The Normalizing Power of the Therapeutic God

Subjectivity, Religious Agency, and Shame before God

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Abstract

This article analyses autobiographical letters on (perceived) shameful sexuality and religiosity written by Finnish Lutheran women. It examines how the affect of shame constructs gendered, sexualized and religious subjectivity and agency as an effect of normalizing power within an individual’s relationship with God. The psychologization process of late 20th century Western culture works as a framework for the discussion. The article argues that the modern psychoreligious ethos, within which the Christian God is understood as an all-loving being, restructures subjectivity and agency in a manner in which a self is seen as something to be liberated to its authentic state. At the same time, however, the image of an all-loving God normalizes gender, sexuality and religiosity in accordance with heteronormative ideals. Moreover, the article argues that examining the normalizing aspect of different affectual practices reframes the subordination/subversion paradox central to the discussion on women’s religious agency.

Keywords

shame – therapeutic culture – subjectivity – sexuality – religious agency – Finland

1 Introduction

Back then there was none of this fussing over sexuality there is nowadays. To be frank, this is not how it should be at all. In my opinion, this is pure fornication. The Bible clearly states that this thing belongs to holy matrimony. [...] There is no need to shout it from the rooftops. It seems to me that the whole world lives a dissolute life. [...] I don't know how much
longer God will look after this generation of whores and sinners. I hope that people will open their eyes before it is too late.¹

HELLEVI, b. 1926

There is a road somewhere inside of me and by following that road I am always before God. God is not monitoring me in a paranoid way. Instead, I feel grateful that someone sees me as worth watching. [...] After a long road to recovery I can finally say that it is wonderful to be me and to be the woman I am. I am good enough. My relationship with God has supported me being me.

IRIS, b. 1954

These extracts come from autobiographical letters focusing on perceived shameful sexuality and religiosity written by Finnish Lutheran women. Hellevi's and Iris's (pseudonyms) accounts, when juxtaposed, illustrate the nature of what is called 'the therapeutic turn'. It has been argued that over the course of the twentieth century and at a faster pace after the Second World War, different psychological, psychiatric, and therapeutic ideas, ideals, and techniques have increased in prevalence within Western culture, religion included. More importantly, psychosciences and disciplines have brought into existence a historically specific way to relate to ourselves and to other human beings. People are preoccupied with their inner worlds (their emotions, identities, and the authenticity and growth of their selves) as much as with the different techniques employed to conduct themselves and other individuals (Rakow 2013: 487; Madsen 2014: 2–5; Rose 1998: 2–4; Furedi 2004: 12–14).

The philosopher Charles Taylor (2007: 620–621) has stated that, as a sociocultural change, the therapeutic turn represents a shift from a hermeneutics of sin to a hermeneutics of sickness, and that this shift has had significant consequences for individuals' self-understanding. Hellevi's account can be seen as an exemplar of the former hermeneutics. When writing about shameful sexuality, she emphasizes second-hand shame for the community, which is not complying with God's commands. For her, God appears as a judge to be feared, since the salvation of the whole community depends on obeying God's commandments. Sexuality, understood as a threatening force which needs to be kept in check, is at the heart of the social order upheld by God as judge. However, for Iris, born some twenty years after Hellevi, the cause of shame has shifted from the community to the individual. Accordingly, she sees God as a caring person

¹ All quotations have been translated by the author.
who has supported her to recover and become herself. The philosopher and psychologist Ole Jacob Madsen (2014: 47–49) has argued that whereas God as a fearsome judge was an integral part of the traditional moral and gender order, the psychologization of Western culture has resulted in a specific psychoreligious ethos, at the heart of which are individuality, emotional well-being, and care for an authentic self. Accordingly, God has acquired the form of an all-loving, cosmic therapist.

In this article I discuss the subjectifying aspect of an individual’s affectual relationship with God with respect to what is called ‘the therapeutic turn’ or ‘the therapeutic ethos’. In what follows, I will analyse the relationship between an individual and God from the perspective of normalizing power by asking how one’s affectual relationship with God is entwined with a larger cultural process of psychologization, which eventually produces subjectivity and agency. From the perspective of Michel Foucault’s thought, different psychological discourses aim at normalizing individuals through measuring, defining, and regulating the border between what is understood as ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’ sexuality, for example. This, in turn, results in a new kind of mode of subjectivity (Foucault 1981: 145–146; Rose 1998: 2–4, 24). I will especially focus on the producing aspect of the affect of shame, which can be described as an intense and painful sensation of being exposed as defective, inadequate, and unlovable (Ahmed 2004: 103–104). I will examine the different mechanisms through which the affect of shame works within an individual’s relationship with God, limiting and enabling—in a word, normalizing—subjectivity and agency, be it religious, gendered, or sexualized.

