

Families, Social Responsibility, and Experiencing Shame

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Abstract: Prompted by conversations at the Society of Christian Ethics and the author’s own family history marked by divorce, single motherhood, and suicide, this essay examines how shame can isolate individuals rather than foster healing. Drawing on Brené Brown’s assertion that shame impedes empathy and engaging Greg Ten Elshoff’s work, the piece critiques how moral judgment within families and faith communities can deepen trauma. Ultimately, it challenges the practice of using shame as a tool for moral formation, advocating instead for compassion and support in moments of vulnerability and failure.

THE ROLE OF SHAME IN FAMILIAL MATTERS CARRIES significant weight for many of us who gathered for the Families and Social Responsibility Interest Group meeting at the 2024 Society of Christian Ethics annual convention. Recently, my co-convener, Marcus Mescher, and I have been deliberate in attending to increasing concerns related to mental health and substance abuse challenges, as well as gender roles and identity formation, within families.¹ Following last year’s conversation, I noticed a connecting thread holding together the group conversations. The feeling of shame accompanied some storytellers as they shared experiences of familial trauma. Reinforcing that “gut feeling” were two sentences from Brené Brown’s 2018 book *Dare to Lead* that personally haunted me as I have attempted to work through my own familial trauma. In the chapter titled, “Rumbling with Vulnerability,” Brown writes: “Shame is not a compass for moral behavior. It’s much more likely to drive destructive, hurtful, immoral, and self-aggrandizing behavior than it is to heal. Why? Because where shame exists, empathy is almost always absent.”²

¹ Special thanks to colleagues who shared personal narratives and theological reflections at the Families and Social Responsibility interest group meeting over the last few years: Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, Dana Dillon, Peter Fay, M. T. Dávila, Todd David Whitmore, Christine Firer Hinze, and Craig A. Ford, Jr.

² Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts* (Random House, 2018), 129.

Brown's stark words unsettle me because I spent most of my adolescent and young adult years hitched to a rollercoaster of familial shame. From the outside, nothing looked different about my family. A mother, father, child, dog, family vacations, and so on. However, on the inside, a different story unfolded over time, a story filled with past hurts, dark secrets, and significant layers of trauma that made everyday familial life a challenge, especially for my mother. She experienced a deep sense of shame coming from both her family and the Catholic Church as marital and familial "expectations" were not met. The "story," whether true or not and depending on who was doing the storytelling, led to my biological parents' marital separation and eventual divorce. As I grew up, no one ever told me the same story twice, despite my repeated attempts to "get the facts." What I do know, however, was that following my parents' separation, my mother found herself pregnant with me, compounding her sense of individual shame. Finding herself divorced, an unpopular label in the small, primarily Catholic town in Western Massachusetts in which she grew up, and a soon-to-be single mother, a second label, led to a personal crisis of faith and confidence. Moreover, the shame she felt as a result of words spoken and actions taken against her severed her relationships with the communities she needed most during a challenging time. Instead of receiving support, my mother was no longer seen by the church or her family in quite the same way again. What followed were decisions and choices that placed both of us on a turbulent familial path that culminated in my second father's suicide during my first year of college. The shame I felt came in the form of me never wanting to talk about "family" in front of those who mattered most to me. I did not want to get into the specifics of who I was in name or what really happened with my father(s). Instead, I most often resorted to twisting familial details so that the communities that mattered to me would not cut me off like they had done to my mother. Fast forward twenty-five years later, and the shame still lingers. As I participate in the making of my own family, I am starting to understand more fully the role shame plays.

But before I continue, let me first offer a brief caveat about the notion of shame in theological circles. Following this, I pick up on Brown's warning (that where shame exists empathy is most always absent) and argue why I believe this is true. To do this, I engage the recent work of Greg Ten Elshoff and argue his framework can provide us a way to think more critically about shame in general and the shame we too easily inflict on others when they have "sinned" or "gone astray." After this, I will circle back and offer a small reflection on what should have been done in the case of my mother, and why we

ought to question shaming another in the name of “moral transformation.”

