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Teresa of Avila on Theology and Shame

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Abstract

This article examines Teresa of Avila's understanding of the relationship between spiritual dryness, intellectual frustration, and shame. It argues that Teresa presents these experiences as interconnected, as well as spiritually and intellectually valuable. This aspect of Teresa's thought provides important resources for theologians in the contemporary age in its insistence on the necessarily dynamic relationship between the spiritual and the intellectual in the life of the theologian. The article concludes with an examination of shame and its impact on theological developments in our time, as well as the possibilities for integrating shame productively.

Keywords

Teresa of Avila, prayer, theology, shame, spirituality

Teresa of Avila, Doctor of the Church and teacher of prayer par excellence, is perhaps most famously known for her mystical raptures and ecstasies. Recall, for example, the Baroque masterpiece sculpture by Bernini entitled "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" that depicts Teresa in the midst of an episode of almost orgasmic spiritual delight. Teresa's contemplative raptures were indeed remarkable, however, to highlight only Teresa's consolations would be to miss the great diversity and richness in her spiritual experiences. Focusing so narrowly on only her spiritual favors would be to risk missing the point of prayer altogether according to Teresa's own teaching. As she argues, the purpose of growth in prayer is to be united with God, not to produce raptures and ecstasies. Thus, in addition to describing her mystical raptures, Teresa also speaks extensively about the important function of spiritual dryness in the growth of the believer. This paper explores Teresa's nuanced understanding of spiritual dryness in order to demonstrate how the theme of spiritual dryness illuminates one of her central theses—namely, that God is the one who directs the spiritual growth of the believer. As Teresa notes, "one does not deal well with God by force and our efforts are like the careless use of

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large pieces of wood which smother this spark."[1] Furthermore, Teresa places spiritual dryness, shame, and the frustration of the activity of the intellect in an interconnected relationship, and in doing so she depicts the spiritual and the intellectual as intrinsically intertwined. To conclude, I extend Teresa's thought in order to address contemporary concerns by arguing that contemplative prayer ought to be considered not only legitimate as a theological method, but, constitutive of theology itself. I argue further that embracing the experience of spiritual dryness is an essential discipline for the theologian. As Teresa suggests, the experience of spiritual dryness exposes and purifies pride, shame, and fear, and as these are three forces that often both drive and constrain academic production, there is a particular urgency for theologians to accept the invitation found in the experience of spiritual dryness, and there to find greater freedom and creativity in the development of detachment, humility, and love.

Teresa on Delight and Dryness in Prayer

"In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are,
to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein
there is no ecstasy."[2]
–T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

While it can be tempting in reading Teresa's works to focus solely on her extraordinary experiences of rapture, consolation, and delight in prayer, this would be to miss the ultimate *telos* of prayer for Teresa, which is to have union with God.[3] As she notes in the *Way of Perfection*, "It [contemplative prayer] does nothing less, when accompanied by the necessary determination, than draw the Almighty so that He becomes one with our lowliness, transforms us

[1] Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life* in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol 1., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington DC, ICS Publications, 1987), 15.6.

[2] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1980), p. 127.

[3] Teresa does distinguish between consolation and spiritual delight by describing consolations as "those experiences we ourselves acquire through our own meditation and petitions to the Lord, those that proceed from our own nature—although God in the end does have a hand in them,"(*Interior Castle* 4.1.4) and "spiritual delights begin in God, but the human nature feels and enjoys them as much as it does those I mentioned (consolations)" (*Interior Castle* 4.1.4). While Teresa distinguishes the two experiences, for the purposes of this paper I use the terms interchangeably in order to denote Teresa's joyful experiences in prayer in contrast to her experiences of dryness.

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into Himself, and effects a union of the Creator with the creature."[4] Union with God, according to Teresa, entails conformity between the human will and God's will, as well as growth in virtue. Consolation in prayer can be a great gift from God that aids this process of achieving union. As Teresa states, "these joys of prayer must be like those of heaven. Since souls do not see more than what the Lord, in conformity with their merits, desires them to see—and they see their few merits—they are happy with the place they have."[5] Sometimes God gives the believer great joys and delights in prayer that are analogous to the joys one will experience in heaven. However, Teresa also expresses some ambivalence about spiritual consolations because she believes they can be deceptive, and that it can be difficult to discern their source and purpose. She argues that the devil is also capable of bringing consolation to believers. She notes that some of her sisters "fancy that they are being carried away in rapture," but, as she argues, "I call it being carried away in foolishness because it amounts to nothing more than wasting time and wearing down one's health."[6] Through these false spiritual delights, the devil is able to "gain ground,"[7] according to Teresa. Consolations can be discerned as truly coming from God if they result in greater virtue and love in the life of the believer. Teresa states, "The love of God does not consist in tears or in this delight and tenderness, which for the greater part we desire and find consolation in; but it consists in serving with justice and fortitude of soul in humility."[8] The consolations must be judged for authenticity by the fruit they produce.

