SHAME, DESIRE AND MARGINALITY

Considerations on challenges to a contemporary theology about human experience

Abstract

How do elements from Christian doctrine help or hinder people when interpreting their lives? In what ways does such doctrine contribute to the shaping of personal and socially embedded phenomena vital for human development? What might empirical material contribute to in terms of providing a critical challenge to traditional doctrines relevant for such matters? These are questions that the present article wants to explore. As an empirical point of departure, it looks into material from a larger study on religious elements in people’s life-stories. By looking at how phenomena like shame and desire can be detected in discourses on the informants’ religious framework and their experiences, the material provides a basis for understanding the nuances of the pragmatic context in which doctrinal elements function. The picture emerging from these explorations is multifaceted, and suggests that the ways in which religious communities – by means of doctrine – relate to phenomena embedding shame and desire might have a strong impact on how people see their future relation to church life.

Key words: shame, desire, marginalization, theological doctrine

Introduction: The task

Theological doctrines always have a pragmatic context, but this context is often ignored or seen as secondary by those who work with such issues, e.g., in systematic theology. It is my contention, however, that paying attention to how peoples’ experience provides such contexts is of vital importance for an assessment of the positive or negative functions of doctrinal elements, and such experiences can also be seen as a possible source for identifying the shortcomings in terms of how teaching and preaching function. Moreover, from another angle, religious doctrine and normative statements might have a strong impact on how people deal with deep emotional phenomena in their lives. Hence, doctrine and norms might serve as a means for encouraging some emotions and desires, and for curbing others. The outcome of this is however by no means obvious.
In the following, I will first provide a sketch of some possible connections between shame, desire and social marginalization, in order to suggest a relevant scenario for considering the links between doctrine and its pragmatic context, with special attention to shame, desire and marginalization. Secondly, I will underpin this sketch more substantially by using some examples from the Norwegian study *Gud på Sørlandet* (*God on the South-Coast*), from which some material has already been presented in the present journal as well as in other publications. The material was collected from three counties in Norway by KIFO Centre for Church Research (Oslo) in collaboration with researchers from other institutions (DIAFORSK), and was collected for the purpose of different studies: A life-story analysis of religion and religious life in Norway (Furseth 2006); a study of euthanasia and moral communication (Schmidt, forthcoming); and studies of the extent and characteristics of alternative religious beliefs in Norway (Botvar, Lunestad). Subsequently the portion of the empirical material gathered in the southern county (Vest-Agder) was used for projects analysing specifically religious life in this part of Norway, which is usually considered to constitute the Norwegian «Bible-belt» (Further on this material, cf. Henriksen 2005a, 2007, Henriksen and Repstad 2005).

Can we learn something of relevance to doctrine from that material about how the informants relate to the deeply socially entangled phenomena of shame and desire, and consequently, about how doctrine's pragmatic context within the framework of peoples' lives might possibly challenge specific ways of interpreting or dealing with, phenomena like shame and desire?

Shame and Desire

The intuitions behind this article are linked to two phenomena that have been the object of my attention for some years: Shame and desire. One intuition is that there is more shame and desire at play in religious circles than is usually acknowledged and dealt with. The second intuition is that this poses a challenge to how theology provides resources for people when they interpret their lives. The first of these phenomena, *desire*, I hold to be underrated in theological anthropology, at least in a positive sense (cf. Henriksen 2005 for a more extensive argument on this, but see also Irvine, 2006). The second, sometimes related, phenomenon of shame is often confused with more or less indistinct experiences of guilt (cf. Pattison 2000:43). My intuition is that by making it more difficult to articulate an adequate language on these phenomena, religious doctrinal traditions also make it more difficult for people to deal with important experiences in their own lives. This, in turn, has consequences for how they relate to these traditions in the long run. Hence, how these phenomena function in peoples' lives also poses some challenges to those who develop contemporary theology.

Both desire and shame are complex phenomena, and I will not have the possibility to go extensively into the complexity they exhibit here. It suffices to say that *desire is expressed in our drive or struggle for what we hold to be good* (for us), and want to possess, control or achieve in order to realize a quality that we do not yet perceive our-
selves to have. A desiring self is constructed by interaction with his or her social environment. Moreover, desire as I understand it here, has cognitive, emotional and embodied dimensions. Hence, desire can be expressed in articulations of what one wishes for, wants or needs, or in articulations of what one holds to be good and worth striving for. It might, but need not, be expressed on a conscious level.

