgment – perhaps most distinctively expressed in the Jewish and Christian understanding of humans as created in the image of God – which is a combination of a high evaluation of humanity that can prevent shame and a more realistic attitude (I am not God, but a finite being called to make the infinite present in the world since I am created in God's image). Thus, religious imagery or conceptions linked to shame may enable movements in different directions: away from the community and the self one feels shameful for, and towards community and self-acceptance. We can see the distinctiveness of religion in the fact that the experienced shameful action is explained and placed within a broader frame of reference where the movements are required, and secured, due to divine intervention. This frame of reference is fraught with the policing strategies expressed in religious communities.

Identity in religious groups – and shame

For most people, to be religious is to have some kind of belonging to a group. We stress the notion *group* here, since it seems more relevant to our topic than "congregation," "community," or other notions that depict a larger assembly of people. There can be many different groups within one congregation or community, and even more when we speak of the

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396 This point is analyzed well in Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, Anchor Books (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1980).

397 Jones, *Terror and Transformation: The Ambiguity of Religion in Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, 168–169.

398 See below, pp. 264f., 343.

members of a denomination. What interests us here is how the interaction between the group and the individual shapes the religious identity of a person.

To a large extent, how a person develops the religious dimensions of his or her personality depends upon the combination of social practices in which he or she partakes (including those that reflect specific psychological patterns and conditions) and what we can call religious imaginaries. Social practices – including religious ones – can build on, reinforce, supplement, or provide a substitute for (or an alternative to) the psychological patterns that the individual developed during his or her upbringing (by their parents). Sometimes these conditions may merge in ways that are hard to separate from each other, as when the parents or caretakers are themselves strongly invested in the religious group and bring their children with them. Thus, there may be various possibilities concerning how shame can emerge in a religious context. These are important to note because they suggest that shame's contextual conditions are, also in religion, of crucial importance for its development:

a) For someone who, as a result of their upbringing, is prone to shame, and has developed a strong psychological dependence on peers, religious resources may work in the following ways. For example, if he or she is part of a religious shame culture, his or her participation may enhance his or her shame. However, if he or she finds a more positive and affirming religious community, this community may add new and positive features that *supplement* his or her original shame-proneness. In some cases, a different community may even allow him or her to participate in practices that overcome shame and enable the development of a new identity that draws on and utilizes other relations and resources than those from which he or she originally came.
b) For someone who, as the result of their upbringing, has developed high self-esteem and relative psychological independence from peers, religious resources may work in the following ways: On the positive side, a religious community may contribute to maintain

> their positive self-esteem and improve it further. However, a religious community which uses shame as a disciplining or controlling element may also shape a more ambiguous self-relation that includes elements of shame as well as self-esteem. Then, community participation may give rise to conflicted feelings. In the worst negative cases, participation in a community of religious practices where shame is involved and actively used may destroy the earlier feeling of self-esteem or independence.

The alternatives sketched here suggest two things: First, we should consider how shame works in the context of personal identity that employs religious resources as dependent on, or at least related to, the conditions for the individual's psychological development. Religious resources (understood as symbolic elements, doctrines that shape self-perception, ritual practices, social interaction, and other elements of identity formation) may nevertheless not only work on the premises of these psychological conditions. They may also, to a greater or lesser extent, themselves be part of the (psychological) resources that determine to what extent, and in what way, the individual experiences shame. Second, the setup also indicates that one cannot speak about the role that religion takes on regarding shame independently of the contexts of upbringing and of the actual religious practices in which the individual takes part. Concerning shame, the content of religion becomes a dependent variable – a fact that makes generic statements about the role of religion in relation to shame difficult, and which underscores religion's ambiguity in the development of the self.

A religious context is often (but not always) marked by voluntary participation and concomitant high personal investment. Here, the emotional bonds that reinforce shame may do so in ways that would not be similar to cases where such bonds did not to the same extent determine the relationship between the individual and his or her peers. The group is the community to which the individual feels that he or she belongs and with which he or she shares a common cause. In a group, the chances for deep and personal relationships are stronger than those possible in a larger setting with weaker bonds – and this can bear much positive

fruit for the individual's development of self-esteem. But the personal and emotional elements that are involved in group belonging also make the individual more vulnerable to misconduct or failed relationships with others.

The religious context may allow the individual to come into closer contact with him or herself and to learn more about his or her vulnerabilities. Thereby, he or she may also develop strategies for how to deal with shame, and even find help and resources to overcome (at least, some of) it. However, the group context may also be the place in which these vulnerabilities are exposed. It may leave him or her hurt or shamed – not least because this context is the place in which his or her basic value orientations, values and commitments may be grounded. If the group functions ambiguously, it may create an atmosphere of both belonging and of vulnerability, which can make the individual more prone to shame. A group that expresses such ambiguous traits may also be harder to leave. Since religion almost always exists as a community, to leave the group may be difficult without also leaving behind your religious loyalties. On the other hand, if you leave religion behind, this may be a cause for shame in the face of your peers; people may, therefore, sometimes continue to attend a church to avoid shame when they have stopped believing because of their emotional belonging to the group. But they may also stop visiting their religious group because of the shame they feel when they do not any longer maintain their religious commitments. In both cases, shame engendered by the conflict between commitments and the actual agency is dealt with.

Conformity and compliance

Religious groups have rules of conduct to which they expect their members to conform, to a greater or lesser extent. To express dissent is not always possible without the risk of being marginalized or ostracized. The smaller and more tightly knit the group is, the easier it is to make sure that members act in accordance with normative expectations. Thus, shame is a constant risk, since it means that the individual may have to create a barrier to his or her individual aspirations, desires, or projects

to comply with or conform to those of the group.[399] Rules usually need not be policed but are often simply internalized by members. Thus, when members do not live up to the expectations of the group, it is their own, self-appropriated potential for shame through self-policing that regulates their behavior. Accordingly, shame results from incoherence between actual conduct and internalized ideals. Such incoherence manifests a certain lack of autonomy. Hence, to avoid shame, heteronomy is here expressed in the self-restraint and compliance that shapes the individual's agency. This agency, nevertheless, is built on internalized virtues that make sure that the requirements for belonging are met. Identity as a consequence of belonging to the group is then secured. However, in many religious contexts, belonging is not secured once and for all. Because religious groups require the adoption of certain doctrines and conformity to specific practices, belonging to the group can be in jeopardy all the time. The more extensive or encompassing, clearly stated, and strongly practiced the norms are that guide the group, the easier it is to become subject to shame or to become shameful. Two examples which can illustrate this point are described in the following paragraphs.

In some strongly conservative and tightly knit religious groups, if one questions the authority of the leader or deviates from accepted doctrine, these would be instances that could subject someone to shaming. One would then, for example, be told that this is not something that one had expected of him or her to say, and the expressions of disappointment by the authority would not only make the individual ashamed. It could also activate memories of childhood experiences in which he or she had provoked similar reactions. Such shaming furthermore makes it clear that the individual is not considered equal to the other members of the group any longer, as he or she has not lived up to the taken-for-granted norms that bind the group together. Group membership may be in jeopardy. This example also points to a factor we have touched upon in the Introduction: how shame may emerge out of the conflict between two contexts of agency that are not possible to bring in consonance. In the above case,

399 Cf. how Tomkins in *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, 389, sees shame as dependent on barriers to excitement and enjoyment. A consequence of this view is that the pluralism of desires must be matched by a pluralism of shame – it is not only experienced as one "thing".

one's context of belief deviates from the accepted one, which is taken for granted by the others. In the following example, agency that belongs to private and intimate contexts conflicts with more public contexts that provide a negative normative interpretation of the conduct in question.

In earlier times, mothers who had children out of wedlock (and, accordingly, in another context than the accepted one) were often shamed in different ways, both in churches and in society. It could taint them for the rest of their lives. But we need not gofar back in history to find similar examples: Not so many decades ago, a couple with whom one of the present authors was acquainted had to stand in front of their congregation in a small town in the south of the then highly secularized Norway. They had to confess to everyone that they had been sleeping together before they were married.[400] It is hard to consider this practice as anything other than shaming, and the shame was caused by the confrontation of two different contexts of agency. The example can, nevertheless, illustrate more than the often-observed religious preoccupation with sex. We can use it to illustrate some of the options that are in play when shame and religious belonging work together: Consider first of all how this shaming practice makes sex a matter of public interest. It brings something that belongs to the most vulnerable and intimate dimension of life to the attention of every member of the congregation. Consider then the shame that not only the couple themselves but also their families may feel.[401] Besides them, this practice probably makes every other member of the congregation that has been involved in similar conduct without being exposed shameful. Thus, this shaming practice reinforces the idea that the actual behavior, in general, is of interest to the whole congregation (and belongs to a broader context than the private domain). Moreover, this behavior in question is especially shameful, since it leads to the need for a public confession, which may not be required in the case of other "transgressions."

Then, consider two more elements: First, what if the couple rejects the demand to confess in public? Then they run the risk of being subjected to an

400 It is striking to the authors, as it probably is to the reader as well, how much religion is concerned with the regulation of sexual behavior. *Why* this is so is not the topic of this book, but examples of this are multitude, also in relation to our topic here.

401 This is shame by association, a topic which we do not discuss in the present book.

even more shameful practice: they may be excommunicated from the congregation and the community that has fostered their religious identity. Alternatively, they may simply say that they will not do it and leave the congregation, regardless of the consequences they have to bear. How these options appear depends on how strong their ties are to the congregation or the group. If they do not think that what they have done is so serious, this can be an indication of their lack of socialization into the group and the accompanying lack of internalization of its normative requirements. But if they have internalized these norms and nevertheless fallen for the temptation that sexual pleasure presented to them, they may have a greater problem deciding what to do.