In his recent book, *For Shame: Rediscovering the Virtues of a Maligned Emotion*, Gregg Ten Elshof goes to great lengths to help his reader understand when and how shame can be an important healthy emotion and when it is not.³ He begins by acknowledging that the topic of shame has been the study of numerous academic disciplines. We need a word to denote the pain we feel when we experience perceived or imagined discrediting by those who matter to us. The opposite also is true; we need a word that describes the good feeling we feel when our social standing is increased by respectable persons around us. In both the East and West, these experiences have been labeled shame and honor. However, Ten Elshof argues that the topic of shame is more complex today because most contemporary writing on shame “has as its ostensible goal the denigration of shame or even the eradication of shame from the range of felt emotions.”⁴ One reason this is the case is because shame can be misused and cause tremendous harm. Despite this concern, however, Ten Elshof’s thesis is that it is misguided to eradicate the feeling of shame because he believes it can contribute to a “healthy moral and emotional experience.” In other words, “There is a relatively narrow band of ‘shame experience’ that makes an important and positive contribution to human life.”⁵ At the same time, he notes there is an incredible amount of room for potential harm, abuse, and dysfunction. Given space constraints, let me highlight four of Ten Elshof’s key points I find useful in thinking through my mother’s and my own sense of familial shame.

First, Ten Elshof argues that the painful aspect we experience when we feel the negative emotion of shame is helpful because it can function as a “warning sign.”⁶ Shame can signal we have been disconnected from the group or community that matters to us. This warning sign is truly valuable, argues Ten Elshof, because we profess a deep belief that we are social beings and therefore need one another. We say all the time we are not meant to live in isolation from others. We need to be accepted, included, and validated both by ourselves (learning self-validation is an important moment in our transition from adolescents to adulthood) and our communities. Therefore, shame can be a useful emotion if we believe community identity and group inclusion are essential to human flourishing. Put differently, Ten Elshof writes of the use of shame, claiming: “It’s for those for whom

³ Gregg A. Ten Elshof, *For Shame: Rediscovering the Virtues of a Maligned Emotion* (Zondervan Reflective, 2021).

⁴ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 4.

⁵ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 5.

⁶ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 79ff.

radical self-sufficiency is not the ideal.”⁷ What Ten Elshof means by this statement connects with his second point about shame and its relationship to guilt.⁸

Second, there is a key difference between shame and guilt, although they can be intertwined. Felt guilt, for Ten Elshof, can feel uncomfortable and painful. In making us feel this way, there is no need to add shame into the mix because the feelings of discomfort and pain as a result of feeling guilty (rather than shamed) are usually sufficient to influence a change in behavior. That is, it is the role of guilt (and not shame) to provide a check on one’s “bad behavior.” Felt shame can “sometimes” have the same effect, but for Ten Elshof that is not shame’s primary purpose. Again, this is because shame is about being “wrongly situated in the presence of, disconnected from, or otherwise socially discredited in the company of others whose opinions matter to us.”⁹ The key is that this can happen to someone even if they did not do something wrong. What this means then in relation to guilt is as follows. Shame “is not a check against any particular set of behaviors.” Rather, in contrast to guilt, “shame serves the unique purpose of binding us into communities of mutual interest and investment. This is something that guilt is logically incapable of.”¹⁰ This is the case because a person cannot be guilty for an action done by another person. Here Ten Elshof uses the example of his son getting caught selling drugs. He, Ten Elshof, might feel guilty for being a bad parent, but he is not guilty of selling the drugs—his son is guilty of committing the action. However, he can suffer shame as a parent for what his son has done. As a parent he can and most likely will experience social discrediting. According to Ten Elshof, the feeling of shame felt in terms of being socially discredited by the community for his son’s guilty actions is a pain-filled appreciation of the fact shame has been inflicted on him, not guilt, due to his son’s actions. This is an important layer of difference between guilt and shame.