My aim is threefold: I will first outline a theoretical framework for analysing the normalizing power of God by drawing on insights from the thought of Foucault and from queer theoretical considerations of shame, power, and subjectivity. Second, I will apply this theoretical framework to a selection of autobiographical letters by asking how women authors, in particular, articulate their religiosity and their relationship with God and what kinds of subjectivity is constructed within these narratives. Finally, I will consider the usefulness of this theoretical perspective for the analysis of religious agency—an issue which has lately been revolving around the question of how to transcend the subordination/subversion dichotomy arising from the paradox of women embodying religious norms seen as antithetical to their own interests (Mahmood 2005; Avishai 2008; Bucar 2010; Muhanna 2015).

The most recent efforts on the topic of religious agency (?) have been strongly influenced by Saba Mahmood’s Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (2005), which key aim is to challenge the liberal-secularist assumption that women participating within certain conservative religious ideol-
ologies have ‘false consciousness’ and thus are acting against their own interests. Utilizing the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Mahmood (2005: 17–18, 32) understands religious agency as developing out of religious norms embodied by the individual. For her, agency is a capacity to action that is produced within historically contingent discursive traditions. Mahmood sees religious agency as a mode of self-reflexivity through which individuals ‘measure themselves against the ideals furbished by these traditions’ (32). This measuring of oneself against shared ideals raises the question of what happens at the affectual level of an individual when the ideals are not properly met. Therefore, my aim in this article is to extend the understanding of religious agency as a mode of self-reflexivity by examining the normalizing power of shame within an individual’s relationship with God.

2 Material and Methods

The autobiographical letters are part of a larger body of material gathered in 2001 and 2004 for a research project on Finnish shame and religiosity conducted by the Theological Faculty of the University of Eastern Finland. The material was collected by using two different kinds of semi-structured calls for autobiographical texts on shame, religiosity, intimate relationships, and sexuality. The calls resulted in 146 letters, which specifically focused on shameful sexuality and religiosity. Of these texts, 125 were written by women. Although men’s accounts on shame are interesting, given the focus of my article on women’s religious agency, I will concentrate on the letters written by women.

I understand the autobiographical letters as confessions of the self. In a letter, an individual forms a reflexive relationship to herself, and represents her life and herself in a unique way by making use of existing discourses and cultural representations of, for example, selfhood, gender, and sexuality. By writing an autobiographical letter, an individual aims at confessing the truth of herself (see Foucault 1981). However, these confessional acts are always situationally conditioned: a letter addressed to the theological research project entails a specific form of self-representation that is grounded in the intersectional relations of power (for example, the age and gender of the writer or the cultural representations of the Church and of God) within which the act of writing takes place.

Moreover, writing an autobiographical letter can be seen as an act through which an individual becomes a subject. Confessions of the self are always connected to the mechanisms of normalizing power. For example, in the case of narratives of shame an individual confesses herself as opposed to what is regarded as normal sexuality. Writing about shame entails surrendering to crit-
ical measurements against prevailing cultural and religious ideals and norms. Respectively, these self-reflective narratives of shame can be seen as mirroring the cultural ideals inculcated in the individual.

Against this backdrop, my analysis does not aim to be exhaustive in regard to, for example, Finnish women’s experiences of shameful sexuality. Instead, it is meant to elucidate the mechanisms through which an individual’s relationship with God produces subjectivity. I have selected specific extracts from the material, which I consider to be representative of the letters written by women. Through a close reading of these confessions of shameful sexuality, I aim to show how ‘normal’ in regard to gender, sexuality, and religiosity is constructed and maintained within the psychoreligious ethos and, especially, within an individual’s affectual relationship with God.

3 The Power of Shame before God

In recent years, the study of affect has increased across the social sciences and humanities. Especially within feminist and queer studies, ‘the affectual turn’ has entailed a subtle analysis of the relations between the social and the subjective (Koivunen 2010: 9; Wetherell 2012: 2–3). For example, Sara Ahmed (2004: 10–12, 191–196; 2010) has argued that emotions ‘do’ more than ‘are’; an emotion is not the possession of an individual, but an effect of circulation of signs and objects. According to her, emotions work as a performative system: affectual intensities, social structures, and identities are produced through repetitive contacts between subjects. These contacts both repeat and are shaped by a history of associations: reading God as all-loving, for example, the subject is filled with self-approval. It is through these affectual contacts that we become invested in social norms. Thus, affects are the effects of power that produce and normalize subjectivity.