In any case, the only option this couple has to avoid public shame or shaming is to adopt other norms and give up their membership of the congregation. But even if they adopt other norms, shame may still prevail, since the impact of the view of others may still be persistent.[402] If they want to maintain their relationship with the group, shame is unavoidable. Thus, shame is the cost of continued belonging.[403] In addition, when we know from empirical studies that restrictive norms concerning sexual practices are something that cause many young people to withdraw from religious groups or communities, it is easy to see that shaming practices negatively impact adherence to religious communities.[404]

On the other hand, though, religious groups can also contribute positively to the overcoming of shame. Many children and young people who have had a problematic upbringing and have never been given a chance to develop a robust feeling of self-esteem have experienced religious youth groups as places where they are accepted and recognized as valuable in themselves. Thereby, they are given better chances to develop resources for self-acceptance than they were given at home. The sense of belonging to a group like this can, therefore, be crucial to the experience of being something more and different to what one has experienced about oneself

402 Cf. above pp. 227f.

403 We have deliberately used this example because it provides a vivid example of something that we know is presently happening much more often, but in ways that are more hidden: to "come out" as gay or lesbian in many churches is still hard to do in many cases. The dynamics in the example above may not always be the same, but the restrictive attitude towards homosexuality in many churches leaves the members involved with only two choices: either to conform, or to leave.

404 Cf. Åse Røthing, *Sex, Kjønn & Kristentro* (Oslo: Verbum, 1998).

earlier. We have earlier seen how a lack of care in early childhood can make children prone to shame and dependent on others than parents for recognition and safety. When religious groups offer opportunities for self-esteem and recognition, for safety and for developing new and more positive roles in which one is not always dependent on the moods of others, they, therefore, serve an important positive function. However, the role that the religious group can play in this regard is nevertheless compensatory, and it continues to work on the premises of childhood development. It is, therefore, important to be aware of elements in the practices, symbols, and teachings around which the group gathers, since these can contribute to further experiences of shame or reinforce childhood patterns. For example, the teachings that God is wrathful because of one's sin may easily reinforce childhood patterns that say that "I am accepted by God as long as I am not a sinner," which is structurally parallel to "Dad only loves me as long as I do what he says."

Below, we will further develop some examples of how religious imagery can interact with group dynamics in ways that have a profound impact on shame and shaming.

The risk of shame in the context of religious practices

Theologian Graham Ward writes, "Shame exposes that which is most intimate about the embodied self, but it also exposes sets of values and levels of interest. We can only be ashamed if we care about something. So, shame is both a very personal experience, but also a highly socialized event in the sense that it is saturated with social and cultural investments. Body, self and society meet around practices of shaming and experiences of being ashamed."[405] Not least is this expressed in religious contexts where the ambiguities of shame may be easy to detect. Religious practices relate to, articulate, and shape some of the most important features and events in human life. Most obviously, they provide rituals related

405 Graham Ward,"Adam and Eve's Shame (and Ours)," *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory, and Culture* 26, no. 3 (2012)307.

to childbirth, death and mourning, and for marriage, to name the most obvious. Many religious contexts also provide opportunities for counseling in times of crisis, or simply for life-guidance to provide better chances for self-development and human growth. But the flip-side of all these practices is the risk of shame.

We want to identify two main points when we look at shame in the context of religious practices. First, as already pointed out by Ward above, such practices are often (but not exclusively) social: they involve the individual in a context where he or she potentially interacts with others. Therefore, to think of religion as something that people merely believe is misleading: it is also about how the individual practices specific types of agency and interacts with and relates to other people. Thus, in cases where such practices are related to shame, it is not only because of what people think or the content of their minds: it is about what people do and how they interact with and communicate with others. Second, religious practices sometimes involve people when they are at their most vulnerable. Not only in times of grief or bereavement, or in times of personal crisis, but also in times of joy and expectation. The latter situations may also make people prone to shame, as we shall see in the following examples. We restrict ourselves mostly to examples from the Christian tradition.

When parents bring their child to be baptized, it is an occasion of joy, pride, and excitement: the rite gives them a chance to stand before the congregation and display how they are themselves and how they want their child to be, as a part of that community. The baptismal rite can serve as a way to recognize parents and the child as worthy of belonging, and as recognized in the eyes of God. When this happens, there is a correspondence between the joy and the expectations of the parents, and the actual function of the rite. This is the positive backdrop against which such rites can also work negatively, for example, when clergy previously – under given circumstances – denied children baptism, be it because the parents were not married, or because the witnesses were gay, or for other reasons. As Christine Park points to, "for Christians, baptism is associated with the bestowal of a new identity and entrance into a spiritual family. In addition, baptism is a cleansing ritual that removes stain and impurity, conferring cleanliness on the shamed person who may suffer from a sense

of dirtiness or defilement."[406] Imagine then the shame that the blocking of the agency that desires to obtain these values may cause.

To be denied participation in a religious rite is, therefore, a strong manifestation of someone considered not worthy. It may not only occur in cases like the above: it could also happen when someone is denied partaking in the Eucharist, or when pastors refuse to perform weddings that involve remarriage on the part of one or both of the prospective spouses. The people in question are then not accepted as belonging to the group or as living up to the standards for membership, belonging, or participation. Their justified sense of shame and resentment may feel especially strong because of the positive feelings invested by all of those who were intending to have a celebration or gain access to something considered valuable and important. Here, the clash between contexts of agency is further enhanced by the combination of positive investment and intention on the one hand, and the religiously charged rite to which their access is denied by others, on the other hand.

Because rejections like these actually contribute to shaming people, they also more than suggest that people have done something wrong, which would then be a likely reason for making them feel guilty. It is not something they have done, but something they are (or are not) that makes these instances of shaming so severe. As long as religious authorities have the power to accept or reject peoples' requests for rites like these, shame is a possible option. The very fact that life events like birth, marriage, etc., are at the center of many peoples' lives and are reasons to celebrate makes it even more imperative to be aware of this point. The risk of shame is at the heart of these events in life when religious rites are the most usual way to celebrate them. When the intentions, desires, expectations, and anticipation that guide agency in such cases collide with practices of rejection that do not recognize them at all, shame is a possibility.

Many people expect the Church or their religious community to be a place to experience something good and beyond the ordinary. Religion and festivity have always belonged together. So have the expectations of

406 Cf. Christine J. Park, "Chronic Shame: A Perspective Integrating Religion and Spirituality," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 35, no. 4 (2016), 366.

finding something good or valuable in times of trouble and/or bereavement. When this expectation is not met or met with rejection, anger, frustration, and shame are likely results. Thus, the very ways in which religion is organized create expectations about the good to which the self can link up with, but they may also involve the risk of shame.

Feelings of shame or inferiority (which are closely connected) can also occur in rituals and practices that do not necessarily address the individual in question. One example of this is how some churches still only ordain men to the clergy. In such situations, women are not excluded from participating because they lack qualifications or because of something they have done. The exclusion is because of the gender to which they belong. Accordingly, the struggle for the ordination of women is not, as often portrayed, a question of equality only. It attempts to overcome a situation in which people are excluded simply because of who they are. Women who invest in studies and preparation for the ministry and are then turned down are likely to feel shame.[407]

But women cannot stop being women or acting like women. However, for another group, the problem of shame in ecclesiastical circles may appear as different (even when we would argue that it is not, in principle): gays and lesbians may be met with an articulated acceptance of "who they are," but told, "not to act on it." Thus, they find they have a double status: they are accepted in principle, but not in practice. Accordingly, they are subjected to other rules of compliance than those of heterosexual orientation, and are therefore also in a more complicated situation concerning their relation to the religious group to which they belong.[408] The fact that

407 Actually, similar patterns may still prevail with regard to race in some contexts. The case of race is even more problematic, though, since there is less acknowledgment of this being a problem in church circles because many may respond that "this is not an actual problem in our context", and thereby allow political correctness to cloud the vision to the lack of equality in matters of participation, education, authority, etc.

408 For a more extensive analysis of argumentation in relation to homosexuality, see Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. 154ff. Churches handle what they see as the challenges of homosexuality in different ways: some accept homosexual clergy when celibate, some not at all, and some as equal to heterosexuals. One of the reasons why the Catholic Church is not willing to open the discussion on celibacy is probably that such a discussion would immediately lead to the concomitant discussion of what opening to a non- celibate clergy would mean for gay priests.

religious doctrines sometimes define or designate people according to their gender, sexual orientation, or even race, makes religious practices of orientation powerful tools for shaming.

Our universal human propensity to feel shame leaves those who experience marginalization especially vulnerable to exploitation for the purposes of power and control. Such abuse of power cannot and should not be addressed simply as the product of individual limitations. Such an approach would mean that one ignores the fact that in many churches there is still outright oppression and denigration of the marginalized groups present. Paul Goodliff writes, "The paternalistic theology which views women as less human, and more sinful, than men is an obvious structural source of shame (and this despite the evidence that men contribute far more to the sum of human misery than women), as is the exclusion of those whose sexuality is deemed heterodox (homosexuals and bisexuals). If history is written by the victors, then such theological shaming is clearly written by the powerful as a means of maintaining their grip upon power."[409]

Rituals that can be seen as contributing positively to feelings of belonging can lead to shame as well. The Eucharist is, among other things, also a celebration of community. Many churches practice an "open table," which allows for everyone to feel included – and thus, it can be a practice that works against shame. But as long as some are not considered as eligible for participation, and even sometimes outright rejected as potential participants, the risk of shame is present. There is sufficient evidence that the celebration of this rite still serves as a "defining" moment for separating insiders and outsiders – not only in parts of the Roman-Catholic Church but also in Conservative, Reformed, and Lutheran churches.