Consolations can also become destructive if they become ends in themselves, and thus constitute a form of idolatry that can inculcate spiritual arrogance as the believer becomes accustomed to spiritual pleasure and seeks to create pleasurable experiences apart from God's initiative. To seek for spiritual pleasure through one's own initiative instead of accepting whatever God provides is a manifestation of pride and an inability to release control, according to Teresa. As she states, "But when they don't have devotion, they shouldn't weary themselves. They should understand that since His Majesty doesn't give it, it isn't necessary. They should believe that their desire for consolation is a fault. I have experienced and seen this."[9] For Teresa,

[4] Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection* in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol 2., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington DC, ICS Publications, 1980), 32.11.

[5] Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 10.3.

[6] Teresa, *Interior Castle* in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol 2., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington DC, ICS Publications, 1980), 4.3.11.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 11.13.

[9] Ibid., 11.14.

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the goal of prayer is God, rather than good feelings about God. Spiritual dryness, then, can be an important gift from God that humbles the soul by reminding it that everything good comes from God, and not through its own efforts. God allows the phenomenon of spiritual dryness to happen so that "we might be humble and understand in truth that we have nothing we haven't received."[10] Teresa also describes spiritual dryness in terms analogous to Jesus' carrying of the cross, and thus spiritual dryness, she argues, is also beneficial in that it allows one to imitate the sufferings of Jesus by embracing the suffering of spiritual dryness. The one in the midst of spiritual dryness should therefore be "determined, even though the dryness may last for his whole life, not to let Christ fall with the cross."[11] Spiritual dryness can thus be a great gift for the believer.

While Teresa certainly has a conception of spiritual dryness as a gift from God to humble the soul, there is also some ambivalence in her writing regarding spiritual dryness. At times, she indicates that the believer ought to welcome dryness as God's will, yet at other times, she portrays it as the work of the devil that should be resisted. For, as she notes in the *Book of Her Life*, "true humility doesn't come into the soul with agitation or disturbance, nor does it darken it or bring it dryness. Rather, true humility consoles and acts in a completely opposite way: quietly, gently, and with light."[12] It seems then that sometimes dryness is from God and should be willingly endured in order to inculcate courage and determination in the believer, while at other times, it is from the devil and should be resisted.

The *Interior Castle* provides further insight on this point. As Teresa argues, spiritual dryness can be necessary in order to purify one from an addiction to spiritual delights and consolations. She notes, "the Lord often desires that dryness and bad thoughts afflict and pursue us without our being able to get rid of them," in which case the believer should "trust in the mercy of God."[13] It can be a temptation to desire good feelings about God more than one desires God, and this is contrary to one of the fundamental goals of prayer, which is a total surrender to whatever God gives. The perfect soul, Teresa says, "wants only what God wants."[14] Teresa suggests that God allows dryness in order to teach us and to test us. As she notes in the *Book of Her Life*, "the Lord often desires to give these torments and the many other temptations that occur in order to try His lovers and know whether they will be able to drink the chalice and help him carry the

[10] Teresa, *Way of Perfection*, 38.7.
[11] Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 11.11.
[12] Ibid., 30.9.
[13] Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 2.1.8-9.
[14] Ibid., 2.1.7.

