

Christian Family Ethics and Shame: Three Perspectives

Marcus Mescher

Abstract: This roundtable reflects on the experience of shame endured by individuals, couples, and families trying to contend with the normative claims of Christian ethics. It arises from a panel organized for the 2024 Families and Social Responsibility interest group at the annual meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics. Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman recounts her own family history of living with shame and why this poses a problem for the Christian moral life. Grace Y. Kao addresses the shame and social stigma experienced by married couples who are childfree by choice, struggling with infertility or involuntarily childlessness, or pursuing assisted reproduction instead of adoption. M. T. Dávila explores how the Catholic Church imposes shame on “Queer Catholic Families” in a way that alienates them from the fullness of their humanity. Taken together, these honest and courageous perspectives provide a sober account of the way the Catholic Church contributes to the loss of dignity, agency, and right-relationships within and between families today.

MUCH ATTENTION HAS BEEN GIVEN TO THE SIN OF pride in the Christian moral life. Theologians have long lamented the arrogant rejection of one’s creatureliness, the denial of human dependence on God, and its damage to right-relationship with God, others, and creation. Pride fuels the *libido dominandi* and often results in a complacent conscience unbothered by sin, whether it might be classified as rebellion, idolatry, or the failure to love as God commands. Pride may be cousin to the “globalization of indifference” Pope Francis denounced, a vain self-concern that leaves people callous to human suffering and injustice.¹

For all this attention on pride, there has been insufficient attention to the state of insecurity, self-doubt, and shame that leaves people feeling undeserving of being loved by God and loving God, unworthy

¹ Pope Francis, “Homily at Lampedusa,” July 8, 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html.

of being loved by others and loving others.² Insecurity, self-doubt, and shame are not identical, and should not be confused with guilt, an indicator of an intact conscience by expressing remorse for a wrongful action. A morally conscious person should feel ashamed after deceiving others, taking advantage of them, or benefiting at their expense. Shame is the inverse of honor or dignity, used to enforce norms about what is proper or improper. Shame is intrapersonal, extending beyond feeling guilt for sinful action. It is a belief that one has failed to measure up to expectations, feeling “disgraceful,” aware of the hurt one has caused, as Aquinas observes.³ Shame is also interpersonal, spurred by interactions with others and their moral judgments that leave a person feeling vulnerable, inferior, or cast out. As Evelyn and James Whitehead explain, “The distressing feeling of shame gets our attention. It signals that we have failed in other people’s eyes . . . [shame is] the cost of acceptance: ‘this is what you must do to belong.’”⁴ Shaming results from enforcing moral norms; if people did not feel ashamed when they manipulate or deceive others, steal from them, or violate their dignity and rights, they may not take responsibility for the impact of their actions on others or account for the social fallout before making future moral choices.

Healthy shame can motivate someone to make amends for actions that harmed oneself, others, or the natural world. “Have you no shame?” is sometimes invoked in public demonstrations protesting far-reaching sins like greed, exploitation, violence, or reckless extraction of natural resources. In our morally complex social context, having no shame would indicate ignorance or apathy in the face of widespread human suffering and ecological destruction. Yet shame can become persistent and excessive, degrading and alienating. This kind of unhealthy shame infects one’s identity; it “is the intensely painful feeling that [one is] unworthy of love and belonging.”⁵ It is an experience of being exposed, diminished, and condemned.⁶ When shame persists, it can be due to disproportionate remorse for what one has done or lack of trust in the grace of forgiveness.

² One exception might be Reinhold Niebuhr’s observation that insecurity leads a person to sin: “Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin” (*The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1 [Westminster John Knox, 1996], 182).

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. q. 4, a 1.

⁴ Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Transforming Our Painful Emotions: Spiritual Resources in Anger, Shame, Grief, Fear, and Loneliness* (Orbis, 2010), 113.

⁵ Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (Random House, 2021), 125.

⁶ On the psychology of shame, see Gershen Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based Syndromes*, 2nd ed. (Springer, 1996) and Helen Block Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (International Universities Press, 1971).