Since many religious groups also strongly emphasize moral issues, shame can be evoked concerning issues that are not necessarily

409 Paul Goodliff, *With Unveiled Face: A Pastoral and Theological Exploration of Shame* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2005), 101. He continues, "The Christian church, if it is to be a community which alleviates shame rather than arousing it, needs to take a careful look at the practices whereby it seeks to ensure conformity of behavior and attitude on the part of its adherents."

considered religious: instances of divorce, substance abuse, or alcoholism can be met with either outspoken criticism or, often just as effectively, the silence treatment. Because of the strong bonds that are often developed in religious groups, these reactions may be felt as powerful – as they may also be when, instead of being shamed, one is met with understanding, acceptance, and recognition.

Confessional practices: shame perpetuated or overcome?

Confession is a special type of religious practice that should be discussed in connection with shame. Confession can be individual or public. In the public form, many churches have a common confession of sin during their worship services. Though for many it may be related to guilt, some members of the congregation may experience that this confession elicits feelings of shame as well. However, shame cannot be dissolved by the proclamation of forgiveness in a way that is similar to forgiveness of guilt. Concerning individual confession, it can enhance the feeling of shame even more, as this practice often requires one to confess specific things for which one feels ashamed. As forgiveness by itself cannot obliterate shame, this practice may appear ambiguous: on the one hand, it may contribute to the perpetuation and enhancement of shame, since one has to confess to a person who can see and hear one. Confession is then a manifestation of the shortcomings or disruptions of agency that lead to shame, or for which the individual already feels shame. On the other hand, absolution may engender an experience of inclusion and acceptance, which in turn alleviates shame on a longer-term basis.

Confessional practice may contribute to the perpetuation of shame insofar as it causes continuous self-scrutiny. Shame plays a vital role here, since such scrutiny sustains contrition, need for repentance, and desire for conversion. Thus, it simultaneously generates a double perception of who you are, and what you, ideally, should have been. Virginia Burrus critically remarks that confession does not provide the longed-for catharsis, "but an ongoing responsiveness – a painfully unrelieved

openness" which implies an infinite responsibility.[410] In confession, one is also exposed to the risk of acting shamefully again, since it requires the veracity of the confessor. Burrus argues that "the shame of confession arises not least at the point of the undecidability of veracity with regard to intentionality, where intention always exceeds our consciousness; it points, then, to the unresolvable hauntings of intentionality as such. Guilt in the face of specifiable injury may most effectively announce responsibility, yet shame bears the awareness of the mysterious and uncontainable depths of our culpability."[411] Thus, to partake in the practice of confession always implies the risk of perpetuating shame.

In her book on shame, Burrus nevertheless also makes some critical observations about confessions that are worth referring to because they provide an opportunity to consider in more detail whether confession represents a useful means for dealing with shame or not. Not surprisingly, she points to the composite or complex situation that the practice engenders. In confession, the confessor measures him or herself according to a given standard and brings to light what is construed as hidden or secret. Only then can a conversion take place. Both losses and gains are implied here. "The truth about the self that is produced in confession is also renounced in confession as if one discovers who one is – a 'sinner' – only in order recklessly to relinquish an identity that is less illusory than all too real."[412] In other words, the confession implies that one has to accept oneself as not being up to the standards one recognizes. Such acceptance may, in turn, also lead to the alleviation of shame. Thus, we may also see confession as a practice that entails several of the movements we have claimed that shame causes: the movement away from the self that one needs to distance oneself from, the movement towards a more realistic self-perception, and the movement that has the specific aim of leading

410 Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects*, 115. Note here how the reference to Levinas' notion of infinite responsibility serves to obliterate the boundaries between self and other – another element that causes shame or makes one prone to it.

411 Ibid., 115. Cf. 145: "That the truth made in confession is fabulous and fictional, both exceeding verifiability and eluding finality, may itself seem a source of shame. Surely it is, at the very least, cause for humility. It is also the reason why we cannot stop confessing, must not refuse the shame of our own inevitable failure ever to get the account of our shameful culpability quite right."

412 Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects*. 111.

the shamed back to the community and ultimately to God. Confession is a way of ritualizing these movements.

The ritual of confession thus contributes to ambiguity in relation to shame. On the one hand, it confronts the confessor with things that he or she experiences as shameful, and thereby, he or she has to relive the experience that causes shame and take part in that shame again. On the other hand, in the very act of confessing, and thereby recognizing the standards against which he or she is failing, he or she is also given a chance to renew his or her ego-ideals, as well as gaining a more realistic understanding of him or herself. The practice of confession can work against the narcissistic self that lives in a delusion of being perfect. If the confession is wisely received, this ritual can then lead to a more mature and realistic self-assessment. Burrus formulates it well in the following passage: "The act of confession is, then, at once assertive and yielding, a willful appropriation of the (divine) power of judgment that is at the same time a deliberately mortifying submission of will and self to judgment, and thus also – perhaps – to mercy. It is neither simply coerced nor simply voluntary but rather sits necessarily on the border of what is coerced and what is offered freely."[413] She goes on, "One must want, at least a little, to be broken, to be exposed, or the confession is sterile: it makes no truth; worse still, it forces stillborn lies. One must also resist, at least a little, being overcome by this desire, or the confession, rendered glib by the promise of cheap grace, is equally fruitless."[414]

Furthermore, against this backdrop, we can see how confession not only exposes the dividedness of the subject – it actively produces it. Shame fragments the subject's self-experience. "It splits again (and again) along the fault lines of its performative ambivalence: I accuse myself; and in the same breath, I excuse myself, I beg pardon, I court forgiveness."[415]

413 Ibid., 111.

414 Ibid.

415 Ibid., 112. Burrus quotes J.M. Coetzee: "in the economy of confession … the only appetites that constitute confessable currency are shameful appetites."

Burrus' analysis sheds important light on the widely adopted practice of confession. However, in a way that surpasses analyses of shame that are oriented towards psychology but ignore religion, she adds an important dimension, by connecting shame to the desire to tell it all:

> If the self who is confessed and thereby alienated is necessarily marked by shame, so too is the self who confesses – marked not only by the shame of the temptation to hide but also by the shame of the desire shamelessly to tell all. [...] The self-exposure of confession is desirable, and thus shameful, largely because the act of confessing is entangled with the act of excusing oneself, of laying claim to absolution: it is as if the very suffering of shame audaciously promises to atone for the shameful thoughts or acts exposed.[416]

We see in this analysis how shame that is involved in the practice of confession also implies the movements away and towards that we have identified in our earlier analyses. The practice of confession thus makes it clear that the complexity of shame is not reduced when it is involved in practices of religion. On the contrary, we would argue that the complex interweaving of shame with religious practices in some cases contributes further to the problems that shame creates in human life.

The body as a religious problem

In the Hebrew Bible shame appears early, expressed in Adam and Eve's realization of their own nakedness. It is not their nakedness as such that causes shame, but the fact that they can be seen by others, to whom they are not ready to appear as naked and vulnerable. The other here is not just anybody, but God. However, God is never present as such – God is always represented by others, and in the gaze of other humans.[417] This is also testified to by the fact that religion is a social phenomenon. The presence of this other changes the context of agency and elicits shame. The Genesis story is, therefore, not a story with exclusively religious significance. It is a story about shame in relation to the human condition, and especially how

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416 Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects*. 112.

417 Cf. our previous reference to Masaccio's fresco.

this condition expresses itself in humanity's desires and the concomitant vulnerable embodiment. Accordingly, shame is, in this context, depicted as about how the naked body is perceived and experienced as a sign. A sign of vulnerability, exposure, and desire: all involved in the agency that is interrupted by the perception of God's sudden presence. Thus, we see in this story many of the features we have developed in our previous analyses of body, vulnerability, intentionality, self-policing and agency.

Miryam Clough develops these points further from a feminist point of view when she points to how the patriarchal shape of much religion defines the natural (embodied) states and conditions of women as religiously problematic:

> Once sin is associated with the body – hence the feminine – the masculine is virtuous, and the feminine can only attain virtue by rejecting those embodied characteristics that most distinctively define that gender, notably sexuality (*jouissance*) and motherhood. Within the framework of patriarchal Christian discourse, the individual who adopts an ascetic lifestyle with the goal of achieving religious piety in the ultimate hope of salvation (the alleviation of the fear of death) adopts a subject position of masculinity and superiority. For women as well as men, this discursive position was also regarded as a masculine one; only by the denial of feminine biological attributes (sex, mothering and feeding) could women become "spiritual".[418]

Much can be said about how religious traditions have tried to keep women away from the public sphere and positions of power. It happens not only for the sake of maintaining male power and domination, but also to render sexuality, vulnerability, and other challenging features invisible. We have already suggested some of the elements in play in this regard in the previous chapter. The ordering of the body, and of what counts as acceptable bodily desires, functions, and features, has contributed to religious imagery in which the body is placed in a situation of predicament or challenge for those who are not male. Female bodies, sexed bodies, or homosexual bodies are obvious examples of that which is deliberately or subconsciously marginalized in ways that cause shame.