Desire should not be understood as mere want or need emerging from lack, nor as lust, but should be seen as an emotional drive that connects and orients the subject’s will and perception towards a specific desired object which is perceived as good for the subject. Desire as I understand it here is also more than an arbitrary element which one can choose to ignore, it seems to have some kind of «occupying effect» on the subject which shapes the way the subject orients herself and understand her possibilities and her world. Desire in this sense matters, as it contributes to the personal shape which the experienced world takes for the one harboring it.

Desire has received far more attention in the history of theology than has shame. But as mentioned, the treatment has rarely been positive, and thus, a more comprehensive understanding of the positive ways desires function in human life is not readily at hand in the history of theology. However, there seems to be a growing interest in compensating for this lack (cf. e.g., Farley 2005, Henriksen 2003, Kearney 1999, Moore, 1989). In philosophy a similar development has been evident for some decades (cf. Nussbaum 1994, 2001, 2001a, Irvine 2006).

Shame, on the other hand, is a strong emotion of being set apart from, by lack of recognition, a social setting that we take ourselves to be related to and which means something for us. Shame involves, as Stephen Pattison says, a deep feeling of being contaminated. To be ashamed is to make oneself into an object, and perceive that in oneself which is not recognized by others as valuable or worthy of appreciation (more extensively on this, cf. Pattison 2000).

Shame is rarely dealt with in present contributions to systematic theology. One of the few but notable exceptions is Stephen Pattison’s Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology (2000, cf. also from a updated socio-philosophical point of view Nussbaum 2004). Pattison claims that it is difficult to achieve a common definition that covers all the different uses of the word, and suggests that a «family resemblance theory» might be the most appropriate when dealing with different aspects of the phenomena (2000:39-42). He lists the following among the characteristics of shame experience: it is a sense of uncontrollable exposure, of being seen, it turns the self into an object in a way that makes the self lose its sense of agency and responsibility, it involves the whole self and is accordingly self- and not object-related, it is a sense of self-consciousness related to a sense of incongruity and can thus be a threat to trust in the nature of things, and a feeling of isolation and lack of communication abilities (2000:71). Although he also mentions several other characteristics, these are sufficient to provide us with a basic vision of what he calls the ecology of shame.
A sketch of some possible relations between shame and desire

There is a possible relationship between desire and shame, but not a necessary one: I can, e.g., be ashamed of some of my desires, but I need not be. And I can be ashamed of things that have nothing whatsoever to do with my desires, but rather have to do with my bad performance, my poverty, my social background, and so on. Moreover, experiences of shame might give rise to experiences of desire (I desire to get out of this shameful state of poverty and become wealthy, I am ashamed of my wrinkles and desire to become beautiful or young-looking by having some Botox inserted). Shame might also lead to marginalization, induced by others or by self: I withdraw from a social context where I feel ashamed or which I perceive as a place where I do not belong any longer, due to my own or others’ perception of who I am in this social context.

A similar feature can be found in relation to desire: Where my desires are not recognized, I tend to hold them for myself, or I place myself where they can be positively recognized. E.g, young boys’ and girls’ desire for challenge and suspense might not be recognized or given sufficient attention in church-related youth clubs, given that experiences of this kind do not always fit with the emphasis in parents who send them there to have them in a safe and secure environment. Consequently, some of the young do not find such clubs to be very interesting in the long run, and leave because their desires are not met. Or, to use a more serious example: young people who find that it is taboo to discuss sexual desires in a positive and affirming manner in a church environment might not find this a helpful place to stay, given that this is one of the most important things for some of them (cf. Röthing 1998). The most obvious examples of this type of problematic are of course related to the issue of homosexuality, an issue where desire and shame might be strongly connected.

How desire and shame are deeply socially conditioned is apparent from the fact that, e.g., a group of girls – or women – might easily produce shame and feeling of being at the margins if they stress too strongly ideals of weight, looks or fashion, and similar with boys. The experience of not living up to such expectations serves as a means for self-marginalization, as the desire one might have for belonging to the group or for being conformed to its ideals is constantly frustrated by one’s own shortcomings.