Moral theologians are still in the early stages of accounting for a different kind of shame: the shame that arises in the person who has been harmed. Here, shame does not stem from one's own moral culpability; rather, it is spurred by a grave violation, an attack on a person's moral identity and agency. Shame is a profound questioning of one's own goodness, a rejection of one's inherent and "infinite dignity" or worth.⁷ Shame leaves people feeling empty, lonely, and disgraced. Some describe shame in terms of invisibility, both to oneself and others.⁸ This is often the case for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and abuse by religious leaders, including clergy.⁹ Shame results from internalizing the moral judgments of others, resulting in a "totalizing experience" of feeling unclean, impure, and unworthy.¹⁰ Self-blame can become so poisonous that healing is rendered only partial or so distant that it feeds despair.¹¹ Shame degrades, disempowers, silences, and excludes; it leads people to feel like imposters, deviants, or outcasts.

Shame is not just one emotion among others; it shapes the life of the mind. Shame directs attention, disrupts attachment, affects sensation, impedes cognition, and constrains the imagination.¹² Shame is a trauma, the rupture or wound that degrades and disempowers, an "unraveling of agency."¹³ Shame infiltrates the story we tell about ourselves and contaminates the story God has to tell about our lives. When shame is present, a person cannot believe they are "wonderfully made" and unconditionally loved by God (Psalm 139:14). Unable to recognize their own inherent capacity to be loved and to love, how can they feel capable of loving others?

It is easy to lament when individuals experience—or are held captive by—humiliation, embarrassment, indignity, or disgrace. Pope Francis often denounced "shameful" social sins like racism, human trafficking, genocide, and the barbarism of war.¹⁴ However, he and other church leaders have been reluctant to discuss shame caused by

⁷ There is some debate about whether finite creatures can possess infinite dignity, but this term is borrowed from Pope Francis, "Dignitas Infinita," April 8, 2024, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html.

⁸ Jaisy A. Joseph, "Responding to Shame with Solidarity: Sex Abuse Crisis in the Indian Catholic Church," *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 2 (2020): 381–392.

⁹ Ashley Theuring, *Sacrifice Lost: The Dark Legacy of the Cross* (Orbis Books, 2024), 44–47.

¹⁰ Joseph, "Responding to Shame with Solidarity," 386.

¹¹ See Denise A. Starkey, *The Shame That Lingers: A Survivor-Centered Critique of Catholic Sin-Talk* (Peter Lang, 2009), 36.

¹² For more on this topic, see Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves* (InterVarsity, 2015).

¹³ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Westminster John Knox, 2009), 17–18.

¹⁴ See, for example, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), nos. 20, 189, 248, and 261.

the church, whether through the failures of its leaders or the impact of its teachings. As with any human institution, the church is a locus of betrayal, manipulation, coercion, and other abuses of power. But unlike other human institutions, its leaders, teachings, and practices are conferred with a sacred power that can leave people feeling tainted if not damned, cut off from their community, and even alienated from God. The church has a long history of condemning sin in individuals and the world, but it has yet to recognize the gravity of sin occurring in an ecclesial context.¹⁵ Shame is caused by individual instances of spiritual or sexual abuse as well as hegemonic ecclesial structures that diminish dignity, damage identity, and constrain agency. The Catholic Church has placed much more emphasis on the effects of sin on the sinner and not enough stress on the effects of sin on those sinned against. When people share their experience of being stigmatized or describe the shame they carry—caused by the harmful actions of others—we must, like the Good Samaritan, leave the path we are on and draw near to them in an act of love that reveals their unconditional value and worthiness. Loving one's neighbor includes the fullness of their humanity.¹⁶ Supportive accompaniment of those enduring stigma or shame can open pathways for restoration, breaking people free from feeling stuck in shame or trapped in the unwelcome exposure of one's vulnerability, a forced intimacy, or the violation of a healthy boundary.

An individual feeling shame for what they did might experience relief following participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But there are no rites or rituals for people to name the shame they carry because of what others have done to them, to be set free, and to extend this kind of liberating mercy across the Body of Christ. In our guild, there is still more work that must be done to account for the damage caused by shame, including in an ecclesial context where “the Church acts as a shaming and shamed subject in ways that inform our communal identity and our interpretation of the call to conversion.”¹⁷ This is because shame is not just one emotion among others; it is like an auto-immune disorder that affects people in their entirety and a wounding that cascades across the entire Body of Christ. The essays in this roundtable illuminate how the church acts as a shaming and shamed subject and the effects this has on its members. As St. Paul

¹⁵ See Marcus Mescher, “Confronting Ecclesial Sin and Galvanizing a Shared Project for Moral Repair,” *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 100, no. 392 (2025): 157–188, doi.org/10.14422/ee.v100.i392.y2025.005.