One still might ask, however, what then is the real difference between guilt and shame, or what is shame for? Well, the answer comes in another layer of complexity Ten Elshof seeks to explain. To do this, Ten Elshof explains shame’s role in terms of belonging. He

⁷ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 81.

⁸ Ten Elshof goes to great lengths to explain why we need the “warning sign” of shame alerting us to social discrediting. Popular social-scientists Evelyn and James Whitehead concur, writing shame is that “healthy sensitivity we feel as we come close to others. A gradually developed disposition, this positive resource alerts us to vulnerable boundaries that both link us and separate us from one another.” For further reading, see their book, *Transforming Our Painful Emotions: Spiritual Resources in Anger, Shame, Grief, Fear, and Loneliness* (Orbis Books, 2010).

⁹ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 86–87.

¹⁰ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 88.

wants us to understand that guilt and its opposite, innocence, “are not contagious” in the way shame and honor are contagious. One cannot really become “guilty by association” because at the end of the day guilt is assigned to an individual either for what they have done or failed to do. He writes, “I cannot become innocent merely by associating with innocent people any more than I can become guilty just by associating with the guilty.”¹¹ In stark contrast, shame and honor are “contagious” because one can become “an object of social discrediting merely by means of association with others who themselves have suffered discrediting.”¹² The social dynamics of shame and honor differ from those of guilt and innocence. Furthermore, Ten Elshof argues there is only one reliable path out of shame, and that requires someone other than the person being shamed—one with greater social standing or credit—to transfer social credit or standing to the one being shamed. “The escape from shame requires cooperation of others—in particular, those with honor who are willing to condescend to suffer the shame of identification with me.”¹³ As I will elaborate on later, this point deserves attention as we seek to accompany families and individual persons through various kinds of mental, psychological, spiritual, emotional, and physical trauma.¹⁴

Third, and most pertinent to this discussion, is the strong caution Ten Elshof and Evelyn and James Whitehead assert when discussing the decision to shame others (whether that be in private or public or at the community or individual level).

The Whiteheads draw attention to the two main messages conveyed when one is socially shamed. A common, first message of social shaming is simple: your actions are wrong so we will show you how to act. A second and related message stemming from an experience of social shaming is this: you cannot survive apart from the

¹¹ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 89.

¹² Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 89.

¹³ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 95.

¹⁴ Here I would like to credit Emily Reimer-Barry for pointing me in the direction of important feminist scholars who have engaged trauma studies and/or affect theory as they relate to theological conversations about sin-talk, abuse, shame, etc. For further reading, see Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Beacon, 2002), A. Denise Starkey, *The Shame That Lingers: A Survivor-Centered Critique of Catholic Sin-Talk* (American University Studies, 2009). See also Stephanie N. Arel’s book, *Affect Theory, Shame, and Christian Formation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). In addition, for further reading on the connection between shame and trauma studies, see Luna Dolezal and Matthew Gibson, “Beyond a Trauma-Informed Approach and Towards Shame-Sensitive Practice,” in *Humanities and Social Science Communications* 9, no. 214 (2022), doi:10.1057/s41599-022-01227-z.

group's approval and protection.¹⁵ Social shaming, therefore, strongly warns us that if we do not fit in then we will be cast out. The primary way in which social shame operates is by naming a person as deviant, a "labeling strategy" often used in past and present religious, cultural, and political contexts.

For his part, Ten Elshof spends time parsing out the difference between "guilting" someone and "shaming" them for good reason. He reminds his readers, however, of the following irony. On the one hand, we often are suspicious of shame; it is most often understood as a toxic or negative emotion of which we must rid ourselves. On the other hand, we tend to be far more accepting of shaming others, deeming it an acceptable and important instrument for social change. Ten Elshof strongly argues this is wrong. He writes, "We should be increasingly suspicious of shaming (recognizing that it is rarely done in the service of love) and increasingly accepting of shame (recognizing that it has important work to do in healthy psychologies and communities)."¹⁶ Let me explain why this is the case for Ten Elshof and how this claim relates to guilt.