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cross before he lays great treasures within them."[15] She notes in both the *Interior Castle* and *The Book of Her Life* that complaining too much about dryness can indicate a lack of humility in some cases because it suggests that God owes us something, when in fact, we owe everything to God.[16]

However, Teresa makes a key distinction in the *Interior Castle* when she notes that while God can cause or allow dryness, God does not bring what she terms "disquiet." Disquiet is from the devil. She argues, "The Lord will give you understanding of them so that out of dryness you may draw humility—and not disquiet, which is what the devil aims after."[17] Disquiet causes the soul to fear in a destructive way, to doubt the mercy of God, and ultimately to avoid prayer because of the gravity of one's sins.[18] Fear that keeps one from communicating with God is never from God and ought to be resisted, according to Teresa. Thus, one way of discerning the source of spiritual dryness is to pay attention to whether or not it is also accompanied by peace, for in Teresa's mind, dryness and peace can coexist and both can be from God. Teresa indicates that dryness can actually be an indicator that one is spiritually strong, and that in some cases, God gives more consolations to those who are spiritually weak. She argues, "the divine Majesty gives these consolations to the weaker souls; although I think we would not exchange these consolations for the fortitude of those who walk in dryness. We are fonder of consolations than we are of the cross."[19] Thus, the experience of the cross of spiritual dryness can be particularly useful for the spiritually competent and virtuous in order to remind them of their wretchedness, which mitigates the development of self-reliance, as long as this spiritual dryness is not accompanied by disquiet that disturbs and hinders prayer.[20]

Teresa on Spiritual Dryness, Shame, and the Intellect

"You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know."[21]
–T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

[15] Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 11.11.
[16] Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 3.1.7.
[17] Ibid., 3.1.9.
[18] Teresa, *Way of Perfection*, 39.1.
[19] Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 3.1.9.
[20] Ibid., 3.2.2.
[21] Eliot, *Four Quartets*.

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One of the most compelling aspects of Teresa's thought on spiritual dryness is the way she connects it to the experience of shame and the frustration of the intellect. She notes, first of all, that theological studies and the intellect can be great advantages when it comes to prayer. As she states, "a background of studies is like a treasure to aid in this practice if the studies are accompanied by humility."[22] Furthermore she notes, "Taking it upon oneself to stop and suspend thought is what I mean should not be done; nor should we cease to work with the intellect, because otherwise we would be left like cold simpletons and be doing neither one thing nor the other."[23] Teresa has a very positive valuation of the intellect in the life of the believer, so much so, that she often expresses both regret and embarrassment at her lack of training and ability when it comes to theological studies. As she states, "my dullness of mind does not allow me to explain in a few words something it is so important to explain well."[24] As Gillian Alghren and others have argued, Teresa's self-deprecating speech about her lack of intellectual ability may have been, at least partially, an intentional rhetorical ploy by Teresa meant to assist her in strategically navigating the cultural pressures of her time by presenting her as humble and non-threatening, however, the ubiquity of comments throughout the corpus of her work expressing her insecurity about her lack of formal education and Teresa's insistence on having confessors who were "learned men" make it difficult to reduce this theme to merely a rhetorical strategy.[25]

As noted above, Teresa was insistent that a robust theological education could provide insight into the spiritual life, and she lamented her own lack of ability in this regard. So while Teresa eventually discusses the limits of the intellect in regards to the life of prayer, it is crucial to note that she is not anti-intellectual. As she notes when describing the beginning stages of prayer, the intellect is one way that a person in the early stages of prayer can "draw water from the well," become recollected, and thus make spiritual progress. She notes, "This discursive work with the intellect is what is meant by fetching water from the well" (11.11). The intellect can be a powerful force, and it is one significant way that the soul actively contributes to its own growth. Furthermore, in Teresa's own life, intellectual activity played an important role in preparing her for the spiritual raptures she would eventually experience. In her early years as a religious, Teresa often experienced great distraction in prayer and found that spiritual reading helped to focus and direct her wild thoughts, thus

[22] Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 12.4.
[23] Ibid., 12.5.
[24] Ibid., 13.12.
[25] Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1996), 68.

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preparing her for deeper stages of prayer.[26] As she notes in favor of the intellect, "The intellect goes in search of reasons for better understanding the great sorrows and pain His majesty suffered. This is the method of prayer with which all must begin, continue, and finish; and it is a very excellent and safe path until the Lord leads one to other supernatural things."[27] Thus the intellect holds a privileged place in Teresa's thought in terms of its ability to aid the soul in making progress in prayer, especially for beginners.

However, while being quite positive about the necessity of intellectual engagement in the life of the one praying, Teresa also describes the eventual limits of the intellect, which are inevitable as one progresses into higher levels of prayer. As she notes, sometimes "after many days there is nothing but dryness, distaste, vapidness," and then "it will frequently happen to them that they will even be unable to lift their arms for this work and will be unable to get a good thought."[28] While in the early stages of prayer, the intellect is engaged and quite effective in helping the soul progress, Teresa argues that this is bound to eventually fail as one encounters a spiritual dryness that includes frustration of the intellect, or as she describes it, the inability of the intellect to "get a good thought."[29] Here Teresa links spiritual dryness with the failure of the intellect.

