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**Stephen Pattison. *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. x + 343. N.P. (Paper).**

[1] When I watch shows like *Jerry Springer*, *Ricki Lake*, and *Montel* (I swear I do not do that often), I get the impression that there is no shame remaining in American society. At those times, I tend to wish that there were more shame in our culture. In *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, Stephen Pattison instead wants to examine what is wrong with shame - at least a particular kind of shame. His is an ambitious project. While his arguments are not always successful, Pattison's text nevertheless promotes a deeper reflection about shame in society and the role of shame in Christian theology and practice.

[2] Pattison recognizes that the accounts and definitions of shame provided by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and others are not always consistent. In explaining this inconsistency, Part I serves as an excellent summary of current academic research about shame. Pattison displays a thorough grasp of the relevant debates, and for the reader who is not familiar with the study of shame, Part I provides a solid introduction to the literature.

[3] The diversity of definitions of shame is, in part, a consequence of the fact that shame is used to cover so many social and psychological states of mind and situations. Pattison, however, wants to examine more exclusively one kind of shame - what he calls "chronic shame." Chronic shame (a term defined and delineated in Part II) is "a condition of polluting, defiling unwantedness that alienates people and groups from themselves and from society" (186).

[4] Pattison is intimately familiar with this kind of shame. He often uses his own personal experience as a way of illustrating the points he wants to make (6-9, 112-13, 253). This certainly is a strength of the book. Many of these examples involve Pattison in a religious context. A man with an intriguing religious background, Pattison clearly has an ambivalent relationship to the Christian tradition. He finds in it the origin of his own debilitating experience of chronic shame, but also the resources to reform the tradition. It is the working out of this ambivalent relationship to Christianity that seems to be the primary motivation

for the work and its constructive culmination. This culmination is found in Part III, the final three chapters of the book.

[5] Pattison's attack upon the Christian tradition - one inspired in large part by his reading of, you guessed it, Nietzsche (224-26) - is two-pronged. He shows how chronic shame is integrally bound up with both Christian theology and practice. In order for Christians to see this, however, they must overcome what Pattison calls "Church idealisation." He writes: "In failing to recognise and remember the difference between God and the church, the latter may fall into the temptation of idealising itself and seeing itself as perfect [both in terms of its theology and practice]. This can have unfortunate consequences in relation to recognising and responding appropriately to shame and shamed people because idealisation may both actively foster shame and prevent its recognition and acknowledgment" (284). Once Christians firmly recognize the distinction between God and the human (and thus fallible) institution and belief system that we call the Church, then they will be able to deal with the role that the Church has played in fostering and supporting chronic shame.

[6] In terms of theology, Pattison offers a compelling critique of the most basic characteristics of the Christian God. Divine perfectibility, omniscience, and omnipotence can leave God's followers feeling ashamed of their own imperfections and inadequacies. In short, they "may be encouraged to see themselves as bad, powerless, defiled and unworthy before the face of an all-good creator" (241).

[7] A powerful (perhaps the most powerful) way in which Christians have understood their relationship to God has been through the concepts of sin and guilt. Pattison recognizes that guilt is not the same as shame. Sin can be the source of both, but guilt can be alleviated through confession and forgiveness. Shame, on the other hand, is a devalued sense of self that continues on through forgiveness (especially in the case of chronic shame). So while the Church may have a mechanism for freeing individuals from guilt, it often does not in regard to shame. However, Christian theology is not devoid of resources for addressing this inadequacy. Pattison notes that a renewed focus on the idea that God loves people could be very fruitful. Or, reassessing the teaching of humility may lead to a more healthy self-assertiveness and self-esteem among Christians who otherwise are dominated by a sense of unworthiness and defilement. Towards the end of chapter 10, Pattison offers a number of "theological fragments" to prod the theologian in the right direction (300-308). These include a renewed focus on the "fundamental goodness and value of creation and of humanity," a rejection of sin as "the defining differentiator between God and humanity," and a new vision of Jesus as someone who helps people overcome shame.