This perspective differs from the characteristic of feminist theologies that the God image is seen as an object of resistance and contestation. In a Feuerbachian manner, many feminist theologians have treated Christianity’s God as a reflection and, hence, a guarantor of patriarchal ideals. The androcentric and patriarchal God has been seen as working against women’s religious subjectivity by denying, for example, the full humanity of women (Armour 2011: 373–374; Althaus-Reid & Isherwood 2007: 81–82).

In accordance with Foucault’s work aimed at analysing how the individual’s experience (like sexuality) is entwined with knowledge (like psychiatry) and power (like therapeutic practices) (Davidson 2001: 31), an individual’s relationship with God—as well as her experience of shameful sexuality—can be
seen as a product of historically specific fields of knowledge and power. Moreover, an individual's relationship with God produces subjectivity through 'affec-tual practices' (Wetherell 2012: 13–14) consisting of feelings, thoughts, cultural narratives, personal histories, interactive and interpretative repertoires, bodily activities as well as theological narratives of God, namely doctrinal systems. We feel our way to God, and, respectively, we come to feel and comprehend ourselves in a specific way.

The emotion of shame plays a central role in this process of subjectification, as it is closely connected with identity and identification. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003: 36–37) points out that the proto-form of the shame affect appears very early in infants and that this early form of shame plays a crucial role in the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child and the caregiver. According to Sedgwick, shame is a disrupting moment in this identity-constituting communication, making it the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop.

For Sedgwick, as for many other queer theorists, shame has played a special role in queer identity politics. It has been seen as a grounding emotional experience of all non-normative identities, and thus a point of connection between those who have been forced to the margins. This shared shame has been seen as a subversive power. For example, Sally R. Munt (2008: 4) claims that ‘horizontal bonds formed through communities of shame can be transmuted into collective desires to claim a political presence and a legitimate self’.

Sedgwick and Munt focus on non-heterosexual identities, and therefore they understand shame as a dynamic that primarily forms the boundary between the normative and the non-normative. Hence, shame is seen as having power only to the extent that it points towards failures and deviations from the heteronormative sexuality, leaving the normative itself intact and unproblem-a-tized. This kind of understanding of shame underlies and shapes our wider understanding of power, subjectivity, and sexuality. For example, many insti-gations to social change (for example, the Gay Pride Movement) are based on the idea that shame works by repressing the autonomous and ahistorical sexual subject. From the secular perspective of the social sciences, religious traditions, too, are often seen through a similar logic of repressive power in regard to women and non-heterosexuality (Herzog and Braude 2009: 2).

Although shame plays a focal part in the process through which normative is separated from non-normative, the shame/pride dichotomy itself—by enforcing the ideal of normative—prevents a perception of the multiplicity within all clearly defined identities, be it sexual, gendered, or religious identity (Halperin and Traub 2009: 3–11). In addition to this, the shame/pride dichotomy is firmly linked with the subordination/subversion dichotomy in that it understands
power only in terms of repression and liberation. As for religious subjectivity and agency, it has led to blindness regarding the multiplicity of lived experiences, personal commitments, and negotiations of identity, as well as the religious inheritance of those assumed to be normative or subordinated (Mahmood 2005).

Moreover, the political strategy to stress the collective experiences of shame prevents a clear understanding of the mechanisms through which the normative is constructed at the level of subjectivity. As Amanda Holmes (2015: 415–416) notes, shame can function as a basis of politics, but by doing so we fail to see the highly isolating nature of the experience of shame. In a similar manner, Ahmed (2004: 106–107) has argued that being shamed is the price we have to pay when we fail to live according to the normative ideals.

Fundamentally, at the level of an individual, shame is bound with the question of social existence and recognition in that it highlights the conditions under which an individual is recognized as ‘normal’. One can even argue that gendered and sexual performatives always happen at the risk of shame. According to Judith Butler (1997: 28–29), ‘The subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced, but that repetition establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate the norm “the right way”, one becomes subject to further sanction, one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened.’

From the Foucauldian and queer theoretical perspective, the power of shame is not so much about repressing but producing subjectivity. As an intense affectual moment, shame has the power to reify social structures and forms of subjectivity (see Ahmed 2004: 11–12). As such, shame is an effect of normalizing power that inculcates and maintains the cultural ideals within the individual and, simultaneously, governs the way in which the norms are further reinstated by the individual. Moreover, all clear-cut categories of identity can be seen as sustained and regulated by shame. Shame and self-doubt wake up in us when we fail to repeat the norms properly. The risk of shame pervades the whole of our social relationships—our relationship with God included.