418 Clough, *Shame, the Church and the Regulation of Female Sexuality*, 164.

We have already claimed that religion is different from morality in the way that it does not only emphasize what you do but who you are (identity) and what you believe (belonging and faith). Whereas what you do is something from which you can distance yourself, stop doing, or admit was wrong to do,[419] it is not so easy when it comes to what you believe (which is often part of your identity, the underlying orientational structure that guides your agency) or who you are. This fact comes to the fore in the way religions are often socially structured according to one's status as belonging to a specific category: man, woman, child, lay, ordained, etc. As Woodhead and Heelas have pointed to, these modes of being, which sometimes are closely related to one's embodied status as well, make it possible to see some types of religion as organized around difference. They therefore, identify them as *religions of difference.* Although not always relying on markers that have to do with one's embodied status, this type of religious organization or structuring may also contribute to shaming, for example, when one does not find oneself belonging clearly to one or the other category.[420]

Authority (and thereby also normativity) is mainly shaped, sustained, and expressed by an emphasis on, and identification of differences in this mode of religion. Attempts to destabilize differences may be met with skepticism or rejection, and one, therefore, also risks being shamed if one questions the way they are defined. Furthermore, blurred or unclear gender roles may create uncertainties and shame as well, for example, when a woman finds it necessary to take on a leading role without any support, or when gender roles become impossible to differentiate clearly, as in the present controversial issue of homosexuality. An important component of this type of religion is that religious authority is externally based and that humans have to be obedient to it. It is so even when this authority conflicts with personal interests or convictions. The neglect of personal convictions or feelings that are not in accordance with established authority can make individuals even more dependent on the authorities'

419 Cf. Deigh's distinction between authorship and ownership, as developed in the chapter on the psychology on shame above, pp. 123–124.

420 Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas: *Religion in Modern Times. An Interpretive Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

acceptance and recognition, and accordingly, also more prone to shame since it does not allow for a self-reliant psychological base. Hence, this type of religion does not contribute much to a social environment in which individuals can learn to trust themselves and their judgments – a precondition for developing lasting and positive self-esteem.

Furthermore, in religious imagery, one is led to think of one's own body as either God's creation, or as not in accordance with God's will. In either case, religious self-interpretation can reinforce feelings of worth or shame, respectively. Because one cannot distance oneself from one's bodily condition, be it in terms of health, sexual orientation, or simply how one looks, a religious person may find it harder simply to say that "it is what it is." Since religion makes everything into a sign, an expression of something beyond the apparent, dispositions or actualities that would have no specific significance outside a religious realm may take on strong significance within it. Due to being unable to distance oneself from one's own body, the body's religious status is not only ambiguous but sometimes also precarious. Thus, the power of religion manifests itself in its ability to shame a human's bodily status as well. Graham Ward writes:

> Because shame is so visceral and embodied an affect, it is the body involved in the act bringing shame that is the first object to be abjected. This inner rejection is the source of shame's extraordinary power over human beings. 'In contrast to all other affects, shame is an experience of the self by the self … Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost'.[421]

Hence, Ward makes it clear how hard it is to overcome experiences of shame: it would entail having to distance yourself from yourself.

In his analysis of Adam and Eve's shame because of their nakedness, theologian Ward furthermore emphasizes how authors from Augustine to Tomkins speak of the 'ambivalence' of shame. His analysis at this point may not add so much to our understanding of religion and shame as it does to how religious imaginaries actualize and make apparent more

421 Graham Ward, "Adam and Eve's Shame (and Ours)," *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory, and Culture* 26, no. 3 (2012), 310.

generic traits. Furthermore, Ward's analysis underscores the element of frustration or interruption of the expectation of being good that shame displays. He writes:

> What makes it ambivalent is that it results from a certain incompletion or frustration of a positive affect. In the beginning there is an interest and a promise of enjoyment. Eve sees the fruit as good, a delight to the eyes, and desired that it should make her and Adam wise, and, gnomically, the Scriptures tell that when she offered Adam the fruit 'he was with her' (Gen.3.6). [...] In the response to shame, 'the self remains somewhat committed to the investment of the positive affect [there is] a continuing unwillingness to renounce what had been or might again be of value.'[422]

The other, generic element in the Genesis story that Wards points to, and which has to do with embodiment, is Adam and Eve's need to hide – be it their bodies, their faces, or their genitals. Shame, writes Ward, engenders a new self-consciousness, where they are thrown back at themselves, and realize that this is "their nakedness, their vulnerability" – a realization that implies that they have to do something about it – they have to hide their shame.[423] Thus, the religious context contributes to similar shame as we analyzed earlier in the chapter on body shame.

The hiding of the body may also interrupt or impede further communication: "In part, this is because the face is turned away; in part, this is the silence that is self-imposed by the one who is ashamed."[424] We argue that this is one of the examples that point to how shame arises from the constitution of a context that is different from the one in which agency originated, and in which it tried to articulate and realize itself. This change of context may be seen as the backdrop for the different movements it engenders, because actions such as hiding and being silent entail that the original intentional agency is no longer possible to articulate as previously assumed.

The body, the flesh, remains a problematic element in many religions, not least because of the idealization of the spiritual in contrast to the

422 Ibid., 313. The quote within the quote is from Tomkins.

423 Ward, ibid.

424 Ibid.

material or mundane. Although religious strategies and symbols exist that can provide the means to balance out this fact, the body itself remains a problem for many. Virginia Burrus reports succinctly about her students:

> Armed with the doctrines of divine creation and incarnation, desiring to affirm the goodness of materiality, the poignancy of transience and finitude, the gift of sentience, my students still often seem to fight a losing battle against a theological tradition that remains to this day marked by its shameful shame of the flesh. Sometimes they are ashamed of their failures to resist the force of tradition, are ashamed even of the passion conveyed by their very strength of conviction; but most of them continue to struggle nonetheless, shamelessly, against the weight of shame, in the face of their own shame.[425]

This is a well-articulated testimony to the complicated and complex fact that even in a religion that confesses the resurrection of the flesh, the problem with shame and the body is not dealt with once and for all. This is so also because the body can engage us in projects and relations over which we initially may have no command, and which require that we become transparent to ourselves to gain control and see if this is an acceptable self-investment or not. It is so not least because the body harbors desire – and desire is a major component in our self-projects and investments, and simultaneously something that allows us to be in touch with our vulnerability. Because many religions, including Christianity, often associate desire with a negative state, as long as this is the case, the body continues to be a problematic element in religion.[426] Desire furthermore manifests how the agency it engenders runs the risk of going beyond the accepted contexts and norms. Therefore, it needs to be kept in check.

Religious doctrines and shame

Religions offer an extensive repertoire of symbols and imaginaries. These provide humans with extraordinary opportunities for self-expression,

425 Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects*, XI.

426 For more about this, see F. LeRon Shults and Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Saving Desire: The Seduction of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

self-interpretation, self-assessment and self-perception, as is also the case in the example of confession just mentioned. The imaginaries and notions at work in religion becomes realities to reckon with for believers. They function as self-objects in the psyche, that is, internal objects on which the psyche develops, orients, evaluates, and into which it also invests libido, creativity, commitment, and hope. Self-objects are not only the workings of the imagination, they also are charged with emotion. They affect human self-perception, emotion, behavior, intention, and agency, irrespective of the existence or non-existence of that which they represent. This fact means that religiously charged self-objects, such as "God," can have a profound impact on humans, even if God does not exist.

Against this backdrop, the reference to William James at the start of the chapter can be seen in a new light: religious self-objects contribute not only to the realization or acknowledgment of "wrongness," but may also contribute to the experience that it is overcome. However, the religious individual and/or the group always inhabit a world in which doctrines and imaginaries shape self-perception and may interrupt the ordinary flow of activity in ways that may cause shame, or allow shame to emerge even when the individual is not engaged in action but merely listening to preaching or teaching.

The following subchapter will analyze some religious doctrines or imaginaries that are relevant to understanding the possible shame-engendering effect of religious doctrine. We will continue to concentrate on examples from the Christian tradition – thereby also making it visible that shame-effects do not only belong to religious traditions from which it is easier for people in the Western world to detach themselves.

Atonement

Christianity in the West centers around two crucial doctrinal *topoi* that have significance for its ability to deal with shame. These are the understanding of the human being as a sinner and the understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus as something that atoned for this sin. The combination of these two mirrors well what William James described as the conditions for a religious experience. How can these doctrinal elements

have an impact on a human being who is prone to shame? What happens if someone who is prone to shame is confronted by the traditional understanding of God's grace as offered in the reconciling act of Christ's substitutionary death on the cross for the sins of all humans?

The notion of the human being as a sinner implies that humans are fundamentally under God's judgment. Jesus, on the other hand, is the one who takes on the punishment that humans deserve, and thereby frees them from it. God and humans can, therefore, be reconciled because of Christ's voluntary suffering on behalf of all humans. Christ procures the grace of God that humans are offered and which implies the forgiveness of their sins. Norwegian pastoral theologian Berit Okkenhaug has problematized this approach because of its inability to address the problem of shame adequately.[427] We agree and illustrate our arguments for this in the following example.