¹⁶ Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty, *Dutiful Love: Empowering Individuals and Families Affected by Mental Illness* (Fortress, 2021), 161.

¹⁷ Stephanie C. Edwards and Kimberly Humphrey, “Haunted Salvation: The Generational Consequences of Ecclesial Sex Abuse and the Conditions for Conversion,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, no. 1 (2020): 52.

reminds us, if one part of the body suffers, “all parts suffer with it” (1 Cor 12:26). For this reason, we cannot reduce concerns about shame to specific individuals or groups like people of color who find their identities and cultures erased or excluded from biblical narratives, lives of the saints, and religious art.¹⁸ To go from shame to solidarity means shouldering our responsibility to be advocates for people who identify as LGBTQ+, feeling demeaned by being labeled as having “objectively disordered” inclinations, prohibited from engaging in sexual intimacy.¹⁹ It is not enough to acknowledge the intense pain of Catholic individuals and couples who cannot have biological children, unable to “be fruitful and multiply” as God’s co-creators (Gen 1:28), or Catholics who are divorced and remarried, forever banned from receiving the Eucharist.²⁰ Naming the reality of the shame people carry and what it means to be part of a “shaming and shamed” church can help us recognize how shame infects the Christian moral life and the community we share together. In a particular way, by attending to the pernicious effects of shame in family life, we can see how it malforms individuals, relationships, and the wider social context as the “first and vital cell of society.”²¹

Since 2018, Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman and I have been co-convening the Families and Social Responsibility Interest Group for the Society of Christian Ethics. After several sessions focusing on hot-button social issues like migration and economic inequality, we shifted our attention to issues affecting our own families and other families we know, including mental health, substance abuse, and challenges with receiving certain church teachings, especially on matters related to human sexuality. In 2023, we invited the interest group co-founders, Christine Firer Hinze and Todd David Whitmore, to share their original aspirations for creating the interest group circa 1992. They discussed noticing a need for the guild of Christian ethics to be more attentive to the “signs of the times,” especially in the setting of marriage and family life. As Kari-Shane and I debriefed that conversation, she observed that shame seemed to be the “connecting thread” uniting so many of the issues and experiences within the orbit of family life and the possibilities and limits of social responsibility. After several more exchanges, we decided to put together a panel to directly address shame for the 2024 annual meeting. This roundtable shares what this panel discussed in a spirit of remarkable authenticity, vulnerability, and courage. It was among the most humanizing and

¹⁸ See, for example, Nathaniel Samuel, *When Stories Wound: Responsible Living in a Polarized World* (Liturgical Press, 2025), 13.

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2358.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1650.

²¹ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 42.

moving sessions I have ever attended at any conference. We appreciate Jason King's invitation to share these insights with the readers of the *Journal of Moral Theology*.

To locate particular experiences of shame, we identified three presenters. First, Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman volunteered to reflect on why it is necessary for those engaged in the field of Christian ethics to acknowledge the experience of shame within family life. She describes her own family history of living with shame—including as it stems from the experience of divorce and the suicide of a parent—and its relevance for the Christian moral life. Next, Grace Y. Kao shares what she learned in writing her recent book, *My Body, Their Baby: A Progressive Christian Vision for Surrogacy*. Her contribution to this roundtable considers how shame and social stigma impact married couples who are childfree by choice, struggling with infertility or involuntarily childlessness, or pursuing assisted reproduction instead of adoption. Finally, M. T. Dávila expresses her thoughts on shame in family life by attending to what it is like for “Queer Catholic Families,” who often feel that the Catholic Church's witness to the God of Life and Love (e.g., John 10:10, 1 John 4:8) is jeopardized by church teachings that inconsistently promote the dignity, inclusion, and participation of queer people and relationships. Her contribution to this roundtable demonstrates how the Catholic Church can leave these individuals, couples, and families feeling less than fully human. By making room for these perspectives, we hope that our colleagues in the church and academy will be more attentive and responsive to the experience of shame in family life, especially when shame is caused by Christian teachings and practices. As these essays show, shame imperils the fullness of human dignity, agency, and right-relationships, a serious threat to personal and collective flourishing.

M

Marcus Mescher, PhD, is associate professor of Christian ethics at Xavier University in Cincinnati, OH. He specializes in Catholic social teaching and moral formation and is the author of *The Ethics of Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity* (Orbis, 2020).