4 The False Self and the Authentic Self

To make visible the mechanisms by which subjectivity is produced within the therapeutic ethos, one must look more closely at the affectual practices associated with it. Analysis of lived experiences of shame is of special importance in this regard. By looking at what the informants aspire to, are ashamed of, or see as undesirable, an understanding of the subjectifying aspect of the psychoreligious ethos can be achieved. Different ‘psy’ discourses run through the
letters of informants born approximately between the 1940s and 1960s. For them, therapeutic ideals of acknowledging and processing one’s feelings and early childhood experiences (see Furedi 2004: 28–29), for example, form the very ground from which their mode of self-reflexivity arises.

Now I understand that I have grown to depend on people who are not capable of loving their lives. My parents’ way of surviving was to raise and bind me by shaming me and by laying a guilt trip on me, and by threatening to abandon me. They used religion and the Word of God as a means of oppression and by doing this they caused a lot of harm.

Mervi, b. 1956

For most of the women of Mervi’s generation, the need to write about shame resides in their past. Mervi, for example, sees that her suffering has resulted from her parents’ incapability to genuinely love her. At the same time, however, she seems to think that they could not do anything but to raise her by shaming. It was ‘[t]heir way of surviving’ in a situation where they were unable to love themselves and, thus, others. Many of the informants see their childhood lacking a sense of love and reciprocal communication as the starting point for their difficulties in later life.

Father’s sins are visited on the children—this is a chain I would like to break. My parents were poorly parented and they, in turn, parented me poorly. It was impossible to discuss about things. It was impossible to feel and to express one’s true emotions and hopes. There was only one truth that was handed to us by our parents. The Word of God justified this truth and, thus, it was unquestionable. There was no true forgiveness. That is why I had to learn to forgive. It has been a long process that has touched the deepest parts of myself. It is not easy to forgive yourself. But only after I can forgive myself, I can forgive others for the wrong things they have done to me.

Kerttu, b. 1943

For both Mervi and Kerttu, childhood appears as a period of inauthentic and false being justified with the ‘Word of God’ that needs to be processed in order to find one’s true self. In Kerttu’s account, for example, the incapability to feel and to express authentic emotions and hopes are seen almost as a curse that she wants to get rid of. In order to achieve this and forgive his parents, she has started a process of self-reflection that has ‘touched the deepest parts’ of self. In both of the accounts above, inauthentic being is seen as the result of oppres-
sive circumstances justified with the Word of God. Respectively, becoming an authentic self requires denouncing the moral and religious ideals of the past.

Mervi’s and Kerttu’s accounts illustrate the unique mode of subjectivity the therapeutic turn gives rise to. Both of the informants present themselves as liberated from the shame of the past they are writing about. Thus, their aim is to give an account of the process of becoming an authentic self. On a closer look, however, it seems that their mode of subjectivity is inseparably connected to the troubling relationship between the traditional communal ethos, or the hermeneutics of sin, of their childhood and the ideals of the therapeutic ethos. It is the very incompatibility between the two ethoses that gives rise to their autobiographies. More importantly, managing the tension between the two ethoses results in a mode of subjectivity which is based on a dichotomy between ‘the false self’ and ‘the authentic self’, the former being an unhoped-for result of shaming and the misuse of religion. In turn, a capability to love one’s life and the authenticity and freedom of the self are seen as ideals which are to be pursued in one’s present life. It is the desire for freedom from subservience that defines the mode of subjectivity for these women. For them, freedom means the capability to find and to express one’s true feelings.

Thus, the self formed within the therapeutic ethos should not be seen merely as a liberated self. Instead, as it is presented within the extracts above, subjectivity should be seen as a process of becoming grounded in a dynamic relationship between the two conflicting moral realms. Being an authentic woman requires denouncing and disengaging from the norms of the previous generation. It is this very process of disengaging that forms the core of the self. As a consequence, the oppressive ideals of the past world are as central for the mode of subjectivity as the individualizing ideals of the therapeutic era. Moreover, the shame these women are writing about focuses on a certain part of their subjectivity. What is at odds with the ‘normal’ of the therapeutic ethos is their past, which is seen in terms of compliance to the oppressive cultural norms.

Although the ideal self is understood as independent, authentic, and emotionally genuine, it is the tension between the two conflicting life-horizons that initially forms the basis for subjectivity. As a result, subjectivity takes the form of a constant process of self-reflection and self-actualization.

This might sound unbelievable, because nowadays young people know so much more about sexuality and relationships, but it was not until I was thirty years old when I finally got loose of the grip of my mother and the other believers. I realized that it is neither my mother nor the pastors that can tell me what God sees as sinful or what kind of people God accepts. I also realized that sexuality is a basic need for us humans and for that
reason it is okay to satisfy sexual needs like any other needs. I concluded that even if my mother did not approve of me, God loves me as a sexual woman.