If a person prone to shame is urged to believe that Jesus had to die in order for her to be reconciled with God, her understanding of her relationship with God might, in fact, enhance the problematic role that shame already has in her life. To tell her about the sinner's lack of self-worth, on the one hand, and about how much Jesus' sacrifice is worth, on the other hand, may prove to be the opposite of liberating. Instead, it may lead her to self-perception according to the following destructive dynamics:

1. I am a sinner, and for this reason, I am not worthy of the love of God. I am a sinner in the eyes of both myself and God. (This expresses the shameful self's self-rejection as motivated by religious teaching.)
2. Despite my lack of worth, God nevertheless loves me and loves me so much that God sent God's son in order to die for my sins. (This is "the gospel" which is intended to serve as a solution to self-rejection and a lack of self-worth.)
3. The very fact that God's son had to die because I am a sinner makes me feel even more unworthy and shameful. Because I am the cause of God's son's unjust suffering and sacrifice, this fact *enhances*

427 Berit Okkenhaug, *Når Jeg Skjuler Mitt Ansikt: Perspektiver På Skam* (Oslo, 2009), 123ff.

feelings of shame and guilt. (For someone who is already carrying deep-seated feelings of shame, this is the result of 1 and 2).[428]

Although point 1 and 2 in the above sequence correspond with James' analysis, the outcome is the opposite of what he suggests. We see here that one of the central religious doctrines in Christianity may, given a specific interpretation, contribute to the feeling of *being wrong* in a way that enhances personal shame. For those who are prone to shame, this doctrine may contribute to sustaining the shameful position instead of liberating them from shame.

Eleonore Stump addresses these problems from a distinct understanding of what it is that engenders shame.[429] Stump approaches the problem from the point of view of philosophical theology – the discipline that tests the coherence of theological propositions to see if they are defensible. She, too, discusses whether the notion of Christ's suffering can be interpreted in order to alleviate shame. The reason for this discussion is clear: Christ's atonement is traditionally supposed to reverse the bad effects of the so-called fall of humanity, and since shame is among the afflictions of humanity in its present state, it is an obvious thing to ask if the atonement provides a remedy for shame as well.[430] Her argument is worth analyzing in detail, because it shows how different elements and conditions for shame, and for lifting shame, are similar within the context of religious doctrine as in other cultural or social contexts.

Stump distinguishes, importantly, between shame and guilt. Both are interpreted against the background of two desires that emerge out of love, as defined by Thomas Aquinas. According to his position, love consists of two mutually governing desires: the desire for the good of the beloved, and the desire for union with the beloved. Stump goes on, writing:

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428 Another version of this criticism, which closely examines Eleanore Stump's claims that the cross of Christ eliminates human shame because it shows that Christ wants to unite with us, can be found in E. J. Coffmann's paper "Stump on the Nature of Atonement" (web.utk.edu/~ecoffma1/SNA.doc).

429 Eleonore Stump, "The Atonement and the Problem of Shame," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 19 (2016). Here Stump develops what Brad A. Binau claimed that no-one had done in his earlier article "When Shame Is the Question, How Does the Atonement Answer?" *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2002): 89–90.

430 Stump, "The Atonement and the Problem of Shame," 112.

> A person who is and feels shamed and a person who is and feels guilty each anticipate a repudiation, on the part of real or imagined others, of both of the desires of love as regards himself. But a person in the grip of guilt will tend to focus more on the first desire, and a person suffering from shame will tend to worry more about the second.[431]

That she points to this fact is essential since it relates shame to the interruption of the desire for communion and belonging – which has been a central point in our previous analyses of shame's various movements.[432]

Shame, then, may lead people to despise who they are as much as what they have done, claims Stump.[433] Such strong shame is ultimately complete only when it is internalized, which emphasizes both the degree of self-loathing that shamed people can experience and, at the same time, the relative freedom, such that they could possibly choose to live otherwise than with this shame.

However, shame is more ambivalent than guilt precisely because it is less objective. As guilt has its opposite in forgiveness, shame has its opposite in honor. Stump argues that, "the most salient difference between shame and guilt is that, on the face of it, the alienation from the self produced by shame *does not have its source in the will of the shamed person*," and thus "seems to stem from an involuntary suffering forced on a person by things that happen to him, outside his control."[434] This is a point that is also emphasized by Martha Nussbaum – shame is often reinforced by societal factors, and is used by society to try to enforce an order of things. Shame is the result of something outside our control – and therefore outside the initial scope of our agency.

Stump points to two different elements in the subjectivity of the person feeling shame: firstly, one has to imagine some repudiation from others, and secondly, this imagined repudiation causes the feeling of shame. Thus, she makes the obvious point that the subject's imagination is a

431 Ibid., 113.

432 Furthermore, it is notable here how both these desires resonate with the psychological features implied in our earlier chapter: if we think of these desires as that which shapes the parent's relation to the child, in allowing her to be herself (what is good for her) and affirming, and not rejecting her (union), these features fit well with our previous analysis.

433 Thus, in Stump's view, shame seems to dissolve both self-respect and self-esteem.

434 Stump, "The Atonement and the Problem of Shame," 148. Our italics.

necessary condition for feeling shame. Thereby, she can also address the complexity of shame and its conditions, since this approach means that shame does not need to emerge from the attitudes of real peers. Moreover, shame has an element of anxiety in it as well, which is related to the human desire for love. Stump writes:

> … a shamed person anticipates warranted rejection and abandonment on the part of real or imagined others, and consequently, he is anxious about marginalization or isolation. His anxiety is directed towards a distance, an absence of union, forced on him by others with whom he himself desires some kind of closeness. His worry is therefore that real or imagined others will be warranted in lacking for him the second desire of love, the desire for union with him.[435]

Stump here points to how the anxiety is related to the desire for recognition – a desire that presumably is behind much of human agency in the social sphere, and to the second element in what we have called the double movement – the movement towards others. It can help explain the shame felt in being ill, diabled, poor, unemployed, or lonely. In all these cases, the shameful can experience shame as a manifestation of the anxiety for being someone with whom others will not want to stand in an affirmative relationship.

What, then, causes the imagined or real repudiation? Based on a long and interesting analysis, Stump argues that we need to distinguish between four different kinds of shame, all of which she then subsequently discusses with regard to the effects of atonement. These four are:

a) Shame resulting from one's own wrongdoing
b) Shame stemming from being the victim of someone else's wrongdoing
c) Shame following some impairment or depredation of nature
d) Shame attached to being a member of the human race

In all of these types of shame, there is some standard of value involved, which provides a necessary condition for feeling shame or being ashamed.

435 Ibid.

In the first three, a standard of value that the person feels defective in relation to is implied, which he or she expects that should be accepted by both himself/herself and imagined or real others. The fourth, collective type of shame is caused by being a member of a group that is defective in relation to a standard that is valid for all of humanity.[436] Stump holds that all human beings, at some point in life, will have to struggle with all of these types of shame.

Stump rejects, head on, the idea that there might be some kind of compensation for shame in heaven. This notion implies that there will be a remedy for shame, although not here and now. She finds this idea confusing and unconvincing. No good can outweigh the shame that a person suffers, and the idea of compensation in the afterlife is not able to defeat shame. Furthermore, since shame is related to something in a person's past, this origin is impossible to change, as is all of history. The past remains no matter what is offered in heaven to those suffering from or subject to shame. Accordingly, to think that atonement can compensate for shame by providing access to the benefits of heaven is misguided.[437]

Stump instead identifies the antidote to (some forms of) shame in its opposite: honor and admiration. Her argument is as follows: a person who feels ashamed is convinced that something about herself warrants that real or imagined others have no desire for being in community with her. Shame, then, emerges out of others turning away because of our weakness, powerlessness, ugliness, or other defects. The human proneness to consider those without power or who have fallen from power as "devalued, degraded, debased, defiled, despoiled" implies that they are "diminished in social standing or cultural stature, and they lack attractiveness for us in consequence. And so a certain kind of vulnerability and helplessness is also a hallmark of shame."[438] However, whereas such conditions for shame are what makes us turn away, the one whom we honor

436 Ibid, 116. This type of shame is addressed, for example, in the analysis of Michael L. Morgan on the shame felt for being part of the humanity that stood behind the Holocaust, *On Shame* (New York; London: Routledge, 2008).

437 Cf. Stump, "The Atonement and the Problem of Shame", 117.

438 Ibid., 118.

or admire is one who is attractive to us, and the one we admire and with whom we desire to have community.

> To the extent that others have a warranted desire for him, they have the second desire of love for him, namely, the desire for union (of one sort or another). And if others are drawn to him and desire union with him, the shamed person's shame is lifted. It helps in this connection to notice that a shamed person can be thought seriously deficient by others on the basis of highly varying scales of value, ranging from moral or religious standards to standards of fashion current in a particular community. And it is possible for a person to be shamed on one set of standards and honored on another.[439]

The fact that shame can be lifted when a person experiences that someone honors him or her, and that this can happen based on other standards than those which caused the shame, points to an important feature in religious believers: when they believe that God honors them, the belief in this acknowledgment may provide an exchange of standards of self-evaluation that may, in fact, liberate them from shame. On a more generic level, what religions do is that they often provide alternative standards by which people can experience their emotional predicament, offered as a remedy because alternative standards of evaluation are employed.[440]

At this point, Stump's considerations of the positive effects of the notion of Christ's atonement show their relevance. Atonement provides a good that defeats the suffering of shame because it allows a person to see himself as honored and valuable or lovable – and "that is greater than his shame and for which his shame is somehow essential."[441]

Stump is careful in extending the implications of atonement. She is not building on the ideas we presented in the earlier section, that imply that Christ suffered because of, or as a punishment for, human sin. Instead, it is God's love for humankind that comes to the fore in atonement, and

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439 Ibid.