At the most basic level, Ten Elshof claims the following. When a person decides to guilt-trip someone, they do not cause the other person to be guilty; rather, the person feels guilty. When we shame someone, however, we cause them to be an object of shame, leading to their social decline and the painful experience of felt shame. Shaming involves both making a person feel differently *and* bringing about their social demise within a community or communities that matter to them. What does this mean in the context of trying to use shame as an instrument for social change?

Ten Elshof is not convinced that in the context of trying to use shame as a tool for social change the person's feelings are the primary concern. Rather, he worries the goal of shaming has more to do with the feelings and behaviors of others. That is, we often want others to see the social demise of the person being shamed, and we hope the person experiencing the shame does not act in the same manner again. If we shame people enough, then perhaps the fear of shame will effect the social change desired. For Ten Elshof (and Brené Brown), this is misguided. So again, Ten Elshof reiterates a warning to his reader that we must differentiate between guilt and shame.

When someone is made to feel guilty, they no longer feel innocent, and they experience the painful feeling of guilt. But the person inflicting the guilt does not cause the person to be guilty. Guilt, therefore, can be more easily done from a place of love in hopes that the feeling of guilt will guide a person to make a better choice (and

¹⁵ Whitehead and Whitehead, *Transforming Our Painful Emotions*, 122.

¹⁶ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 106.

thus be less guilty in the future). Shame, in contrast, is rarely done out of love for the person being shamed. Rather, Ten Elshof contends it is more often done with the good of others in mind. Moreover, one cannot assume shame will lead to a change in social behavior (as stated earlier). Shame removes a person's positive social standing in the community that matters most to them. Given this, Ten Elshof makes two important points regarding the use of shaming another (in hopes of enacting a behavioral change).

First, we must be highly cautious in thinking we can shame one person for the good of others because that is difficult to justify. A second and related point follows. The harms associated with shaming can run deep as the person shamed is deprived of good feelings and now feels painful emotions. While a similar painful feeling can arise in a person when they are guilt-tripped, it is *not* the same kind of feeling as when someone is shamed. The harm that comes from a guilt-trip is the harm of no longer having pleasant feelings and feeling the pain of guilt. Shaming another person changes their feelings (from happy to pain-filled), *and* shame cuts off that person from belonging in community (even if they do not feel it). This is the difference! When someone is shamed (versus experiencing guilt), Ten Elshof writes, "You will be thought a monster or a person of little consequence and will suffer the rejection of those who matter to you."¹⁷ For these reasons, Ten Elshof argues it is extremely difficult to justify shaming someone out of "love," especially if one claims they are committed to Christian love. Put differently, Ten Elshof asks us to think twice about the use of "complete and thoroughgoing" public shaming as it is rare that we can justify the complete social undoing of one person for the sake of another or a group of others. Moreover, we should think twice about depriving someone of community and reducing them to the status of "monster" or "alien" because inflicting that kind of shame (and oftentimes subsequent social labeling) does not align with a Christian ethic to love one's enemies. He concludes, "At best, we sacrifice them, in an attempt to love others, and at worst, we sacrifice them to satisfy our felt need for vengeance."¹⁸

Given these concerns, Ten Elshof offers a cautious approach when thinking about the possible use of shame for behavioral change. One must ask important questions before assuming shaming is an appropriate tactic. A priority is answering this question: Can the shaming be controlled? Is the act of public shaming "consistent with my goal of loving the person shamed?" One also needs to ask, if the shaming is done in private, then what potential harm might be caused

¹⁷ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 107.

¹⁸ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 112.

by the shaming. As a result, caution must be used in both determining how and when shame is utilized. And again, this relates back to this distinction he wants to draw between shame and guilt. When guilt is inflicted on someone, that does not mean the person as a whole is bad. The guilt trip is focused on a particular behavior. And often, the person who is guilt tripped responds with, "I should not have done that." However, when someone is shamed in public or private, Ten Elshof argues we remove any confidence felt on behalf of the person experiencing the shame that they will continue to be accepted by those around them. This is because shame, unlike guilt, cuts a person off from belonging in community. Ten Elshof therefore goes on to warn how easily shaming can lead to a lack of self-esteem, self-respect, self-confidence, etc., quickly developing in the one who is shamed. This also circles back to why there is an important distinction for Ten Elshof between the negative and painful emotion of felt shame and the practice of shaming.