[8] A revised theology would lead to more shame-free practices. Pattison views many Christian practices as contributing to the kind of theological beliefs raised above. For example, baptism and confession drive home the point that we are unclean and unworthy before God - in other words, alienated from God. The practice of excluding certain individuals (e.g., homosexuals) from the Church and positions in it is a sure way of engendering shame in those individuals. Pattison's vision is one in which the "aim of Christian practice . . . is to help overcome alienation and exclusion. This might help enable shamed people and groups to see themselves, others, and God, face to face" (296).

[9] Pattison concludes that there "is no aspect of Christian thought or practice that might not engender or exacerbate shame in some individual or group" (289). I find him successful in showing that this is the case, and he provides helpful suggestions for Christian thought and practice.

[10] There are, however, several points that should be questioned or at least deserve further critical reflection. First there is a conceptual difficulty. Pattison liberally admits that shame is difficult to define. Even the more delineated phenomenon of chronic shame is ambiguous. In fact, at times Pattison seems incapable of maintaining the distinction between the two terms. He often uses "shame" when he means "chronic shame." For example, he writes that shame "can best be understood as toxic unwantedness" (182). But even he would admit that all shame is not toxic. It is chronic shame that is toxic. There are many examples of "softer" shame that are perfectly appropriate given the circumstances and certainly are not toxic. Thus, we have an argument that is targeted at a concept that is extremely hard to define and remains ambiguous even in the author's mind. In that case, we must ask: How can you hit the target if you cannot see it clearly? Though Pattison's work is very thorough, there nevertheless is much still to say about shame and even the idea of chronic shame. In regard to the latter, we might ask: Are there physiological causes for it that are non-religious? Is medication the answer in some cases? Can people suffer from it justifiably? In other words, do some people deserve it?

[11] These latter questions raise a second problematic issue with the book. Though I commend Pattison for his use of his personal experience to illustrate his argument, I wonder if that experience does not distort his perspective. While he notes that his focus is on the negative aspects of shame (especially chronic shame), the author finds little or no use for any aspect of shame (123-29). Is this because the author's experience of shame has so clearly been devastating to him psychologically? Perhaps. In any case, I find his argument on this point a bit exaggerated. Along with others, Pattison finds that we live in an "age of shame" (142) - clearly a negative fact for him. But is this true? We may well be living in an increasingly shameless age (certainly the kind of television I mention in my opening paragraph would confirm this). And I certainly do not see around me an epidemic of chronic shame! How many people really suffer from such shame? I agree that even one person is too many. But in assessing the social utility of shame we would need to know how many people are affected by it negatively in relation to how often it helps people to correct poor or inappropriate behavior. I do not want my children to suffer from chronic shame, but there certainly are situations in which I would hope that they feel ashamed of their behavior. In short, before we throw the baby (positively functioning shame) out with the bath water (chronic shame), we had better get more reliable sociological and psychological data (Pattison's personal experience notwithstanding) in order to make an informed assessment.

[12] This leads to my third and final point. I agree that Christians should examine their tradition and reform it in order to prevent the engendering of chronic shame. At the same time, Pattison ignores the fact that Christianity helps people to be shameful about behavior for which they *really* should be ashamed. Not all shame is bad, and Christianity *can* help people recognize those instances in which they should feel ashamed for what they did or did not do. Again, before significant changes are made in Christian theology or practice, there

needs to be more data concerning the propensity of Christianity to engender chronic shame in relation to its more positive role of helping to identify shameful behavior for its members.

[13] Pattison writes: "If shame promotes social responsibility, moral conformity and cohesion, it may be deemed a positive and creative force. If, however, it diminishes individual and group self-esteem and self-respect, it can be seen as destructive" (175-6). Pattison's book seems to work under the assumption that shame is mostly the latter. As indicated above, I do not think he is correct in this regard. Still, I find his work engaging and important for theologians, church leaders, mental health workers, and moral philosophers. Obviously he could not answer all the relevant questions, but he has framed the issues well and provided many fruitful paths for our further reflection.

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