440 However, this may go both ways: it is possible to imagine that religious standards sometimes contribute to shame with regard to something that the person previously has been proud of doing. The condition for this being the case, however, is that the person now recognizes the religious standards as more valid than the standards that previously generated his or her pride or honor.

441 Stump, "The Atonement and the Problem of Shame," 119.

which displays God's desire for unity and community with the human race. Thereby, she can avoid the problematic elements in an interpretation of atonement where Christ must die because of the sins of the one who is ashamed – an idea that could easily lead to more shame. She writes:

> When, voluntarily, out of love for humankind, Christ dies by torture naked in the view of his friends and disciples, he joins the shame and suffering of humanity. By this means, he makes the shame of humanity something shared with the Deity, and that sharing is a great honor for the human race. It is one thing to be a member of the species that perpetrated the moral horrors of the twentieth century. It is another thing to be a member of the species of creature to which God joined himself in nature and shame and suffering.[442]

Thus, according to Stump, atonement can be seen as a remedy for the fourth type of shame that she has identified – that of belonging to the sinful human race. "It is not hard to think of the good in question, namely, the honor of having God himself as part of the species and its suffering as greater than the good lost, namely, the honor that the race lost in virtue of its deplorable history."[443]

However, one needs to interpret atonement from a different angle if one is to see it as a remedy for the other types of shame that Stump lists. At this stage of reasoning, Stump enters into a far more distinct, theological mode of thinking than she has done so far. Here, she takes as her point of departure the orthodox claim that in his human nature, Christ bore the sins of all of humanity on the cross. She takes this notion to mean that in his passion and his death, "Christ opened himself up to the psyches of all other human beings, all at once, so that he somehow received in himself, in psychic union, the psyches of other human beings, in their sin and shame, without himself actually becoming guilty of a sin of his own. By this means, he bears the sins of all human persons in himself."[444]

Accordingly, Stump holds, what Christ did was necessary on his part for establishing a union between him and every human being. He opened himself up to their "indwelling" in him so that they could respond by

442 Ibid., 121.
443 Ibid., 122.
444 Ibid., 123.

uniting themselves with him. In such a union, Christ dwells in the human person, just as the human being dwells in Christ. This idea implies that what is required on the side of the human is to be willing to make this union happen.[445] It is this personal union with each person that can provide a remedy for the other types of shame, according to Stump.

In conclusion, then, we see that Stump's approach to atonement as a remedy for shame provides alternative standards for honor than other human standards – the Deity is willing to join in the shameful conditions of humanity because of the desire for unity with the human race. The conditions that contribute to shame in humanity are not sufficient for Christ to give up the desire for community and union. Thereby, Christ shows that humanity is more valuable than any standards that cause shame. Furthermore, as Stump shows, this does not abolish the causes of shame and shaming but provides a chance to establish an alternative means for self-value. The challenge for the one who is ashamed is to be able to believe that this is something that took place for him or her.

If we consider Stump's discussion from a distance, we can see that the way she uses religious imagery is parallel to what it would be in contexts other than religious ones, as well. It is about accepting people despite their imperfections. Thus, again, we see that religious ways of dealing with shame explicate or articulate features common to all humankind. Religious ways of addressing or dealing with shame are not constitutionally different from those used in other realms of human life.

Sin and feeling accepted or repressed

Religious imagery uses the notion *sin* for the dark side of the human condition. This notion describes the depravity of humans, and as such, it has contributed significantly to human beings' sense of being repudiated by God and others – thus causing shame. However, from a more positive angle, the notion of sin may also contribute something positive and realistic to the human condition, provided that it is used within a context that allows for nuance. That requires, however, that it is seen in relation to the

445 Cf. ibid., 124.

most positive symbol that Christianity has for human beings, namely, that humans are created in the image of God, with the dignity related to that designation.

The concept of sin may be a resource when it comes to the understanding of human growth and transformation. But then it has to be understood not only in terms of what must be morally rejected, but also in terms of what stands in opposition to the image of God in humans, and the human calling to do God's work in the world – a calling which is the basis for human self-respect and self-esteem from a religious point of view. Sin is distortion and corruption of the goodness in the world and the personal life and experience of the individual. Accordingly, one could still use the word sin for certain elements in human life and human experience without having to accept the "Protestant-Augustinian tradition doctrine of original sin which holds that the entire created order, including human nature, must be repudiated in order to 'put on' a new life whose centre of gravity is not self but God."[446] This doctrine might then provide relevant resources for interpreting human experience. There are still a lot of horrors in the world that can be interpreted in terms of sin. Moreover, basic tensions in human life are not well served if we interpret them within a basically harmonious framework. Human life is about growth, transformation, and the overcoming of problematic features. Some of these might be in stark contrast to the ideal human that both Christian theology and other spiritual traditions depict as desirable.

However, talk about sin without causing shame is only possible if one can first underscore or affirm something constitutionally positive about humans, such as the understanding of them as created in the image of God. By affirming the human being as created in the image of God, theology makes it possible to affirm the human need for positive self-esteem and self-recognition (more on this below). Even more so, as these are elements that we know from psychology that are best nurtured when expressing a relationship that is unconditional. Let us explain:

446 Linda Woodhead, "On the Incompatibility between Christianity and Holistic Spirituality; A Reply to Jan-Olav Henriksen," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 19 (2006): 60.

When the self-symbol God is seen as one who loves you only when you conform to certain patterns, act in accordance with specific norms, or have or lack specific feelings and desires, it is hard to develop a positive and religiously based affirmation of oneself. It leaves one constantly in need of referring to and adjusting oneself to experience oneself as valuable, and it makes God's love dependent upon one's actions.

Religious resources for work against shame need to uphold the distinction between humans and God, between the actual and the ideal, and affirm that this is unavoidable, even in a context where humans are aiming at growth and moral improvement. It is important to avoid the identification of the human with the divine because it would otherwise contribute to narcissistic grandiosity in the human. Such identification would overload the human, and make the human's religious status dependent on the outcome of human agency. Exactly that is rejected in both Luther's theology of justification by grace alone, as well as in Augustine's doctrine on grace.[447] Recognition by God is fundamentally unmerited. Furthermore, one can address expressions of such overestimation of human abilities as expressions of sin, and thereby point to the limits of human life as something that one has to acknowledge. The hubris (note the allusion to Augustine's understanding of sin here) of humans is to try to override the unavoidable character of these limits.

The object of much pastoral counseling is to develop the ability to discern what the necessary limits are that cannot be overcome, and what we should, from a realistic point of view, strive to transform and overcome. Hence, to understand how sin works as hubris in human life means finding out how one can become a better person. On the other hand, to find out where false ideals of humility are at work and hold someone back from developing the call to be an image of God is the other side of the same task.[448] The result, given that this work succeeds, is that humans come to know themselves better. It might not, in effect, be very different from what Woodhead reports on the aims of the practices of the so-called new spiritualities:

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447 Cf. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996).

448 Cf. Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980).

> To be a mature human subject is to be someone who has a body and feelings, is aware of them, takes responsibility for them, and "manages" them successfully. It is to be a bounded emotional self, which is open to impressions from outside, but able to respond to them appropriately. Attentiveness to the bodily and the emotional states play a vital role in the construction of this sense of bounded individual selfhood. Religions may facilitate such self-awareness when they authorize a self which is rooted and grounded in the emotions of that unique self itself. By being recognized, valued and discursively represented, the embodied emotional self comes into being.[449]

Such an embodied and positively valued self represents a challenge to versions of religion that overlook, ignore or reject positive traits that are important for their followers. In their study *The Spiritual Revolution,* Woodhead and Heelas *et al.*, give contemporary examples of how people's inner lives are only to a certain extent recognized in the religious contexts they researched, and they see this as a challenge to Christianity's present state.[450] Their results are telling: specific feelings, especially strong ones, or those expressing positive self-esteem apart from what is recognized as religiously valid, or desires that are not in accordance with Christian ideals, are subject to repression. Thus, self-projects are interrupted. This causes shame, not only because one harbors such feelings or desires, but potentially also because they lead to agency that is not in accordance with that of the religious context to which they belong.

Images of God and the processes of the self

A central element in many religions is the notion of God. In the following, we will call this the God *symbol*, to place it in relation to Kohut's self-psychological approach. This symbol may have profound effects concerning shame – regardless whether the person believes in the existence of God or not. God is a powerful symbol in many people's psyches nonetheless.

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449 Cf. Woodhead, "On the Incompatibility between Christianity and Holistic Spirituality; A Reply to Jan-Olav Henriksen," 59.

450 Paul Heelas. Linda Woodhead, et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

Shea understands the God symbol from the process of human imaging. For him, imaging is part and parcel of what it means to develop a coherent self that can make sense of events, and which can negotiate meaning and deal with life's contingencies. Imaging is both what we do and what we are. It engages all of the self's senses to help us grasp and relate to our reality. Shea holds that, "Imaging is a continuous, developing, bodily process, an ongoing organizing and reorganizing of perceiving and knowing." Processes of imaging constantly help us to reconfigure "the whole."[451] Imaging is not subjective and arbitrary, nor should it be seen as a means for escaping reality; instead, it is how we entertain the real and engage fully with life.[452] It is what makes it possible to have knowledge of reality, and for the mind, "the task of the imagination, and particularly of the religious imagination, is to compose the real."[453]

Shea sees religion as that which links the self and God. From that perspective, imaging is the very way in which such relations take on the character of being real. The incomplete process of imaging, which he calls fettered imaging, is a stage in the process of becoming a more mature self. Imaging is, therefore, part of that which constitutes the development that will eventually lead to the superego of the self. The content of this superego is made up of cultural understandings, societal norms, parental values, the influence of peers, and religious beliefs. This content "combines with the incompleteness of the adolescing self's own perceptive and cognitive powers to hinder and constrain what may later be a freer, fuller, more complete, and more appropriate imaging of reality."[454]

What kinds of processes lead to a belief in a superego God and how are these, subsequently, of importance for shame and shaming? According to Shea, the superego God is produced by the adolescing self, with his or

451 John J. Shea, *Finding God Again: Spirituality for Adults* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 9.

452 Ibid., 10. For a similar assessment from the point of view of the philosophy of religion, see R. Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols,* (Albany, 1996). For constructive theology, see G. Kaufman: *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia 1981), especially Chapters 1 and 2. The strength of Kaufman's contribution is that he not only stresses that our conceptions of God are our constructs, but he also relates this understanding of the constitution of theological discourse to contributions in contemporary self-psychology.