This experience of the limitation of the intellect for the believer is a crucial turning point in the progress of the soul, because by acknowledging the failure of the intellect to bring about consolations and spiritual pleasure through discursive reflection, the soul is able to see its own limitation and dependency, and is thus poised to ascend to higher levels of prayer. When the intellect fails, it can happen that the soul finds itself unable to contain and focus its thoughts. As Teresa argues, it is very important that "no one be distressed or afflicted over dryness or noisy and distracting thoughts. If people wish to gain freedom of spirit and not be always troubled, let them begin by not being frightened by the cross, and they will see how the Lord also helps them carry it."[30] Noisy and distracting thoughts are one aspect of the experience of the cross of spiritual dryness. By accepting the failure of the intellect to effect spiritual growth, the one praying is first forced to summon up courage to continue with prayer while not seeing the immediate benefits. This also develops determination, and both courage and determination are essential for growth in virtue. As Teresa notes, "His Majesty wants this determination, and He is a friend of courageous souls if they walk in humility and without

[26] Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 4.9.
[27] Ibid., 13.12.
[28] Ibid., 11.11.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 11.17.

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trusting in self."[31] Furthermore, in the experience of the inability of the intellect to bring about spiritual growth, the soul has to face the reality of its own limitations, its sinfulness, and its utter dependency on God, and this is the birthplace of spiritual growth because it develops humility. Teresa describes this process in the following way: "When the soul begins to compose speeches and search for ideas, though insignificant, it will think it is doing something if they are well expressed. The idea it should have here is a clear understanding that there isn't any idea that will make God give us so great a favor, but that this favor comes only from His goodness," and furthermore, she argues that it is "not with the noise of words but with longing that He hears us."[32] In the experience of the dryness of the intellect, one discovers that the intellect cannot manipulate God into providing favors and consolations, thus it is here that the intellect encounters the absolute gratuity of God. Teresa's mention of the role of desire is also significant when she notes that it is "not with the noise of words but with longing that He hears us."[33] Any tendency to privilege the intellect above the heart's desire for God is rebuked in the experience of the limitations of the intellect. For Teresa, what is eventually more essential to the soul's journey to God is not the constructions of the intellect, but rather, the will's movement of love. Teresa argues that the soul ascending to God should "make some loving acts about what it will do for one to whom it owes so much without, as I said, admitting noise from the intellect which goes about looking for great concepts."[34] In the experience of the failure of the intellect, the will may be particularly awakened and inclined to God through desire.

A further result of the failure of the intellect in prayer is that, as one enters into pure dependency upon God for spiritual favors and union, the intellect is enlightened and clarified by God's grace. As Teresa notes, "Although their studies will not cease to benefit them a lot before and afterward, here during these periods of prayer there is little need for learning, in my opinion; rather, their studies will make the will tepid. For in seeing itself near the light, the intellect then has the greatest clarity."[35] Here, as I develop in greater depth in the final section of this essay, Teresa presents a theological epistemology of gratuity. In the suspension and failure of the intellect and in the embracing of the limitation of the intellect, the intellect is infused with spiritual knowledge given directly by God through an experiential encounter with God. Teresa argues, "When the Lord suspends the intellect and causes it to stop, He Himself gives it that

[31] Ibid., 13.2.
[32] Ibid., 15.7.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

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which holds its attention and makes it marvel; and without reflection it understands more in the space of a Creed than we can understand with all our earthly diligence in many years."[36] Far from causing atrophy of the intellect then, the mystical encounter with Christ in prayer contributes new and deeper theological knowledge into the believer that surpasses what can be gained solely through the exercise of studying and discursive reflection. This insight from Teresa is essential for developing a contemplative theological method for the twenty-first century.