What I intend by these initial – admittedly sketchy – considerations, is to suggest some more substantiation for my intuition that experiences of shame and desire might function as something that contributes to marginalization from a specific social group – in our case, the Christian community. Hence, the following is more concerned with the theological challenges than, e.g., the more extensive sociological study on marginalization from religious communities, as studied by Norwegian sociologist Pål Repstad (1984). The mechanisms at work here are not exclusively related to religious contexts, though, but are probably at work in all places where judgments of specific expectations, normative expectations of conformity etc., are articulated. Moreover, the production of shame and the way desire is framed is deeply linked to elements of doctrine or teaching, and hence, such doctrine / teaching may have more bearings on how one deals with desire and shame than what often seems to be perceived by those working
with this dimension of theology. Hence, the following examples might provide us with means for a more critical consideration of the pragmatics of this theology.

Experiences of desire and culture

We will now look at some empirical material to see if there is anything present that gives us an indication of how doctrinally shaped attitudes towards shame and desire function in the economy that constitutes an informant’s relations to his or her religious community, and towards elements that we choose to call cultural, in a wide sense of the word. Please observe that the informants we here refer to were not asked directly about phenomena like shame or desire. Rather, such elements are detectable from what they say about the way they related their faith and their life-stories. Hence, the following is also an interpretation of what is said implicitly in their narratives, and we should not expect to find very much material addressing issues like shame and desire. Moreover, this means the material is not established in order to make generic conclusions on the issues under discussion here, but is presented in order to understand more about the possible connections and mechanisms that are at play in the relationship between desire, shame and marginalization. After presenting the material, I will offer some more general considerations regarding this (almost complete) absence of such elements at the end of the article, because I think that we nevertheless are presented here with material that poses some challenges for works in systematic theology and theologically informed practice.

Desire as a positive phenomenon is, as mentioned, underrated in Christian theology and practice. In ethics, it is usually considered a danger, something problematic, and something to be curbed. Hence, we should not be surprised to find the same patterns in our material. Even though experiences of desire are possible to understand and to detect within different frameworks and configurations, the most obvious framework is the one described by Heelas and Woodhead as religions of difference (Heelas and Woodhead 2000, 2005). In such a context, emphasis is on the difference between humans and God, between sin and salvation, and between what God wants and what humans want. Emphasis on God’s sovereignty and might corresponds to emphasis on human sinfulness and lack of possible self-affirmation. Hence, desire, as something deeply human, is hard to understand in an affirmative and constructive manner. Instead it is seen in relation to sin.

In our material, one of our informants, when asked what she understands by sin, testifies to this way of interpreting desire. «Tonje» is a member of a typical «religion of difference» congregation, and describes sin with reference to experiences of desire. She sees desire as that which leads humans away from God:

**Sin … is a kind of temptation, emerging from your own desire…. There is a kind of desire in humans, and when you follow that desire, it is a sin. It is a driving force in humans, I think. It is hard to define correctly, but it is going against the Word of God. Sin is what goes against the word of God.**
What is worth noticing here is that the understanding of desire presented here does not allow for nuances, like «positive» and «negative» desires. This lack suggests that there has been nothing in the teaching or preaching «Tonje» has met, that suggest that desire can be a positive element that links her life to something good, as suggested by my initial and preliminary definitions. From such a perspective, desire is problematic without exception. I would argue that such a lack of nuances in teaching and preaching might impair how those listening may be able to interpret their own experience adequately.

However, this should not be taken to indicate that there are no positive ways of employing the notion of desire in «Tonje’s» understanding. When speaking of the ideals that are present in her cultural context, mainly consisting of the struggle for increased wealth and consumerism, she is able to identify these ideals and detach herself from the desires they might entail by means of this very understanding of desire. «It is not money that makes people who they are», she says. Hence, she is able to confront such cultural features critically by means of her faith, and in this sense, one could say that the doctrine she has adopted of sin and desire allows her to be less determined by the desires that the present consumerist culture represent. Accordingly, the way her faith gives her a chance to distance herself from possible and existing desires serves as a resource for cultural criticism. From a doctrinal point of view, we can here see how old, still potentially valid ideals from a more ascetic culture come to the fore and confront a culture of affluence and extravagance, by making it possible to express the necessity of focusing on «the more important things» than what immediate desires constituted by consumerist culture suggest. The pragmatics of «Tonje’s» theological coupling of sin and desire thus illustrates that such connections might still be worth observing.