453 Shea, *Finding God Again*, 10. Shea is referring to Sharon Parks here.

454 Ibid., 11.

her particular needs, transference patterns of relating, and with his or her particular logic of objective knowing.[455] As a consequence, this experience of "God" evolves alongside the self that holds on to this God. The result can be different versions of "God" which nevertheless all have some characteristics in common. In the following, we present the elements in the superego God (understood as a supreme being) that seem most relevant to the topic of shame.[456]

The *God of law* commands and is the source of morality. He commands obedience more than understanding and insight into God's will. This version of "God" is perhaps the one that most strongly implies a fusion of religion and morality. Here, the standards against which the person measures him or herself are rooted in an instance to which he or she cannot object, and to elements that are not negotiable. It is unavoidable that this God will become a God of guilt and shame. As the self grows, so do the ambiguities in its relationship with this God, who is not only benevolent and good but also judging and all-seeing – a point that contributes further to shame.[457] Thus, this symbol mirrors the self's own dividedness and moral failure.

We can add the following reflection to Shea's description here: understood as a supreme being, this God is omnipresent. We have already suggested in a previous analysis that this God can enter the consciousness of the individual at any given time and, as it clashes with it, interrupt the already existing context of agency by introducing a new and different one in which God's presence is the main feature. For religious people, this point displays how the imaginaries that are enmeshed in their fundamental ways of relating to the world and the self make them exposed to the risk of shame in a way that is probably greater than non-religious people. God can always appear in the consciousness of the believer and disturb projects, intentions, and intentions in ways that cause shame.

455 Ibid., 23.

456 We will not refer to all of Shea's points in detail as this is not necessary for our present purposes.

457 Shea places this God's commandments entirely within the realm of Lawrence Kohlberg's description of the pre-conventional and conventional forms of morality, which we discuss in the next chapter. See Shea, *Finding God Again*, 26.

Stephen Pattison sees the problems of the God of law most strongly articulated in the ideal of God as perfect, good, and complete in "Godself". For a person prone to shame, such a symbol of God can become destructive because the ideals it implies means that almost everyone is bound to fall short. Shameful dissatisfaction with oneself is the result. Pattison sees the aspiration to perfection as pernicious and persecutory for ashamed selves.[458] The notion of God as a punisher may also deeply trouble people who have problems with the God presented by the authorities, and reinforce the sense of ontological badness in the believer.[459]

Obedience and adaptation are the immediate requirements for good standing with this God. These form the preconditions for God to offer necessary security. However, in the long run, this God may be challenged by the experience that impossible and rigid commandments are not really helpful when dealing with the challenges of life. Moreover, such a God may also engender shame and a false self, because this God symbol always demands conformity and the neglect of one's own emotional responses.[460]

Closely related to the above God of law is the God of dependency and control. On the one hand, this God provides everything that the adolescent self needs for growth and development, but on the other hand, power and authority are restricted to "Godself". The self has no independent access to these resources. Providence and dominion describe this God. Shea holds that this notion of God holds an inbuilt contradiction: when related to the concrete experience of human life this God is all-powerful and all-knowing and desires our well-being. However, this God also allows humans no autonomy. The contradiction between the apparent

458 Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, 238.

459 Cf. ibid., 241.

460 Shea, *Finding God Again: Spirituality for Adults*, 26. For this point, see also Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology,* 238, who points to how the rhetoric of God helping people to find their "true" selves in him nevertheless advocates conformity to God's needs and will. This call "to become as God wants one to be, to obedience and to conformity, can help to crush people's sense of their own goodness and the appropriateness of their being." As a consequence, such rhetoric may encourage a shameful heteronomy and conformity and leave people profoundly discontented with themselves as they are.

call to freedom and responsibility and God's demand that we remain in a position of absolute dependence on God is not easily solved.[461]

The benefit for the self in holding on to this God symbol is nevertheless apparent: this God promises to protect one from the pains of inner struggle and from having to make responsible life choices. However, the condition for fulfilling this promise is that one gives up the struggle for freedom and autonomy. Hence, comfort and security come at a price. Gratitude may, in the long run, be exchanged with rebellion.[462] From the perspective of shame, this may be seen as negative: the idea that God does not need anything from humans and that humans do not actually desire anything from God may imply for people who are prone to shame that they will continue to feel incompetent and worthless, instead of being affirmed for actually being able to do something useful for others. "The price of developing a sense of absolute gratitude to and dependence upon God may be the acquisition of a diminished view of the power and value of the self," writes Pattison.[463]

The God of the group is linked to a group that is ordered hierarchically. God is at the top, and then come the authorities appointed to speak on God's behalf, who therefore require attentive obedience. By accepting these terms, one can become a member. Belonging to the group determines whether one is a true believer in God. This God is a God of compliance, convention, and conformity. At best, the group (and its God) offers comfort, strength, and solidarity. However, a lack of acceptance of the requirements may also lead to feelings of isolation and rejection – and thus engender shame, just as we can see in Stump's earlier description of not being desired. So too can the lack of ability to adhere to the group's expectations for conduct, that is, when it comes to issues about substance abuse.[464]

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461 Ibid., 29.

462 Ibid.

463 Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, 240.

464 Cf. Elizabeth A. Prosek et al., "Experiencing Shame: Collegiate Alcohol Abuse, Religiosity, and Spirituality," *Journal of College Counseling* 20, no. 2 (2017) and Pekka Lund, "Christian Faith and Recovery from Substance Abuse, Guilt, and Shame," *Journal Of Religion & Spirituality In Social Work: Social Thought* 36, no. 3 (2017).

We may supplement the analysis of the superego God presented thus far with other traits that Stephen Pattison identifies as important in the symbol of a God that engenders shame. When God is understood as completely different from other beings, this may lead to a total dis-identification of God with humans. If this trait is dominant, it is hard to see how such a God can mirror human development in ways that provide affirmation of God's attunement to human needs and interests.[465] Moreover, and in line with this, as *God does not have a body* (unlike humans), dis-identification may also follow from disembodiment. Underscoring the contrast inherent in the body-spirit dichotomy may imply that all things relating to the body are negatively related to God, who is spirit.[466] Pattison points to the possible consequence of this understanding that anything can be done to the body,[467] not only by the self but also by others. Violations of the boundaries of the body, be they in terms of ridicule, violence, sexual abuse or drug abuse, may, as we have already indicated, contribute to shame, no matter if they are caused by others or oneself. As the body is our concern in terms of not only appearance, but also in terms of sexuality, digestion or excretion, the body may be a source of shame in many ways, because it does not share in God's nature or live up to the ideals of perfection that religions mediate.

According to similar logic, a God that is primarily presented as pure and holy cannot tolerate the unclean. Such God images may increase the personal sense of alienation from both the ideal self and the divine. Furthermore, the associated quest for reconciling purification with the divine "can also foster some most unpleasant human attitudes and vices such as self-righteousness, exclusivism, and contempt for others."[468]

We have repeatedly pointed to the body as the locus of feelings and desires. However, many Western images of God portray God as rational and, accordingly, as one that does not have feelings or desires.[469] For a self prone to shame, this God symbol contributes to a split in the self

465 Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, 236f.
466 Ibid., 237.
467 Ibid.
468 Ibid., 237f.
469 Ibid., 238.

that can be far more complex than that described here.[470] The contrast between a self-controlled and passionless God and a self in the hands of its own emotions may contribute to self-experiences of shame and inadequacy. Repression and the denial of feelings may turn into an ideal, and failure to live up to this ideal may, in turn, engender similar feelings of inferiority.[471] It may also render the self more prone to abuse by others.

How should we assess the risks of shame in the context of religion?

The present chapter has presented some of the different levels at which shame may be at work in the context of religion. Like other areas of human life, shame is prevalent here as well. How to evaluate the risks for shame in a religious context? The answer to that question may depend on who you are, and whether or not you are engaged in religion, and, if so, in what ways. For those who are religious and still find it is worthwhile to be so, we can offer the following options.

Religious practitioners who are focused on the need for obedience to authority and the disciplining of the flock may find that shame is, and has to be, a part of the repertoire of interaction and conduct. They may argue that this has always been so, that this is a consequence of being faithful to tradition, and so on. The cost of this attitude is the possible arrested personal growth and development of adherents and the risk of losing some of them, especially if shaming practices become too pervasive.

Other religious practitioners may see the analyses we have offered here, and similar ones, as an excellent opportunity to be constantly aware of the risks of shame and shaming. They may be motivated to develop forms of interaction and agency that impede the development of shame and utilize other mechanisms for moral teaching and codes of conduct.