The other significant thread that Teresa develops in her discussion about spiritual dryness and the intellect is the role of shame in the spiritual progress of the believer. The three themes of spiritual dryness, frustration of the intellect, and shame are interconnected in Teresa's thought. While in the contemporary Western context, shame is often portrayed as a negative emotion to be overcome and eliminated altogether, Teresa has a nuanced conception of shame that allows it to serve a positive, though limited function in the spiritual progress of the believer. She argues, first, that it is not necessary for the believer to manufacture feelings of shame at the thought of one's sins, because the Lord provides this. As she states, "When prayer comes from God's spirit, there is no need to go dredging up things in order to derive some humility and shame because the Lord Himself gives this prayer in a manner very different from that which we gain through our nice little reasonings."[37] Even shame, then, is not something that we can properly provide for ourselves, and the danger in trying to do so is that one will become so overwhelmed at the sight of one's sinfulness that one will abstain from prayer altogether. In reflecting on her own life, Teresa notes, "This was the most terrible trick the devil could play on me, under the guise of humility: that seeing myself so corrupted I began to fear the practice of prayer."[38] Neither the intellect nor one's "nice little reasonings"[39] are powerful enough to provide true humility and knowledge of one's sins, and it can be destructive to attempt to do so. In contrast to false humility and shame that some believers might seek to manufacture on their own, true humility, and what Teresa perceives as productive shame, are gifts given by God. As she states, "For such [false] humility is nothing in comparison with the true humility the Lord with His light here teaches and which causes an embarrassment that undoes one . . . God gives a knowledge that makes us realize we have no good of ourselves; and the greater the favors, the greater the knowledge."[40]

[36] Ibid., 12.5.
[37] Ibid., 15.14.
[38] Ibid., 7.1.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 15.14.

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Shame, then, for Teresa can serve a positive function of dispossessing and "undoing" the human subject of any delusions of being in control of the spiritual life. It also serves to more deeply inculcate humility.

Teresa discusses the relationship between shame and the intellect by noting that it is often a temptation for the intellect to busy itself by tracing the soul's many sins. As she notes, "What I call noise is running about with the intellect looking for many words and reflections so as to give thanks for this gift and piling up one's sins and faults in order to see that the gift is unmerited. Everything is motion here; the intellect is representing, and the memory hurrying about."[41] The busyness of the intellect seeking to comprehend its own sinfulness can become an obstacle to growth in prayer. A refusal to stop depending on the intellect is a sign of resistance to surrendering to the work of God. Furthermore, it is an assertion of one's own autonomy that hinders the development of the deeper union with God that comes through embracing one's dependency on God. Teresa notes that our intellectual efforts in this regard are "like the careless use of large pieces of wood which smother this spark."[42] The better path, according to Teresa, is to acknowledge the inability of the intellect to develop true humility, to embrace the frustration of the intellect, and to wait for God to provide self-knowledge. At this stage, the believer should "pay no attention to the intellect, for it is a grinding mill."[43] True self-knowledge given by God includes the experience of shame or embarrassment at the sight of one's own sinfulness, but doesn't end there.

After the experience of the dryness and frustration of the intellect, and the initial experience of shame that draws one into deeper relationship with, and dependency on, God, Teresa notes with urgency that one must not linger in the experience of shame. As she notes,

> Once a soul sees that it is now submissive and understands clearly that it has nothing good of itself and is aware both of being ashamed before so great a King and of repaying so little of the great amount it owes Him—what need is there to waste time here? We must go on to other things that the Lord places before us.[44]

Shame can be useful then, according to Teresa, but only within strict boundaries. It is not an end in itself, but is beneficial insofar as it prompts one to deeper humility, gratitude, and union with God. Shame, spiritual dryness, and the intellect are thus connected in the following way in Teresa's thought: the frustration and failure of the intellect is one aspect of spiritual dryness, this experience

[41] Ibid., 15.6.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., 13.15.

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of limitation and inability to produce spiritual consolations through discursive reflection leads one to enter into greater dependency on God, entrance into deeper dependency on God leads to an encounter with one's sinfulness and inability to effect any good work, and this leads to deeper love for, and union with, God, as the soul activates the will through movements of love despite the suspension of the intellect. As Teresa notes, "Here there is no demand for reasoning but for knowing what as a matter of fact we are and for placing ourselves (with simplicity) in God's presence, for He desires the soul to become ignorant in His presence, as indeed it is."[45] As the soul progresses towards union with God, the activity of the intellect is suspended, self-knowledge deepens, and the soul is infused with a deeper theological knowledge of God based on an encounter with God's self. As T.S. Eliot poetically expresses, "You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance./In order to possess what you do not possess/You must go by the way of dispossession./In order to arrive at what you are not/You must go through the way in which you are not./And what you do not know is the only thing you know."[46] When the intellect fails to produce devotional thoughts, the soul cannot hide from its own sinfulness and is forced to face its shame. This shame is a relational gift in that it invites one into deeper union with God.