As explained earlier, we can be less suspicious of the feeling of felt shame because it can serve as that "warning sign" that we could be discredited by those who matter to us. Despite this "warning sign" often being pain-filled, Ten Elshof does believe it can be channeled in a healthy matter when regulated and done in a controlled environment. At the same time, our use of shaming in hope that it will change a person's behavior contains significant risk; its use needs to be questioned because too often shaming is inflicted on a person out of vengeance, hatred, or fear. As Ten Elshof concludes his remarks, he notes we should keep clear of thinking it is okay to sacrifice the well-being of the one being shamed for the good of others to promote a particular cause. This means we must genuinely admit the harm inflicted by shame is not easy to control and can easily lead to unintended consequences.

Fourth and finally, Ten Elshof explains that the path out of shame requires the restoration of one's honor versus an improved sense of self-respect as is often thought. This restoration of honor is clearly demonstrated for Ten Elshof in the story of the Prodigal Son. Rather than a story about unconditional forgiveness, he claims the primary message of the story is about how shame and honor work. The son returns to the father shamed, and the father, with his honor intact, runs and embraces his son of now low-social standing to remove the son's shame and restore his honor. Ten Elshof writes, "When we read the Prodigal Son story as a picture of the incarnation and atonement, we find it has less to say about the forgiveness freely available to us in Christ and far more about God's plan for rescuing us from the shame

of our fallen condition.”¹⁹ From here, Ten Elshof concludes his thoughts by giving an example of how this might look in the present. He draws upon the figure of the pope as an example. He comments on the power of the pope’s social standing, as well as the ability of the pope to honor people simply by means of casual association. This calls to mind an important face-to-face meeting at the papal residence in October 2024 between Pope Francis and a delegation of transgender, intersex, and ally Catholics.²⁰ This encounter between persons highlights our deep human need to belong, be seen, and be heard.

Given this brief overview of Ten Elshof’s understanding of shame, what does this mean for this personal reflection on my own familial trauma? First, I hope to have demonstrated that we need to think more carefully about shame and its possible role in moral formation for a variety of reasons. Talking about shame (even in the most general terms) is difficult because the word elicits a range of reactions. Second, scholarship on shame makes critical distinctions between shame, guilt, embarrassment, etc.; therefore clarifications in terminology are necessary. Third, most discussion threads attempting to discuss the use of shame in moral formation offer a warning that deserves further consideration.

I have found the work of Ten Elshof worthy of further reflection because he, along with Brené Brown, argues there are important differences between how shame and guilt operate. In similar manner, there is a difference between the feelings of felt shame and deciding to inflict shame on a person. Both authors contend shame has everything to do with our human desire for connection and sense of belonging. When we feel shame, it is a painful feeling of believing we are not good enough, unworthy of love, and do not belong. In addition,

¹⁹ Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 126.

²⁰ For more about this meeting with Pope Francis, see www.newwaysministry.org/2024/10/12/new-ways-ministry-brings-transgender-intersex-ally-catholics-for-dialogue-with-pope-francis/. Pope Francis was no stranger to addressing the topic of shame throughout his pontificate. In March 2017, he spoke of the “grace” that can accompany shame as one takes the necessary steps of asking for forgiveness from God and the community. See Pope Francis, “The Grace of Shame,” Morning Meditation, March 21, 2017. For the full text, see www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2017/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20170321_the-grace-of-shame.html. Similarly in October 2021, Francis spoke of shame when referring to the sex abuse crisis during a general audience at the Vatican’s Paul IV Hall. More specifically, he argued the crisis was a “moment of shame” for the church as it had failed to place abuse victims at the center of the clergy sexual abuse crisis. For further reading see www.ncregister.com/cna/this-is-a-moment-of-shame-pope-francis-expresses-sorrow-at-french-abuse-report.

what initially drew me to reflect further was Brown's statement that where shame exists empathy is absent. As a result, she too argues shame can be "dangerous" because it can quickly lead to feelings of self-loathing, low self-esteem, self-hatred, etc. Thus, both writers urge us to remember that shame manifests itself in relation to a particular community, and it plays a direct role in how we experience belonging. When we feel like we do not belong, we easily can find ourselves heading down a slippery slope of personal self-destruction.