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470 For the social effects of this godly ideal, see also the sociology of emotions as described by Riis and Woodhead in A Sociology of Religious *Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), which describes thoroughly the sociological functions that may surround the features we describe here.

471 Cf. Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, 238f.

Because religious practices and teachings are employed in so many different contexts and mean different things to different people with different background stories, it is not likely that shame will ever be eliminated from religion. But if one has the aim of reducing shame in religious contexts, there is much to be aware of. If one does not see this as a valuable aim, then one can go one as before. If the latter is a good strategy for religion in a modern or postmodern context remains to be seen. We think not.

The latter points notwithstanding, religion addresses – and must address – failure, because its acknowledgment is a precondition for growth and self-development. But how failure is addressed, and what symbols are employed for dealing with it, varies, and must do so. Graham Ward writes wisely, "Theologically, human beings still walk a high wire between *amor sui* and *amor dei*, pride and humility, assertive self-determination and obedience; with shame, the opening can always be seen beneath the feet, below the wire."[472] The religious practitioner will need to develop modes that overcome shame in a community, and can do so only if he or she can develop trust in an idealized figure with whom he or she can identify without also acknowledging their difference – and that can only be learned in healthy and well-functioning contexts of human interaction.

In her analysis of various aspects of shame, Martha Nussbaum also asks if her analysis is at odds with major religious ideas regarding shame.[473] She points to some critical elements that are worth considering in this conclusion, and which we have hinted at already. Her recommendation is that religions emphasize that perfection is an implausible and inappropriate goal for a human being.[474] At first sight, this might seem like an approach that could generate or contribute to shame, but that need not be the case. Consider what we have written above about standards that generate shame. If these standards are too high, they may cause shame by merely setting the bar too high. Thus, a more realistic understanding of the capacities and capabilities of human beings contributes to an

472 Ward, "Adam and Eve's Shame (and Ours)," 313.

473 See Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 342f.

474 Ibid.

adequate understanding of the human condition and provides the means for more tolerance in the face of imperfection and insufficiency.

Of course, religious ideas exist that consider the human being as not worthy of respect – as we suggested in the previous section. But Nussbaum holds that the major religions accept an idea of human dignity and, therefore, also human rights. They do not see this idea as incompatible with teachings regarding human frailty and inadequacy.[475] Thus, she seems to underscore the point we have made above about seeing the failures of humanity against a fundamentally positive backdrop of human dignity, which in the Abrahamic traditions is expressed in the notion of the human being as created in the image of God.

There are three important considerations that we can develop based on Nussbaum's short remarks regarding religion:

> First, the idea about human inadequacy and imperfection need not in itself engender shame – even when articulated within a religious context. To be aware of one's finitude may provide a realistic notion about what it means to be human – and allow for a recognition of the vulnerable and frail human condition, without this being a cause for shame.
>
> Second, it is primarily when these features of the human condition are related to specific standards that contribute to jeopardizing someone's stature or belonging to a specific community that they may become problematic. When inadequacy and imperfection are employed as a basis for the evaluation of a person's potential recognition by others, and as a condition for their desire for community with this person, shame lurks in the background.
>
> Third, if religious symbols are employed to express the ambiguities of the human condition in a way that allows for the recognition of human dignity (being created in the image of God is a symbol used in Judaism, Islam and Christianity), as well as the imperfect status of humans, these in combination may contribute to a more sound and realistic understanding of the human condition that can hinder the development of shame. Then, religion can make a positive contribution to a culture in which shame is all too pervasive.

475 Ibid., 343.

Furthermore, we can relate these points to Jill McNish's suggestion for a religiously constructive response to shame. She holds that a certain "sense of being somehow flawed or at least feeble, inadequate, or finite, is an ontological part of what it means to be human."[476] Shame is, accordingly, in her view, something we need to approach constructively to come to terms with the conditions for our existence. The argument that she offers to substantiate this point is as follows:

Shame is situated at the borderline between unity and separation. Like many others, both secular and religious, philosophers, theologians and psychologists, McNish uses the Genesis story about Adam and Eve in the Garden as her point of departure for reflection. She sees the content of this story as an illustration of how separation occurs: "It is really not about God's expulsion and banishment of the primal couple from the garden and/or from God's presence, but rather the couple's own shame experience and their need to separate themselves from the unity they had felt with nature itself and from God's presence."[477] Hence, McNish points to how this story illustrates what we have previously identified as the movements entailed in shame: to separate oneself from community, and to desire for its return.

If we, furthermore, consider this interpretation in light of our understanding of shame as the result of an interruption, the myth about God's presence in the Garden is about a presence that makes Adam and Eve aware of a context of agency and intentions different from the one in which their own agency takes place. Thus, they experience separation from God as something that causes shame, whereas they previously lived in a state of unquestioned union and immediacy. But shame not only manifests a separation between humans and the God who can relieve humans from their sense of wrongness. It also holds a productive potential. McNish develops this potential in a critical comment to Vicki Underland-Rosow. She describes Underland-Rosow's position as follows:

> Shame is antithetical to spirituality. Much institutional religion in our culture separates humans from themselves (their feelings, desires, and thoughts), from

476 McNish, *Transforming Shame: A Pastoral Response*, 125.
477 Ibid., 130.

> each other, the universe, and a Higher Power. Spirituality brings things together. Spirituality involves connections. Spirituality is often experienced as profound oneness with the universe. Shame involves separation, alienation. Spirituality has no need for disconnection: Most western religion demands separation and shame."[478]

Read in the light of the fundamental idea about religion in William James as stated in the introduction to this chapter, one might say that Underland-Rosow's contrasting of religion and spirituality here points to how religion builds on the premise of separation, and therefore allows for shame to have a valid place in the religious context. However, spirituality, which is related to human growth and self-acceptance, seems to require for shame to be overcome. McNish nevertheless sees hidden problems in this way of establishing the solution. She critically addresses the premise that it is "in the nature of things that human beings should experience a perpetual state of unity and connection with the source of being and with one another."[479] The problem with this position is that it does not allow authentic spirituality to include experiences of brokenness, dislocation, and fragmentation. Thus, this understanding of spirituality seems to offer a false and superficial picture of the human condition. Separation is a necessary condition for individuation and creativity, and without it, there would be no human growth or progress. Therefore, McNish underscores the necessity of separation: "In order to individuate and come into their own as separate and authentic human beings, people need to experience boundaries between themselves and God and one another. Shame is one of those affects that enables this experience."[480]

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478 Ibid., 134.

479 Ibid.

480 Ibid., 135. It is against this backdrop that McNish interprets the myth about the Garden of Eden: "The advent of shame caused Adam and Eve to leave the paradisal garden. Yes, this was the end of dreaming innocence. It was the end of humankind's thoughtless unity with God and nature and an end too of humankind's unthinking identification with God. However, it was also the beginning of human creativity and invention. Eve ate of the Tree of Knowledge. This was the beginning of shame. From this archetypal moment, human individuals began to experience boundaries. Leaving the garden set limits and gave shape, substance, and direction to human life. They went out of Eden and began to work, to create, to invent – in short, to become individuals and to start the long process of individuation, both as a species and as individual persons. They lost their unthinking experience of unity with God and nature, but they began the process of finding themselves as human creatures. That unity which was lost is what individuals seek in a

McNish can therefore argue that the experience of shame is "an important way that God reaches out to us and touches us," because shame may point to unavoidable elements in the human condition. Thus, she also points to the same elements that Nussbaum identifies as necessary for humans to acknowledge in order to come to terms with these features of human life that cause shame: "We are frustrated, even overcome at times, by our physical, finite nature and by failings and inadequacies specific to us as individuals." However, these experiences are instances with religious significance, since it is possible to experience oneself as accepted by God, nevertheless. The unconditional acceptance of God can make experiences of shame transformative, "if and to the extent that we can avoid resorting to the various defenses which seek to deny our experience of shame."[481] Hence, she interprets the New Testament stories as chronicles of shame. "They are about the outcast, the unlovable, the impure, the abandoned – the shamed – in all of us, not just outside of us."[482]

It is clear from her elaborations on shame as a contributor to spiritual and personal growth that the shame she is talking about here is adequate, that is, it is a shame that the person in question is entitled to feel. Hence, McNish's argument rests on the premise that separating adequate from inadequate shame is necessary before one employs shame for a positive spiritual and personal purpose. However, given that premise, her constructive proposal for shame in a spiritual context can make sense:

> Psychic and spiritual growth can be attained only in this process of owning the fragments of ourselves, and this is what God asks of us. This is the pursuit of wholeness, and there is a cost to it because seeking wholeness does not mean finding only the good parts of ourselves but all of ourselves. This is what is involved in transformation of shame and the integration of shame experience. Unless we are willing to enter into this process of naming and owning the

lifelong quest. The negotiation of the suffering involved in grasping and seizing that which was gained while still holding on to a piece of the unity that was lost is the challenge of human existence."

481 Ibid., 143.

482 Ibid., 166.

> shameful, shamed, and isolated parts of ourselves, we will be unable to achieve any sense of unity with God.[483]

To acknowledge weakness and vulnerability, and own it, is an important condition for overcoming shame. McNish, therefore, sees the theme of transforming weakness and thereby shame as a central motif in Christianity – and one that takes the human condition more fully into account than one that sees shame only as a way to spiritual suicide.[484] We note, however, that her position needs the careful distinction and discernment suggested above: shame is not an unqualified way to a positive religious mode of being-in-the-world.

483 Ibid., 167.
484 Cf. ibid., 169.