The approach to desire we find here is of course in both instances critical. However, from the example we see that this understanding of desire and the way she interprets it in her own life is not a merely negative approach to everything that can give human life more joy, well-being and happiness: it might also serve as a way of setting a focus different than the one given in present consumerist culture. By not allowing desires to spontaneously be affirmed as positive, «Tonje’s» attitude towards them, as it is shaped by the doctrine she has received, allows her to question her priorities.

While the above example shows us a critical stance toward desire in general in order to preserve important life qualities, others might see the importance of acknowledging desires in order to have a good life. Then they might become challenged by the mainly negative approach to personal desires in religions of difference in general. One informant, a woman born before WW II, tells us of how she had to find a different community than the Christian congregation in her local area in order to be able to fulfill her desires for artistic self-realization. She found that the Christian community to which her friends and neighbors belonged was unresponsive to her artistic interests and her desire to pursue them. I deliberately say desire here, and not «wish», because it becomes apparent from her life-story that this is a major element in what was a condition for her experience of well-being and life-fulfillment. Hence, after some time she turned elsewhere for a community where she could find some affirmation for these
interests. The Christian community’s lack of ability to acknowledge peoples’ desires for creative self-fulfillment in this case leads to estrangement and alienation. From the point of view from which I consider such experiences here, this poses a challenge to develop a doctrinal link between desire and creativity that can affirm such links as something by and in which the divine expresses itself through human agency and fulfillment. However, in traditional congregations shaped by a «religion of difference culture» this seems hard to find. It nevertheless suggests that there is some potential for improvement in how theology interprets such desires in human life – and that the congregations need to relate positively to these in order not to marginalize members who harbor them.

Another informant, «Eve» can tell us about similar experiences, but in a less antagonistic shape. She tells us how she was engaged in different forms of activities in church life in her youth, but came to find that the demands for specific dos and don’ts were basically not appealing to her. Her parents helped her see that these «requirements» were man-made and not part of religion, and encouraged her to find her own ways. These ways were then more marked by what we can call life-affirming activities; she was engaged in sports and in Latin-American dancing. Those were the things she wanted to do. Such activities were more authentic expressions of her desires for self-realization and what she perceived as good. However, as her parents helped her distinguish between what they said was the religious content on the one hand, and the man-made restrictions for desire on the other hand, she is presently more favorable towards the Christian community than is the former informant.

I think theologians are well advised to look more into what is happening under the surface in these examples: There is a discourse going on about the place of desires in one’s life. The outcome is not given, and the patterns are different. In the last example of «Eve», this is not only another story about a more affirming versus a more restrictive way of leading one’s life, where established religion can be found on the restrictive side. Eve does not opt against religion, but against what she – with her parents – finds to be restrictions of desire not necessarily belonging to their religion. But in a context where Christianity is closely linked to specific types of lifestyle, affirming some desires and rejecting or curbing others, the outcome of her struggle with these issues is nevertheless that her religion becomes more privatized. Hence she becomes marginalized from a specific social environment or religious community, but not from faith and religion in its more privatized forms. «Eve’s» story suggests that a positive and affirming theological articulation of desires for creativity and bodily self-expression might have contributed to countering her process towards a more privatized mode of religious life, had such a theology been present.

However, the way desires and culture interplay has more than one possible outcome. Informant «Anne» tells us how her parents saw movies as something sinful that had to be avoided. Like any other young girl, she wanted to see a movie about the figure skating champion Sonja Henie, but her parents refused her to go. As she says, «I was very hurt by that, because so many of my peers could go there, but not me.» In this sense, she is, by means of what is deemed as unacceptable desires from a religious point of view, excluded from the group to which she naturally belongs. As an adult, she
has not been an active church member. The lack of recognition of her desire seems to have contributed to her self-imposed withdrawal from religious activity.

From these examples and others emerge a striking feature regarding religion, desire and culture: Informants tell stories about the needs for self-realization and artistic enjoyment, and how these needs are not always sufficiently met or recognized in a church setting. There are, however, some indications that there has been a change in this area, given the decline of what we can call «the Pietist regime» in Norway. Although the youth choir movement Ten Sing is probably not enough to satisfy all young people’s need for artistic self-realization, we have informants with good memories of such and similar groups involving artistic self-development. Also, some report on how a theater group in the church made a lot of positive impact – a phenomenon that was unheard of 40 years ago, of which they presently appreciate very much being a part. Sometimes such artistic sensibilities are coupled with a new sense for liturgical life, which provides an alternative to the mere focus on individual emotions (det tradi-sjonelle føleriet) which some informants react against, and which was part of the Pietist regime’s focus on the inward life of believers. However, there are also several informants who express how they miss more artistic and cultural elements as possible enrichment in the religious services.