Eveliina, b. late 1940s

In Eveliina's account, the false/authentic dichotomy is applied to religion and religiosity. Eveliina sees priests—a symbol of institutional religion—as representing the same oppressive power relations as her mother. The same reasoning was already present in Mervi's and Kerttu's quotes. For them the 'Word of God' is foregrounded as a means of oppression and a legitimizer of oppressive power relations. This understanding is contrasted with the authentic emotional life, which manifests as 'true forgiveness', and the capability to love unconditionally.

Within the sociological analyses of religion, challenging traditional religious authorities and the turn to the self are usually associated with modernity and the different factors linked with it, such as the rise of universal democracy and capitalism (see Woodhead 2002: 9–10). From a Foucauldian standpoint, however, the dichotomy reveals the tension and the friction through which individuals pursue normality. Individuals do not just integrate the new truths of the self offered by 'the modern world'. Quite the opposite. New models of thought problematize one's habitual understanding of the self, leading to a reappraisal of the self. Occasionally, as in Eveliina's case, this process can result in a new way of being in the world and before God.

Ole Jacob Madsen (2014: 48–50) has argued that seeing God as a cosmic therapist entails a form of Christianity which provides people with a connection to the transcendental to only a limited degree. According to him, 'a great deal of contemporary religion can be understood as a worship of the Self as God' (50). Madsen (2014: 55–56, 63) sees that in spite of its seemingly liberating message, the psychoreligious ethos is 'a self-centred prison' that does not offer any possibilities for shared experiences or collective action.

The therapeutic ethos has definitely changed the social structure in regard to shared moral agency. However, Eveliina's account implies that there may be more going on than just a worship of self as God. The informants understand the therapeutic God as an antithesis to the patriarchal God that maintains an oppressive gender division by, for example, shaming and laying a guilt trip on womanhood and women's sexuality. At the same time, Eveliina's letter illustrates how recent scientific knowledge delineating sexuality as a basic human need is connected with the self-understanding of an individual. Sexuality, womanhood, and a relationship with a therapeutic God come to be linked together in a metonymic manner, as they all refer to individuality and authenticity. Hence, pursuing true womanhood also means simultaneously pursuing
authentic sexuality. Finally, this pursuit is endorsed by the therapeutic God. These interconnected elements entail an understanding of the intimate relationship with God being the most authentic form of religiosity. Thus it can be argued that it is not about worshipping the self, but about worshipping a God that is seen as wholly approving.

5 Shame, Self-Domination and Religious Agency

The false/authentic dichotomy as a mode of subjectivity is highly interesting in regard to the issues of religious agency and, especially, the central paradox concerning it, namely, the subordination/subversion dichotomy. These two dichotomies are parallel in that they place autonomy and freedom of the subject as desirable. Thus, the false/authentic dichotomy has to be submitted to the same critical scrutiny as the subordination/subversion dichotomy by asking, for example, how gender, sexuality, and religiosity are performed and constructed within the normative expectation of authenticity (see Avishai 2008: 412–413) and how shame works within this normalizing process.

According to Mahmood (2005: 10, 14–17), the normativity of the autonomy of the subject within feminist theories stems from the dual character of the feminist tradition, namely, the tension between feminism’s analytical and politically prescriptive dimensions. Mahmood aims to discharge this tension by focusing on the historically and culturally specific nature of agency. She opposes seeing agency merely through the notion of humanist desire for autonomy, since it narrows the scope on different modes of human action. Instead, she sees agency as a subject’s capacity to action which is produced through the contingent relations of power and knowledge. Hence, Mahmood argues that ‘the meaning and the sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity’ (14–15). It is these locational and historical ‘modes of being’ or ‘modes of ethical formation’ which Mahmood analyses more closely by looking at the variety of ways in which religious norms are inhabited and experienced by the members of the piety movement of Egyptian women. Thus, Mahmood focuses more on the ‘doing of religious subjectivity’ than on the ways in which women subvert their religious tradition or use it for extra-religious ends, such as economic opportunities (see Avishai 2008: 411–413).

While being widely read, Mahmood’s work has also been criticized. Many of the critiques stem from a desire to retain autonomy for the subject. For example, Elizabeth M. Bucar (2010: 666, 669, 673) points out that while it attempts
to correct the common emphasis on resistance to religious norms, Mahmood’s conception of agency cannot account for individual creativity and criticism. Bucar argues that seeing religious agency in Foucauldian terms obscures free subjects, since it insists that ‘agency develops out of concrete structures of discourse’ (669). In a similar manner, Aitemad Muhanna (2015: 17–19) reads Mahmood’s ‘politics of piety’ as referring to the subjective, submissive, and unpolar aspect of religious agency. Although I think this line of critique overlooks Mahmood’s theoretical premises (see especially Mahmood 2005: 27–31), it nonetheless hits the mark that Mahmood is not explicit enough about questions of freedom of the religious subjects.