The Shame of Theologians and Prayer as Theology

"It does not matter whether the humiliated one
has been shamed by derisive laughter
or whether he mocks himself.
In either event he feels himself naked,
defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth."[47]
–Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Her Sisters*

Affect theorist and psychologist Silvan Tomkins argues that, "Though terror speaks to life and death and distress makes of the world a vale of tears, yet shame strikes deepest into the heart of man."[48] The power of shame lies in its nature as an "inner torment, a sickness of the soul."[49] Unlike terror or distress, which are experiences inflicted upon humanity from outside forces, humans typically experience shame as coming from deep within, although it can be provoked and exacerbated by the objectifying other

[45] Ibid., 15.8.
[46] Eliot, *Four Quartets*.
[47] Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*: *A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, eds. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, Duke University Press, 1995), 133.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.

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expressing contempt. The combination, then, of innate sources of shame and the forces of shame in the outside world threatens to cripple human spontaneity and joy in what Tomkins refers to as a "generalized shame bind almost as toxic as an anxiety neurosis."[50]

Shame is marked by the experience of one's self as vulnerable, worthless, frustrated, and alienated. Human beings desire union and connection, and the frustration of these desires provokes the experience of shame. The face, and in particular, the eyes, are the loci of the affective demonstration of the experience of shame. As Tomkins notes,

> The shame response is an act which reduces facial communication. By dropping his eyes, his eyelids, his head, and sometimes the whole upper part of his body, the individual calls a halt to looking at another person, particularly the other person's face, and to the other person's looking at him, particularly at his face.[51]

A person who is ashamed drops his or her eyes and lowers the head because the eyes are the gateway to intimacy, and shame is fundamentally a response to the frustration of intimacy. Shame can thus only be activated where there is first desire. Once one experiences interest or enjoyment, he or she is immediately vulnerable to the experience of shame. As Tomkins notes, "any barrier to further exploration which partially reduces interest or the smile of enjoyment will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame and reduce further exploration or self-exposure powered by excitement or joy."[52] Shame is evoked when one hopes for union and mutuality and instead finds rejection. Because intimacy is sought primarily through facial and interocular communication, when this is frustrated it evokes the ambivalent experience of a residual wish to gaze upon the love object with the eyes and to find communion with the loved one, but also the desire to protect oneself from the source of rejection, thus causing one to lower the eyes in shame and hang the head. As Tomkins notes, insofar as any human being is excited by or enjoys "his work, other human beings, his body, his self, and the inanimate world around him, he is vulnerable to the variety of vicissitudes in the form of barriers . . . which will impoverish, or otherwise prevent total pursuit and enjoyment of his work, of others, of himself, and of the world around him."[53] Because the varieties and opportunities for enjoyment and excitement in the world are limitless, shame also "knows no bounds."[54] Insofar as a human experiences interest and

[50] Ibid., 149.
[51] Ibid., 134.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 150.
[54] Ibid.

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enjoyment then, he or she may also experience shame, and so shame is fundamental to the experience of being human.

The experience of shame is particularly known by theologians because of the nature of theology as a relational discipline that seeks both union with, and knowledge of, God, who cannot be explained or contained. As Elizabeth Johnson notes, "The reality of God is mystery beyond all imagining."[55] God can never be completely captured by human language or expression. As Augustine famously argued, "*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*."[56] The pursuit of saying something coherent, even systematic, about a Being who is always beyond every articulation and syllogism is part of the intoxication and allure of the academic discipline of theology. It evokes the passion and excitement of the theologian because of its ever-receding horizon of possibility for exploration. Theology is an expansive exercise that engages the deepest questions of the human spirit—it stirs, it provokes, it synthesizes, it inspires. The theologian is allowed to entertain the most grandiose thoughts and deigns to become an "expert" in that which always eludes comprehension. All of this intoxicates and flatters the ego of the theologian. Yet perhaps, lingering behind the intellectual stimulation and even the academic regalia, a hope lies within the theologian for a transformative encounter with the source of love itself.