One of our informants, «Berit», a women who has been strongly committed to mission and more or less charismatic groups all her life, witnessed how some of the groups she has been a member of have actually hindered her from developing skills and interest in a more creative and cultural context. She expressed how this has led to a reduction in the spectrum of knowledge she has gained of her co-members. They only got to know the «spiritual» dimension in each other, she says, and «the other sides of life never emerged and were not allowed to blossom. That is the reason why I felt I was being suffocated.» She mentions reading novels, going to the movies and listening to music as things she missed – and says that the lack of possibilities for engaging in such practices also led to her losing touch with what happened in the world. The only thing she read was religious literature. Today she has distanced herself from her old friends, and she has only sporadic contact with them. She has developed a more nuanced view of what is right and wrong, and is able to confront some of the problems that the intense and strict milieu created with regard to her own personal priorities. One could say, perhaps, that she has become more attentive to her own needs and desires, even though it has led to a change with the kinds of group she identifies. At a certain stage, she has been confronted with the choice of working with nature or against it, and has chosen the former. From a theological point of view, this development allows the question to emerge: what kind of theology is behind such a negative relation to the natural, to that which seems important in order to make people thrive and flourish on the personal level, even when it is not directly related to practices of prayer, faith, evangelization etc? Such examples indicate that religions of difference are not only marked by an emphasis on various differences. They also shape the whole paradigm for the articulation of doctrine in a way that allows for little or no positive assessment of desires related to and shaped by other things than the congregation and its aims.
However, sometimes natural desire triumphs over constraints in normative and restricting agendas for lifestyle in quite vivid ways. We have one example, a wonderful story, of how the desire for the loved one (to put it that way) was able to overcome even strong relations to a religious community. A man fell in love with a young girl who did not belong to his strict and disciplining congregation (the sect Samfundet). He strongly wanted her to join the congregation because this would make it possible for him to marry her. His desire for her to join the congregation made her somewhat suspicious of his real motives, and she told him that if he wanted her to marry him, he would have to leave the congregation. He did, although it was very hard, both on him and his parents. However, nature triumphed. He left. Three years later she said to him: «You have showed me that you really love me, so now we can both enter the congregation». And they did.

Desire for wealth
In the Christian tradition, the attitude towards wealth – at least wealth not in the hands of the church, has often been considered problematic (cf. Henriksen and Sommerfeldt 2005). However, desire for wealth can only be dealt with critically if one allows for articulating that desire in general as a theologically relevant topic.

One informant «Tor», who has experienced both poverty and wealth, became obsessed with the desire for wealth at one stage in his life. The thoughts about money and how to get more of it were with him from morning to night. His own success in business thus eventually became a problem for him. The constant focusing on the accumulation of wealth led to a crisis where he had to ask if the struggle for money was more important to him than his family and health. He was able to get out, to be liberated from it.

«Tor» is a man with a very strict religious upbringing, and from other parts of his story we learn that earthly possessions was a theme given attention in the congregation where he was raised. After he left this congregation, he apparently also left behind the religious resources for interpreting what happened to him in the instance just reported. There are no references to religion in his interpretation of what happened to him when he was only able to focus on money in his life. This might be explained by the fact that he, as a successful businessman, is not among those who be likely to critique accumulation of wealth as such, with a basis in religious resources. Nevertheless, it might also be that he, like so many others in our material, is not used to utilizing the Christian tradition for the interpretation of his own life-experience, so that the religious remains in a compartment by itself, with little or no relevance or relation to everyday life. (Further on this thesis, see Henriksen and Repstad 2005). Hence, the strong desire that threatened to ruin his life lacks an interpretation from within the religious framework he otherwise can employ for understanding other experiences.