Recent studies in trauma and affect theory reinforce this claim, and theologians have taken notice.²¹ In particular, I am drawn to two sets of comments written by Emily Reimer-Barry over the last decade. The first comment comes in response to a March 2011 blog post written by Patrick Clark. In her response to Clark's question as to whether shame should "make a comeback" in theological discussions about moral formation, Reimer-Barry asks a poignant question.²² She asks, "What kind of God would require shame to be a part of moral formation?" In 2017, she makes a similar set of thought-provoking comments, this time in engaging Church Militant's use of sin-talk and shaming discourse.²³ She writes, "Shame can be toxic and stifle the person's growth and integration. Theologically, it is the opposite of the *imago Dei*." Reimer-Barry proceeds to cite alarming statistics of LGBTQ youth suicide rates, numbers which have only grown over the years. She concludes her post with an urgent plea to the church for more listening to LGBTQ youth, and she calls for more accompaniment by the church (along with humility and vulnerability). By accompaniment, she asks the church to make an investment in getting to know what someone else's experiences are like in order to build more trust.

I am drawn to Reimer-Barry's first comment because her question ("What kind of God would require shame to be a part of moral formation?") resonates with some of the feelings I wrestled with while hitched to my family's shame wagon. It is more accurate to understand my feelings of felt shame as feelings of embarrassment. But the line was blurry, and I did feel shame because I could feel the felt shame my mother carried around. I learned quickly and early that she had

²¹ In a recent 2023 article at Outreach.com, Adam Beyt addresses LGBTQ persons' experiences of guilt and shame within Catholic culture, more specifically within Pope St. John Paul II's "Theology of the Body" lectures. Like other theologians, Beyt too raises concern about the use of shame-talk. For further reading, see outreach.faith/2023/03/how-the-theology-of-the-body-evokes-shame-for-lgbtq-catholics/.

²² For the full post, see catholicmoraltheology.com/should-shame-make-a-comeback/.

²³ For the full post, see catholicmoraltheology.com/toxic-shame-and-sin-talk-church-militant-has-it-all-wrong/.

been cut off. To her credit, she did not want the same for me. But nothing made a lot of sense, especially when I was told God loved me. With the dark secrets in one hand and the lurking unanswered questions in the other, I convinced myself God's love was not for me. The familial trauma had made its way into every fiber of my being. It was not until I reached college that I encountered the necessary community to help sort through the differences between felt shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and guilt. That help came in the form of a Jesuit chaplain minister who accompanied me as Reimer-Barry suggests and insisted I claim a seat at God's "table."

At the same time, this reflection (and familial stories shared in this interest group setting in recent years) stirs in me a lot of "what ifs" when thinking about my mother. Taking Ten Elshof to heart, I agree with his analysis that felt shame can be a helpful "warning sign" that we are at risk of not belonging to those who matter most to us. However, more compelling is the warning he and Brown give about inflicting shame on others. And so, I ask myself what could have been done differently to accompany my mother when she found her marriage broken and herself a soon-to-be single mother? Her felt shame was a warning sign she was about to be cut off from those who mattered most. At the same time, in what ways did the shame thrown at her for not following the "right" social and religious scripts inhibit her ability to feel like she belonged? Moving beyond this reflection, I ask us to consider again how we can we morally transform ourselves into a living body of Christ—regardless of the wounds we carry—because we know we are made in God's image (rather than trying to argue we have figured out a more "Christian" (i.e., loving) way to employ shame). **M**

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