Moreover, although Mahmood points out that ethics—referring to Foucault’s idea of the technologies of the self through which a subject constitutes herself as a certain kind of being—is a modality of power which is not outside the cultural mechanisms of subjectification, the linkage between the larger arrangements of normalizing power and knowledge and the subject’s self-formation is left largely unanalysed (see Mahmood 2005: 28–31). As a consequence, religious agency, understood as the ethical formation of the subject, appears to Mahmood solely as what she calls ‘positive ethics’—that is, as the subject’s capacity to treat authorized models of religious behaviour as a ‘ground through which the self is realized’ (Mahmood 2005: 31). As much as I agree with Mahmood’s insight that Foucault’s ideas are helpful in conceptualizing agency ‘beyond the confines of the binary model’ (Mahmood 2005: 29), I see her understanding of the technologies of the self in relation to the individual’s freedom and power as unfocused and, consequently, leading to an uncritical stance towards the multiplicity of the religious norms which individuals inhabit.

Therefore, the analysis of religious agency would gain from a more precise understanding of what Foucault meant by the individual’s self-domination. According to Foucault, the technologies of the self are cultural patterns, which are imposed and proposed on an individual by his culture, his society, or his social group. The individual, then, acts according to or by critically subverting these patterns in order to constitute himself as a subject. Foucault pointed out that self-practices can be seen as an individual’s attempt to give ‘one’s own life a certain form in which one could recognize oneself’ and ‘be recognized by others’ (Foucault 1997: 223–225; Oksala 2005: 157–165; see also Foucault 1987: 11; Foucault 1988).

By focusing on the subject’s self-domination, Foucault’s aim was to analyse how subjects enter into a certain game of truth. Foucault understood subject not as a substance, but rather as a form that changes every time an individual establishes a relationship with herself (Foucault 1988: 252–253). According to
Foucault, self-domination demands the subject to be free by default. However, the problem with freedom is that people are rarely conscious of alternative ways to form a relationship with themselves—in other words, to make use of their freedom—and, consequently, people are forced to understand themselves according to the lines of normalizing power (Foucault 1987: 3–5; Alhannen 2007: 158). It is this particular aspect of normalizing power and freedom that Mahmood largely ignores in her analysis of the modes of subjectification.

However, the analysis of freedom and normalizing power can gain from seeing affectual practices as a focal part of the technologies of the self. The authors of the letters aim to establish and maintain a personal relationship with God. This relationship is always at risk of rupturing, however. It is the shame experienced before God that points to the contours of the possible, imaginable, and liveable for the subject. Thus, analysing the mechanisms of shame means analysing religious agency at the level of subjectification without fixing the meaning of agency in advance. More importantly, it is about analysing the historically specific relationship between the individual's experience of herself and the social conditions producing that experience in the first place. In this regard, and contrary to Mahmood's reading, the analysis of shame is not 'positive ethics', since it aims to reveal the mechanisms through which an individual is directed towards the normal within her relationship with God. Keeping this in mind, I will now return to the autobiographical material and analyse it more closely from the vantage point of shame and religious agency.

6 Precarious Agency before an All-Loving God

As mentioned earlier, an individual's relationship with an all-loving God can function as an empowering and liberating force. At the same time, however, many of the informants write about shameful sexuality in a manner that implies that an all-loving God does not only liberate but also sets limits to subjectivity.

Luckily, I feel myself as a good mother in spite of everything that has happened. Thank God, my (now adult) sons are ‘normal’ in regard to sexuality. They are also more reasonable than their father was in their age. [...] My husband was a ‘sex maniac’. During our first matrimonial year he strayed for the first time. It was a bombshell for a family girl like me. I prayed to God for strength a number of times. This way I could achieve a peace
of mind. [...] My husband led me to explore the many forms of sexuality. Because I was young, I even enjoyed the golden showers and being whipped.

Alli, b. 1952

Like most of the women of this particular generation, Alli sees God as empowering and supporting. Nevertheless, her passivity and refusal to escape from the unsatisfying situation is striking in contrast to the previous extracts. Instead of supporting Alli to become empowered—for example, by encouraging Alli to divorce her husband—God gives her strength to endure, therefore maintaining and normalizing her role as a wife and a mother. Thus, in her affective relationship with the therapeutic God, Alli is supported and recognized as normal only within a strict framing, central to which are the ideals of monogamous heterosexuality, nuclear family, and motherhood.