The challenge that «Tor» offers theology is the following: How can one address such experiences in life in a manner that both allows for the accumulation of means necessary for security and sufficient comfort, while on the other hand also addressing
and theologically interpreting what happens when desires for these means «takes over and occupies» life as a whole? Again, the call is for a more nuanced theological articulation of the positive and negative functions of desire.¹

Shame

As indicated in the introduction, much shame is falsely identified as guilt in the Christian tradition. The doctrine of salvation from sin and guilt seems to pull the interpretation of shame towards guilt, which is then not adequately dealt with nor sufficiently recognized as belonging to a distinct and separate context of problems. However, if we look at the empirical examples we have at hand from the point of view of our initial description of shame, there seems to be at least some indications, although not many, that shame and shaming still might play a part in what shapes the relations of people to church life. Given that we stick to the initial understanding of shame as a feeling of being contaminated, we can see how a conception of how the blood of Jesus cleanses from sin corresponds to this. This is at least what the idea corresponds to when used by one of our informants («Tonje»). As mentioned, «Tonje» is part of a very closed community in which it is more likely that specific actions or deeds can become shameful. The proclamation of the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus works well and has a great plausibility in such a social structure. «Tonje» does not, however, name specific sins as examples of what needs to be cleansed. She underscores the fact that in order to become clean there is a need for something more than what one can achieve by one’s own deeds – there is need for a cleansing act by others (renselse).

I think «Tonje» here gives us access to a phenomenon that needs more attention in the development of theological interpretation: As specific actions are perceived as shameful, those who perform them are in need of being reconciled not only with God, but with the community (cf. Douglas 2002). This happens through a confession of sins – and forgiveness is then expressed theologically as the cleansing by the power of Jesus’ blood. The actions performed and confessed need not have any negative bearings on the community or congregation as such, but given that the person in question does something that is perceived as wrong, he or she can be ashamed. He / she might also be seen as someone who brings shame on the whole congregation. The act of repentance then is not only a theological and individual action, but an action in which one is given the chance to become reconciled with the community that one has defiled by means of one’s actions. Without repentance and acknowledgement of sin, the congregation has but one option: to exclude the person in question, or to live with the shame or disgrace that he / she has put on them. Public confession appears in this setting as the pragmatic context for dealing with shame – although this is usually addressed as sin / guilt.

What I am trying to say here is that the mechanism of repentance and reconciliation with others becomes more understandable in terms of shame than in terms of guilt. In Protestantism it is guilt that is acquitted, and not shame. But if my interpretation here is correct, the mechanisms of confession and admission of sin are more aptly described
as mechanisms related to shame. Guilt can be forgiven, and often the guilt in question might not have any impact on other members (if it is possible to interpret the transgression in question as constitutive of guilt at all). But shame has impact on the community with which the transgressor identifies. Hence, shame has to be dealt with. That is then what takes place in instances of repentance and reconciliation, sometimes even involving a public confession.

Seen from the point of view of different types of congregations, the structure described here probably works best within a setting shaped by religions of difference. This is so partly because these are the congregations which are most attentive to who belongs in the community and who does not (another version of making boundaries). But these are also the congregations which exert most powers of control over their members in terms of saying what is acceptable and not in terms of action. They also put the most emphasis on human sinfulness vs. divine righteousness (cf. Woodhead and Heelas 2000).

Practices that lead to shame might also appear quite unintentionally, and give rise to the sense acute individual isolation, powerlessness and despair (Pattison 2000:73-75). One informant, «Camilla», tells us how she suddenly found herself in a desperate situation and turned to the church for help. This church was one in which she had involved herself strongly, and to such an extent that she says she lost most of her social network outside that church except from the family. When her family then suddenly found themselves in a crisis, she turned to the church for help, but was met with no positive response. She does not herself address this situation as one in which she was shamed, more like one in which her vulnerability and desperation were not recognized. As a consequence of the lacking response, she no longer has any kind of positive relationship with Christian congregational life at all. The way she was treated made her feel that she did not belong where she thought she did, and she never came back. The church’ pastor seemed unable to address her needs in a way that qualified as offering her help, and one can only wonder about what kind of theology it was that promoted such a lack of sensibility for others’ needs. Here a need (and not a desire according to the definition above) was not recognized and met, and led to shame or shame-like effects, as «Camilla» felt that she became exposed.

