

I got into this mindbender when Marty asked me to review for THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY Jn. Patton's IS HUMAN FORGIVENESS POSSIBLE? (Abingdon/85). More than any other publishing pastoral counselor (he heads the Georgia Association for Pastoral Care in Atlanta), JP has done his homework on secular research & theory vis-a-vis shame. My review will become a thinksheet, so I'm into something else here (#2035), viz, extending JP from the individual (counselor/counselee) level to the sociopolitical level: I'm applying his thesis to another trunk and its branches. (ASIDE: Logicians & rhetoricians speak of "branching" as one type of structural thinking. A simple analogy: Your theme is the tree trunk, and you intensify and illumine its reality by "branching out" from it into inferences/applications. Photomicrography reveals that this parallels the development of the human brain, whose "dendrite" neuronal system of contact/communication gets its name from the Greek word for tree, dendron. Most of my thinksheets are of this structure, the numbered sections being the branches--the numbering being for easy reference by me and others.)

1. JP's thesis is that, esp. since the somewhat stable 1950s, our culture has been shifting from a guilt culture the church traditionally has handled fairly well to a shame culture the church is handling inadequately because (1) it hasn't developed a shame theology and (2, p.127) "the church and her clergy may be defending themselves against the church's weakness as a force in present-day society through defenses similar to those used by individuals, clinging to its righteousness and its power to forgive sins." 129: Not from Paul, but from Augustine through Luther to the present church, "emphasis on guilt often results in the neglect of the more powerful, less manipulable experience of shame....The Pauline experience of weakness can provide us with a theological means of dealing with the painful experience of shame." Paul's thorn (2Cor.12) helps him identify with his Lord, "who was crucified in weakness" (2Cor.13.4). I must add Heb.12.2: Jesus "endured the cross, despising the shame": (TEV) "Because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross." Paul models for us not in experiencing shame, which we have no evidence he did--since he had (Stendahl) "a robust conscience, not plagued by introspection"--but in that "he managed to identify his weakness with Christ and find power in making that weakness public rather than in vain attempts to hide it" (130f). Right here is the psychopathology of shame: "vain attempts to hide it." These attempts, the exposition of which consumes most of JP's book, are (1) rage, (2) withdrawal, (3) manipulating power, including the imagined power to forgive, (4) manipulating one's powerlessness, and (5) (self)-righteousness ("being right" in conscious-constant contrast to the one one sees as guilty of injury to oneself--the injury real or imagined). (The words are mainly mine, but the substance of all this diagnostic is JP's.)

2. The two critical correlates of JP's diagnostic tool are (1) "human nature" insofar as we can distill it out of various cultures, here the guilt culture and the shame culture, and (2) the gospel. To put the criteria interrogatively: (1, of #1) Is this pastoral therapeutic accommodationistic (so that the counselor is helping the sinner to cope in sin as a fish swimming in, say, saltwater instead of fresh--or are "all men(humans)" being addressed in their original sin, their universal waywardness from God (as Ro.1-3)? (2, of #2) Is this therapeutic theory/praxis faithful or at least conformable to Christian faith/order/life/work? With these two caveats, I proceed to social application, which (at least in this book) JP does not proceed to. (ASIDE: However the two questions are answered, I've no doubt we've some profound wisdom as fruit of JP's thirty years of professional wrestling with the issues swirling around "forgiveness.")

3. But first, to be as fair to JP as I can manage, let's let him (with ^{over}

his book's only italics) state what he's about (p.16): "My specific thesis about human forgiveness is that *human forgiveness is not doing something but discovering something--that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them. I am able to forgive when I discover that I am in no position to forgive. Although the experience of God's forgiveness may involve confession of, and the sense of being forgiven for, specific sins, at its heart it is the recognition of my reception into the community of sinners--those affirmed by God as his children.*" "Discovery" is JP's key word in 1:1, as "realization," "realized forgiveness," is key to Jas. Emerson's forgiveness-in-Christian-community (in the latter's THE DYNAMICS OF FORGIVENESS). Basically, forgiveness is neither act nor attitude: it's realization and discovery....Now to my social applications:

4. ABORTION is currently triggering storms of rage and self-righteousness with feelings of impotence because we prochoicers won Roe v. Wade and of power as the proliferers see themselves as recruiting more troops and winning battles in street and ballotbox. This psychocluster suggests at its root something that might not be inaccurately called "shame." Suggestions: (1) Shame at the R.v.W. court-loss; (2) Shame over the violation of "the rights of the unborn," taken & applied personally--as somebody, in self-contradiction, yelled at me "Your mother should have aborted you!" (3) Shame over the injury done to "natural law" and "the Church's Teaching"; (4) Shame over the injury to our nation, in the world's eyes, that 18 million "unborn children" have been aborted in the USA since R.v.W.; (5) Personal shame when one's arguments are injured by attacks from someone like me (resulting in abusive mail, phonecalls, threats). Seems to me this thinksheet's title well applies to the USA's ominous abortion crisis.

5. The curious double case of NICARAGUA & S.AFRICA. To put it sardonically, USA activists criticize N. for its near-genocidal treatment of its Miskito Indians and are easier on S.A. because Pretoria has never been as cruel to S.A. Blacks at N. has been to the Miskitos. Right? Wrong. Then equally critical of both regimes? Wrong again: REVERSE! Why? The cynic's response--or is it the realist's?--is that the USA has ca.13,000,000 Blacks and 5(?) Miskitos. But let's use JP's diagnostic:

...NICARAGUA: Our activists feel injured and react with shame for the USA's "shameful" treatment of Latinos ("South of the Border"). They're ashamed (1) at the hypocritical discrepancy between our protestations of democracy and our practice of siding with anticommunist power; (2) that we export, in the form of "imperial" or "colonial" exploitation, our capitalistic-commercialistic possessions-as-superior-to-people; (3) that Washington supports the Contras, whom our activists see as "nothing but terrorists"; (4) that so few Americans see, and care, that the Sandinistas are "a democratic government" (though Marxist in its founding-documents language). I've heard and read a lot of screechy activist rhetoric, overheated with self-righteousness and political impotence and unmodulated by Niebuhrian realism. Some of my best friends are....

...S.AFRICA: We activists (and I'm one on many issues!) have a history of empathetically sharing in the inner injury, the social insult, of "the oppressed"--partly because of Biblical religion, and partly because of the American sympathy for the underdog. We try to feel the shame the insulted feel so that we can (1) understand their rage/withdrawal/power-&-impotence manipulations/strutting of self-righteousness, and (2) participate with them in their "empowering." We find it easier to see the pathology of Pretoria than that of Tutu & company. Some of us feel the need to nail the enormous self-righteousness in the American activist cultural imperialism of trying to force our political culture ("one-person-one-vote") on a foreign country whose problems are both similar to and radically different from our country's. It makes our activists, including the President(!), feel good when we use our financial "sanctions" even though this always damages us more than it does others.