Dana Becker (2005: 111–118) has argued that motherhood and mothering have been strongly valorized as vehicles of women's empowerment by the psychoanalytically orientated second-wave feminists from the 1970s on. Consequently, according to her, womanhood has been firmly linked with traits like relationality, reproduction, and nurturing. Thus, it can be argued that the therapeutic ideal of motherhood has a metonymic relationship with ideals surrounding a balanced marital life and normal childhood development, for example. At the same time, however, sexual subjectivity is also constructed along the same ideals. For example, Alli sees her sexual explorations as shameful and not as a part of her true self, but merely a result of her young age and ignorance. 'Abnormal' forms of pleasure were, thus, just a passing phase, or a mistake which had nothing to do with her real self.

A couple of times, I have fallen for men that remind me of my ex-partners (who were really good-looking 'ladies men'). These relationships may have increased my self-esteem for a moment, but they also resulted in a bad conscience. It is like my heart is being ripped out of my chest when I think that my children will lose their place in heaven because of their mother's gross indecency.

Jenna, b. 1948

In Jenna's account, extramarital affairs are understood as threatening the salvation of the whole family. For both Alli and Jenna, shame and self-doubt stem from the cultural ideals regarding the nature of gender difference and female sexuality. According to Eva Moskowitz (2001: 94), different ‘psy’ discourses have strengthened the idea of gender difference even further by claiming that, for
example, women have different priorities in marital relationships than men, with key feminine characteristics being ‘kind’, ‘cooperative’, and ‘charitable’. Alli’s and Jenna’s relationships with God are tied to these intersecting discourses of gender, psyche, and identity, resulting in a specific mode of being in the world.

Just like Mahmood’s women informants within the Egyptian piety movement, the authors of the letters are also aspiring after a certain telos, a desirable objective or a mode of being, through their self-practices. Within the psychoreligious realm, this telos means acquiring an authentic sense of self. The image of an all-loving God functions as a support and guarantor of this aspiration. However, God empowers women only to a certain extent. The normalizing power of God works silently by limiting women’s possibilities and capabilities to imagine themselves as otherwise than culturally expected. The mode of subjectivity for my informants emerges from the norms they have inhabited and from the practices they direct towards themselves. In other words, these practices are the form they give to their freedom; freedom acquires its form through the embodied norms of the therapeutic ethos. The individual’s desire to be recognized as normal is bound to the larger cultural arrangement of knowledge concerning motherhood, family, gender, and sexuality, as well as affectual practices of normalizing power. Thus, everything is not possible, desirable, or even imaginable to these women. Shame, as an effect of normalizing power, marks off certain modes of being as shameful and abnormal. As a consequence, shameful desires and pleasures form an abject-like part of the self, which an individual can act on or think of only through a kind of ‘precarious agency’. Shame denotes a part of the self which is both irremovable and a threat to one’s social existence.

As Mahmood has argued, by concentrating on the way women embody and live the authorized norms, one can conceive of religious agency as something outside the subordination/subversion dichotomy. This does not, however, mean that different modes of religious agency and self-practices are beyond the scope of critique. As is evident in the accounts of Alli and Jenna, for example, within self-practices there are always traps and snares that render individuals—depending on, for example, their social location and gender—subservient to normalizing domination. However, the critique of normalizing power cannot begin by assuming an autonomous subject. Instead, it has to proceed from an analysis of the different modes of self-practices in regard to normalizing power. Hence, the analytical dimension of feminist theorizing has to come before the politically prescriptive dimension in regard to religious agency. Only after an analysis of how agency is constructed through self-practices can the political aims be further defined.
Moreover, it can be argued that the subordination/subversion dichotomy—as well as the shame/pride dichotomy which often accompanies it—is in itself a historically contingent framework for agency which is linked to the mechanisms of normalizing power and, in particular, to the process of psychologization of Western culture. Moskowitz (2001: 208–210) states that the women’s movement is highly indebted to the therapeutic ethos in that therapeutic ideals such as fulfillment, personal experience, and the authenticity of identity have been used as central tools to resist women’s oppression and patriarchal society. The same therapeutic ideals have obviously shaped the understanding of religious agency, too. A good example of this is the feminist theologies’ aim to debunk the androcentric God, which is grounded in a conflict between patriarchal religion and (true) female identity.

At the level of individual experience, the historicity of this logic is best illustrated by contrasting the letters cited above with the letters written by older women born before the Second World War:

My mother started to remind us girls about the importance of living with dignity. An old saying goes: you become a girl, you are a girl, but it is difficult to be a girl. This advice has meant a lot in my life. I have sometimes wondered if it has meant too much. But, in the end, it has probably been best to respect my parent’s advice.

Mia, b. 1929

Nowadays, even children are raised to be openly sexual. But what will people answer to God? God knows all these things and will not leave us punished. [...] My family raised me to be a moral person. I was told that I should not sleep with a man before marriage, and I have remained pure by being one man’s woman.