Other more or less similar stories of rejection are not hard to find. But from our perspective here, they are likely to be interpreted as attempts to shame and thereby to change peoples’ orientations, attitudes or plans, than as actual shame. In the material we have, there are several stories of couples that have been dismissed by the pastor when they came to be married, because one of them, or both, had been married previously. Here, church doctrine on marriage and divorce clearly functions in pragmatic context where the theology in question might be understood as producing such attempts to shame those asking for church services. These stories show some of the same patterns as above: people turn to the church for help and expose themselves and their vulnerability, but are not met. The sense of rejection this leads to is similar to that of shame (isolation, exposure, powerlessness), or perhaps in some cases even identical. For some, experiences like these shape the relationship these people have to the church for the rest of their lives. Especially hurtful are such experiences when there is a clear
discrimination between different couples in more or less the same situation. This fact contributes to the feeling that the church has an arbitrary way of dealing with such cases, and that much is up to the likes and dislikes (trynefaktor) of the pastor and his (it is usually a he) power. People who experience such things are those who most often report that they do not attend church services or take part in any kind of congregational life. In sum, one can say that the practicing of church doctrine in order to discipline members is in these cases most likely the most effective way of having people suspend their active membership.

Nuances appear, however, in these cases as well: We have a story from an informant, «Peter», who has kept his faith and church membership but who has reacted against what he sees as ecclesial conservatism and lack of humanity. He gives a vivid description of his experience: When he showed up with his new wife-to-be to meet a pastor who was against re-marriage, the pastor told them that he could not perform the ceremony because it was against his conscience. Also, he would not recommend that they went to another, more positive pastor in the congregation in order to get married in the church. Peter says: «Then I got angry. I don’t think I said much there and then, but it really upset me. I felt I was being kicked out of something that I wanted to be a part of,» he says. For «Peter» and his spouse, the end of their story was that they were married in a church in a larger city.

It is not difficult to see the reaction of «Peter» as a way of dealing with the attempts to shame, and accordingly, the attempts to discipline him. He finds empowerment in the struggle for recognition, and opposes the very practice he is confronted with by seeking out an alternative. We know from other contexts that shame is a strong means for disciplining others and for making people do some things and not do others. Yet, the story tells us that these attempts at shaming and control do not work any longer – at least not when there are options for action outside the community to which the individuals in question initially belong. In this sense, one could say that increased pluralism and access to alternative practices also contributes to decrease in direct shaming practices. Or to put it from an even more doctrinally based perspective: plurality in doctrine and in normative factors effectively limits the possibilities of shaming practices. The challenge for theology is then to discuss to what extent it is both viable and desirable to maintain theologies that can lead to impressions of arbitrary and random attempts at using shaming for disciplinary means. Most likely, theologies which function like this have only one effect: that people withdraw from church life and become marginalized from it.

Shame, desire and the typology of Heelas and Woodhead

To what extent can different doctrinal frameworks, as well as cultural or religious settings, help or encourage people to articulate and interpret their desires and avoid the possibility of being ashamed to admit what they need, want, and desire? I have already suggested that Heelas and Woodhead (2000), in their typology that distinguishes between religions of difference, religions of humanity, and spiritualities of life, provide
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a fruitful description of how doctrinal elements may function in different ways within different types of congregations. What they call religion of difference might be the most likely context for shaming and skepticism or rejection of desire to take place. There, the point is to mark distinctions or differences between God and humans, nature and grace, etc. As everything human is potentially sinful, it must be met with suspicion and integrated in a more spiritual framework, where the focus it provides on «me» as the individual from which it emerges is tuned down or curbed. Parallel to this curbing is the control of the community or congregation over the individual, which most likely can be expressed also in terms of shaming. Note here that this shaming needs not be the result of a direct or articulated practice from the side of others – shaming most subtly expresses itself in how the individual is able to experience herself as set apart from the community. Shame might often be seen as self-inflicted (a feature that often make communities unable to recognize that they have a part in the marginalization of others, as they perceive of themselves as welcoming, including etc.).

Religions of humanity, which are more positive to human experiences, might be more open for desires as long as they are in accordance with specific norms and are no threat to the neighbor. As the difference between God and humans is here not emphasized so strongly, the affirmation of some desires might even express itself in the ability to see them as part of the God-given gifts that make human life flourish and develop. Within Christian communities, those practices and communications shaped on a Religion of humanity-pattern are those most likely to allow for desires, and also to allow for differences in opinion and practice, as such communities need not be shaped around so close ties between the members as the first one.