Yet, while theology intoxicates and inspires, the theologian quickly finds that it is also a never-ending series of frustrations. Every "answer" provokes a hundred new questions. It often seems to be, in the words of T.S. Eliot, a "periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion," and at the end of illustrious careers theologians may find themselves in possession only of the "knowledge of dead secrets/Useless in the darkness into which they peered/Or from which they turned their eyes."[57] Beyond the intrinsic tendency of the discipline to be intellectually frustrating in its expansiveness, the theologian continually faces anew the reality that union with God is not achieved primarily through intellectual pursuits. Intellectual pursuits, even those within the realm of theology, can actually become sophisticated forms of hiding from truly encountering God. While the intellectual pursuit of theology might intensify the desire for union with God, it can never satiate it. Theologians, then, are particularly vulnerable to the experience of shame because of the nature of theology as simultaneously

[55] Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York, Continuum, 2007), p. 7.

[56] "If you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something else instead of God." Augustine, "Sermon 52: The Trinity," *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, *Sermons on the New Testament*, Vol III (51-94). John E. Rotelle, O.S.A, ed. Trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York, New York City Press, 1991), n.16, 57.

[57] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, p. 125.

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desire-producing and frustrating. The expansiveness of the discipline and the continual vicissitude of desire intensification and frustration within the daily life of the theologian create a tendency for each to silently suspect that he or she is a failure, an imposter, never possessing any credible knowledge because of the elusiveness of the subject, thus also contributing fear of being exposed as a charlatan to the emotional challenges of the theologian.[58] Add to all of this the reality of theology as exploring that which is most lofty and sacred, and the theologian can hardly avoid persistent feelings of worthlessness. There lies a great temptation, then, for theologians to slowly become bound by the constraints of shame and fear. Are the eyes of theologians marked by the bright expectation of enjoyment and communion, or are they frustrated and cast down in shame, frustration, and fear?

Teresa's wisdom regarding spiritual dryness, shame, and the intellect presents a transformational model for systematic theology in the contemporary age. Recall that for Teresa, the frustration of the intellect and the experience of shame present crucial opportunities for deeper union with God. If systematic theology is combined with the practice of contemplative prayer, the theologian need not fear the inevitable failure of the intellect to grasp God, for in this experience of failure he or she can enter into deeper dependency on God for theological knowledge, a profound type of knowledge based on encountering God that becomes, according to Teresa, "impressed deep within your being."[59] In the experience of spiritual dryness that includes the frustration of the intellect, the theologian is exposed to her own limitations, her humanity, her shame, her insatiable desires, her longing for union, her pride, and her fear, and here becomes able to experience the pure gratuity of God. It is in this moment that a further emphasis of Teresa's becomes particularly relevant—namely, the importance of continually fixing one's gaze on Christ who always gazes with love at humanity. While Teresa suggests that the experience of shame is crucially important to one's spiritual development, her conception of shame is not as that which would cause one to cast down one's eyes from Christ. In fact, if one's sense of shame presents a barrier to relationship with Christ, Teresa would argue that this shame is not from God. Instead, she presents productive shame as the experience of embarrassment in the face of one's sinfulness that ought to draw one more deeply into union with Christ, rather than presenting a barrier to relationship. As she argues, "I am not asking you to do anything more than look at Him . . . Well now, daughters, your Spouse never takes His eyes off you. Is it too much

[58] This insight was inspired by Graham Ward's insightful reflection on the shame inherent to inter-disciplinary work in his article "Adam and Eve's Shame (And Ours)" in *Literature and Theology* (2012), Vol 26(3), pp. 305-322.

[59] Teresa, *Way of Perfection*, 6.4.

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to ask you to turn your eyes from these exterior things in order to look at Him sometimes?"[60]

Teresa's recommendation of a discipline of reciprocal gazing in love between Christ and the believer provides a means by which the shame of the theologian can be gently exposed, welcomed, and transformed. Shame, when it is exposed to the loving gaze of Christ directs the eyes upward in hope for communion rather than casting them down in frustration. As Tomkins notes, "The self lives where it exposes itself and where it receives similar exposures from others. Both transmission and reception of communicated information take place at the face."[61] The theologian whose face is continually directed toward the loving encounter with Christ in prayer can slowly become more able to be detached, humble, and creative. Freed from the binds of shame and fear, it can now be possible for the theologian to hold the shame of others so as to direct their eyes to the loving and persistent gaze of Christ. As Teresa exhorts, "Your eyes on your Spouse! He will sustain you."[62]

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[60] Ibid., 26.3.
[61] Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 137.
[62] Teresa, *Way of Perfection*, 2.1.

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