Hellevi, b. 1926

It is almost impossible to find the ideal of the autonomous subject from Mia’s and Hellevi’s accounts. On the contrary, they see communal and religiously justified norms—a hermeneutics of sin—as a normal and a natural way of life. Instead of trying to liberate themselves, these women aim to safeguard themselves, for example, with the help of their parents’ advice.

Before the therapeutic ethos bloomed, the mode of subjectivity was produced along a different line of reasoning. The most important change has occurred in what Foucault (1985: 27) called the mode of subjection, that is, in the way or the degree to ‘which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognises himself as obliged to put it into practice’. It is living the norm
thoroughly that counts as honourable, rather than liberating oneself from it. However, seeing female sexuality as something to be guarded and suppressed leads to a mode of agency that can expose women to sexual abuse, for example.

I woke up in the middle of the night because I felt someone on top of me. He said, 'Do not be afraid. This is not anything bad.' ‘What is that stone,’ I asked. ‘It is not a stone,’ he replied. And he did that thing I did not know anything about back then. These matters were never talked about at home.

Liisa-Maria, b. 1932

Liisa-Maria’s account is yet another example of the traps and snares which can be hidden within the inhabited and lived religious norms. Prior to the therapeutic turn, the inhabited religious norms put women into a passive and subordinate position in the gender order. From the perspective of the therapeutic ethos, this arrangement of power is seen as an object of resistance, epitomized perfectly in the subordination/subversion dichotomy. However, while highlighting the importance of authenticity and fulfilment of the self, the psychoreligious ethos is impervious to its own hidden traps and snares, which become concrete in the form of precarious agency, in particular. Moreover, the analysis and theorization of religious agency need to take into account these subtle and changing dynamics of subjectifying power. It means focusing on the hierarchies, localities, and positions produced through repetitive affectual practices and on the effect they have on the individual’s capacity to act. Individuals are in different positions in relation to normative discourses and, thus, they have varying capabilities to think and to act differently than expected. Therefore, the aim of more subtle analysis of modes of subjectivity and agency is not to liberate, but to offer new discourses and ideals, which can serve as a ground for new ways of understanding and using one’s freedom.

7 Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the ways in which the affect of shame works within an individual’s affiliation with God as a subjectifying effect of normalizing power. The above analysis of autobiographical letters suggests a few challenges to the study of both an individual’s relationship to God and religious agency. First, I have argued that an individual’s relationship with God should be understood as a historically contingent experience, which works, for example,
through affectual practices as a central node of normalizing power, producing religious subjectivity and agency.

Second, in connection with the above, the idea of religious agency as a historically contingent mode of self-reflexivity or as a capacity to action produced within authoritative religious discourses should be analysed in respect to the affectual practices as mechanisms of normalizing power. By focusing on the ways in which affects work as normalizing instruments of power, a more precise conception of the limits and capacities of religious agency can be achieved. Shame, in this regard, is of particular importance. As an emotion which arises when the self is exposed as imperfect or abnormal, it can point towards the boundaries of normality. Thus, as a mode of being which is imaginable and liveable for an individual, agency is always demarcated by shame.

Moreover, by restricting my analysis to the psychologization process of Western culture—and, in particular, on articulations of it by Finnish Lutheran Christian women—I have, first, aimed at clarifying the mechanisms through which the individual’s relationship with God works as a normalizing and subjectifying force and, second, pursued a better understanding of religious agency as a historically bound capacity to action. I have argued that the subordination/subversion dichotomy is firmly linked to the psychologization process of Western culture and is, thus, a product of normalizing power. This is why the nature of religious agency—as well as the individual’s freedom, according to Foucault—should be understood as formless and without direction or meaning.

From the vantage point of the normalizing power of shame, religious agency is primarily grounded in a desire to be recognizable and ‘normal’—not in an innate desire to be free. Shame produces a mode of self-reflexivity in which, for example, certain sexual desires or pleasures are experienced as abnormal, abject, and to be detached from the real self. These undesirable forms of being—as a kind of residue of normalizing power—can only be acted on or thought of through a mode of subjectivity I have called ‘precarious agency’.

What is seen as a desirable aim of religious agency, the telos, is always determined within a complex and changing dynamic of power and knowledge. Thus, analysis of the modes through which individuals understand themselves cannot offer directions for liberating political action. Instead, by showing the shifting nature of religious subjectivity and the meaning of religious agency, analysis of affectual practices within one’s relationship with God can open up new spaces for imagining and, hopefully, practising one’s freedom in unexpected ways. Thus, precarious agency can turn into a secure mode of being in the world.
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