I am not in a position to speculate much on how desire and shame function within the new spiritualities. Let me make two reflections that also might have some bearings on possible future articulations of theology. First, I think there is in the new spirituality movement a recognition of what Nietzsche called «The Wisdom of the Body» – the fact that when the body is expressing something, it is an expression that one is well advised to give attention. In the material from which I have taken samples, several of the informants report on how they have become ill by not paying sufficient attention to the body’s own call for authenticity. From the point of view of Christian theological anthropology, there is a lesson to be learned and elements of insight to appropriate here, if theology is to be of any help to people who are in need of interpreting their own life-experiences in a viable and robust manner. It is especially important that people are helped by theology to relate to and recognize all of their desires, and that they are not led to ignore or suppress any of them because they initially become identified as worthless, bad, shameful, uncalled for, etc. There is something deeply human to learn from engaging with all such phenomena, and theology should not ignore this challenge.

My second reflection on the new spiritualities is that they might not only be seen as feeding on traditional religions’ lack of ability to recognize and affirm desires, but might also be feeding on shaming practices that exist in society in general. Such practices are closely related to health, body, food – all embodied or body-related phenomena with which we are constantly bombarded with ideals that we usually do not live up to – at least not fully. The new spiritualities might provide resistance against this, while
at the same time also buying in on some of this culture. In any case, it takes the body, and body-related issues, far more seriously than does traditional religion. For theology, and theological anthropology, this calls for a more full-blown and robust theology of the body – and of bodily desires.

Concluding reflections of diverse kinds

In the empirical material referred to above, a striking feature is that most (but not all) of the informants who talk about incidents that have to do with shame and desire are women. This feature may suggest that those who often tend to be most «relational» in their approach to the world are also those most able to voice the difficulties and challenges related to such phenomena. We can see this as an indication that many women tend to have a wider repertoire for articulating feelings and emotions than many men. This needs not imply that they are thereby also given more control over their lives: there are several stories indicating that women nevertheless tend to neglect their own needs and the necessary articulation of their desires in order to provide for others – sometimes with disastrous consequences for their own health and well-being.

The ability to articulate desires or to admit shame might have a hard time in traditional Christian religion, where one is usually met with reservation when one expresses desire or with lack of understanding if one speaks of shame. Often, that which in the Christian tradition is addressed as guilt is really more a sense of shame, but the ability to understand, recognize and address it as such is underdeveloped. Given that Christianity has been the main cultural resource for language about the self up until recently, it should not come as a surprise that we also find little or no articulations of shame and desire in our informants’ way of speaking about their lives and what matters to them.

Moreover, there might be (carefully stated) a possible correlation between the lack of ability to articulate desire, and the lack of control and lack of autonomy in one’s own life. (esp. choice of education, studies, work). These traits may have some possible connection to results from a Danish study on alternative spirituality that suggests similar patterns (Ahlin 2001). In our empirical material, especially among many women, things just seem to happen to them, and many are not acting out of personal deliberations or a full recognition of what their desires are. I think that these results also suggest what could be an immediate gain if people were encouraged by theology to articulate and recognize their desires: it would give them a far better chance at self-realization that would benefit not only themselves but also others and society. To state it more bluntly: When you can articulate your desires, your potential for thriving improves, and you are also more able to fulfill your destiny as being created in the image of God.

Let me mention one more issue: it is a general strand in the empirical examples that I have used for developing the above reflections, that the perception of Christianity is related very much to questions of individual lifestyle. I call attention to the fact that the more the focus is on issues related to this type of lifestyle, the stronger are the possibilities for establishing criteria by which the individual is determined to be an insider
or an outsider. Accordingly, one can be marginalized by others by not meeting the criteria, but also by one’s own perceived ideas of what is acceptable or not. The larger the focus on individual lifestyle, the more possibilities for shaming, or for selecting which desires are desirable and which are not. The development of a religious community that is not based on or so strongly focused on individual lifestyle, but emphasizes common and inclusive practices of generosity and hospitality might offer a potentially different approach to how Christianity might be practiced: without shaming, and with a far more positive recognition of human desire.

Notes

1 Allow me to make one remark in the end, reflecting on the material above: several of the informants who have eventually given in to their desires after some type of crisis, seem to suggest, by way of their narratives, that decrease in health is related to not taking seriously the desire for self-fulfillment and personal development. The material does not give us reasons to blame this only on the religious doctrine, upbringing or social setting—it has more to do with what was possible in a more or less rural Norwegian setting some decades ago. I would, however, suggest that the shortcomings in offering people accessible resources for such fulfillment is also a theological lack, and a lack that we see met and compensated more clearly by the new spirituality that Woodhead and Heelas found in Kendal (2005). This is among the challenges for theology that I have discussed with Linda Woodhead in TKRS 2005-2006. See also Henriksen 2007.

References


