
The subject of this small book is a large one: no less than how Christianity in the *persona propria* of its saints, martyrs and ascetics converted the sensibility of the Mediterranean world from one of guilt to shame. Burrus believes they did so not by replacing shame with guilt but “by embracing shame shamelessly.” The argument is supple, nuanced, slippery, and sometimes written in a prose whose argument is so labored as to be unintelligible. The latter particularly evident in Burrus’s discussion of how early Christians uncoupled shame from honor and joined it to grace. There are really two books competing for the reader’s attention here. The first one, which is theoretical and reflects Burrus’s principal interest and subject is largely indebted to thinkers like Levinas, Kristeva and Derrida and provides the intellectual framework for the second one, which is an analysis of a selection of early Christian texts. These texts range widely both in genre, themes and chronology, from such familiar ones as *Revelation* and the *Passion of Perpetua* to the less well-known fifth-century *Life of Syncletia*.

Burrus presents her argument in four short chapters arranged chronologically, beginning with the apostolic period and ending with Sophronius’s *Life of Mary of Egypt*. Chapter One, *Shameless Witnesses*, is concerned with illustrating Burrus’s thesis regarding the Christian embrace of shame. She provides a brief analysis of the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. Her second chapter, *An Embarrassment of Flesh*, is a discussion of the Incarnation and Christ’s humiliating assumption of flesh produced a Christian theology of abjection which was to prove a fecund source for joy and the vehicle to transcend human identity. The chapter looks particularly at Tertullian’s *On the Flesh of Christ*, the *Apocryphon of John*, Origen’s *First Principles* and selections from Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa. Chapter Three, *The Desire and the Pursuit of Humiliation*, is principally a discussion of vignettes from Palladius’ *Lausiac History*, Evagrius of Pontus and the anonymous *Life of Syncletia* to illustrate the ascetic’s efforts to escape selfhood through a humiliation of the body which ends in dissolution of the self into a union of love with the divine. Chapter Four, *Shameful Confessions*, completes the study with a discussion of the “confession” as a “verbalizing act” in which the subject of the narrative is twofold: the self is confessed as other and the self is confessed to another. Augustine,
Cassian and Sophronius’s popular Mary of Egypt are examined. Burrus concludes with a brief afterword, “Shame, Politics and Love,” in which she contrasts Nussbaum and Kimball’s understanding that shame and its social stigma in antiquity was always a negative with her own idea early Christian texts present a more ambivalent attitude concerning the social stigma of shame.

Space does not permit a discussion of Burrus’s many arguments and of the narratives cited in the work. My principal concern throughout is that the close reading of the language of the texts, while in some instances breathtaking conceptually, is, when scrutinized, often lacking in a genuine feeling for its unique particular context and the intention of its rhetoric. Furthermore, Burrus’s arguments regarding the texts, although often creative, would have greater power if she engaged at greater length the pertinent scholarship. Allow me to present but a few examples which will illustrate my concern. Chapter One discusses the Ignatian Epistles, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne, the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, the Acts of Thecla, the Life of Antony and the Life of Symeon the Fool. This chapter and its textual analysis would have benefited from a more nuanced consideration of the inherent problems in treating these different genres in their very different historical contexts with their different voices rather than treating them as representatives of related narrative types which share some thematic commonplaces. Taking Ignatius’s Letter to the Romans as her start Burrus reads this letter as marking the beginning of an extreme interest in converting shame into shamelessness; she focuses on the Ignatian language of sacrifice. Yet a more detailed, careful analysis of the language of this highly rhetorical pastoral epistle—its urgent eschatology (ἔσχατοι καιροί, Eph.11.1), the obvious intended literary implications of his Eucharistic allusions (ἀφετέ με Θηρίων εἶναι Βοράν Rom. 4.1; cf. Phil. 4.1), Ignatius’s fervent belief that this arrest was providential, an inescapable fact of the divine will (ἀλλ’ ἐκ χάριτος Θεοῦ Smyr. 11.1) and not purely an act of volitional agency—would have gone a long way to making her argument more persuasive. It would have contextualized Ignatius’s desires and it would have seen them not simply as a manic desire for a sacrificial death but rather as part of his understanding of God’s larger cosmic eschatological soteriology in which he was merely an insignificant part.

Similarly, her example from the Passion of Perpetua (a Latin prose narrative of three distinct voices) also exhibits this lack of close engagement with the language of the text. Burrus excerpts the famous scene of Perpetua’s