

Fear, Guilt, and Shame Revisited: A Tertullian-Inspired Criterion for Contemporary Spiritual Life

Bogdan Andrei

University of Bucharest, Romania
bogdanandrei77@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This article examines whether fear, guilt, and shame, perceived today mainly as negative affects, retain genuine moral and spiritual value. Through a cultural and theological analysis of Scripture, early Christian authors, and, in particular, Tertullian—used here as an analytical instrument, rather than as a doctrinal norm—it shows that, in the Christianity of the first centuries, these affects were theologically reordered, not eliminated. From Tertullianic architecture, a discernment criterion was extracted: the affects became formative when, through faith, they took as their object the God who is revealed, and remained exposed to the risk of deviation when their object was otherwise. The criterion is then applied to contemporary phenomenology and proposed as a working hypothesis.

KEYWORDS: Fear, Guilt, Shame, Tertullian, Moral Theology, Religious Affects, Early Christianity, Theological Discernment

1. Introduction

Fear, guilt, and shame are treated together here because they are reactions to the same reality: sin, understood here, in keeping with 1 John 3:4, as a transgression of God's law. This shared reality manifests, however, in different socio-religious registers: fear before a power or presence that judges, guilt before a law or relationship that has been violated, shame before a community or an unrealized ideal of self. Precisely because these affects share a common root, we can trace them together without conflating them (Georges, 2014).

Today, fear, guilt, and shame are viewed almost exclusively as negative affects, linked to trauma, manipulation, and toxic forms of religion (Winell, 2011). Contemporary spiritual discourse increasingly favors the language of inner comfort and personal validation—what the sociology of religion has called, in the American context, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (Smith & Denton, 2005). This reaction has real grounds: religious history knows enough cases of abusive guilt induction and of fear used for control.

Fear, guilt, and shame persist concretely in the moral life of modern man, and despite every effort at eradication, they have only changed their object. Fear has taken on other faces, traditional moral law has been replaced by a normative code colloquially labeled "political correctness," and shame has been transferred into the culture of exposure. The mechanism has not been eliminated, only relocated. Thus, the concern for these affects is grounded in their persistence, and aims to ensure that, in rejecting them because of their excesses, we do not also lose the moral resources toward which they can direct us. This tension is not merely theoretical. A visible number of people sense the limits of a faith reduced to comfort and seek, beyond it, a moral seriousness that therapeutic discourse no longer seems able to offer. This is a phenomenon long documented in the sociology of religion: demanding communities, not permissive ones, retain and attract the strongest commitment (Iannaccone, 1994).

The question this article asks is: what is lost when fear, guilt, and shame are removed entirely from the Christian context? The thesis proposed is that these affects carry genuine moral value (Rotaru, 2024, pp. 301-318) when, through faith, they are referred to God as He has revealed Himself. Related to the human self, to society, and to culture, they do not automatically lose their relevance, but they are exposed to a major risk of deviation.

The discussion here is limited to the Christian context; nothing is claimed about other religious traditions, since the scope of this article does not allow for a responsible comparison. The article does not intend to recover punitive religion, but proposes a criterion of theological discernment between the risk of toxicity and the formative role of these affects.

The argument carries three explicit limitations. First, the approach is theological and cultural, not psychological. We do not contest psychology's role in clinically assessing these affects. The article's contribution follows the logic, proposed in another context, of the boundary between what science can describe and what morality can decide (Gould, 1999), with a view toward recovering these affects within man's relationship with God. Second, Tertullian of Carthage is used here as an analytical instrument, not as a doctrinal authority. This Latin writer is employed because he is the first to bind fear, guilt, and shame into a coherent system. It is not his harsh tone or his various radical opinions that are proposed for recovery, but the direction of resolution and the purposes he established. Third, the fact that this affective system functions coherently in Tertullian does not prove that it describes a universal structure of moral life; it remains a working hypothesis, open to further verification.

The article will trace, in the second section, the three affects in Scripture to justify keeping them within moral attention, and in the early Christian authors to demonstrate the continuity of their valuation in the first Christian centuries. The third section will set out Tertullian's contribution. The fourth section proposes a conditioned use of these affects, and enumerates the implications of this approach for spiritual life today. The concluding section summarizes the contribution and its limitations.

2. Fear, Guilt, and Shame in Scripture and Early Christianity

2.1. The Biblical Perspective on the Affects

Scripture does not eliminate fear, guilt, and shame; it reorders them theologically. In the biblical narrative, fear first appears as the reaction of a guilty conscience (Genesis 3:10)—an instinctive fear, without love, a symptom of rupture (Mathews, 1996, pp. 240–241). At Sinai, God offers Moses an inverted logic of fear: "Do not be afraid, for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin" (NRSVue, Exodus 20:20)—fear becomes a pedagogical instrument and a sign of God's presence (Sarna, 1991, p. 13). Fear, reinterpreted in light of the truth about God, leads to fearlessness (Psalm 27:1). In this sense, "the fear of the LORD" is described as "the beginning of knowledge" (NRSVue, Proverbs 1:7; Waltke, 2004, pp. 180–181). In the New Testament, fear grounds the communal Christian ethos, a continuation of its role in the Old Testament (Acts 2:43; Fitzmyer, 2008a, p. 271), and culminates in its ideal transfiguration through love: "perfect love casts out fear" (NRSVue, 1 John 4:18). Instinctive fear, tied to punishment, is absorbed into filial fear, that of the son who no longer fears the Father (Brown, 2008, p. 530; Smalley, 1984, p. 259). Yet *timor Dei*, more than an emotion may be understood as an act of eschatological recognition by faithful humanity (Revelation 14:7; Beale, 1999, p. 750).

In the Bible, guilt is not an abstract moral label, but a concrete deviation from a relationship (Tate, 1990, p. 16). The Hebrew term *ḥāṭā'* literally means "to miss the mark" (Psalm 51:4). The New Testament universalizes this reality, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (NRSVue, Romans 3:23)—guilt is no longer merely an individual deed, but humanity's state of estrangement from God (Fitzmyer, 2008b, p. 346). The financial metaphor of "debt" in the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:12) nevertheless preserves a solution: guilt

calls for reparation, but the reparation is offered in Christ (Ephesians 4:32), not merely claimed (Hagner, 1993, p. 115).

Shame, finally, shifts from social honor to eschatological faithfulness. In the Old Testament, the term *bôš* describes the disappointment of one who trusted and was left alone (Psalm 25:2–3; Craigie, 2002, pp. 218–219); in the New Testament, *aischynē* expresses the fear of being despised for Christ's sake (Mark 8:38; France, 2002, p. 341). But the Epistle to the Romans completely reverses the logic of Roman honor: "No one who believes in him will be put to shame" (NRSVue, Romans 10:11)—the only real shame is no longer social dishonor, but unfaithfulness (Fitzmyer, 2008b, p. 592).

2.2. Continuity in Early Christianity

Christian authors of the second century did not invent this affective language—they received it from Scripture and used it to form a communal conscience, each with his own emphasis. Clement of Rome (ca. 96/2002) places the abandonment of the fear of God at the origin of the disorder in Corinth and recommends that the young be taught it again (*1 Clem.* 3; ANF 1, p. 9). Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110/2002), on his way to martyrdom, sets fear and love in a dramatic choice: "let us either fear the wrath to come, or let us love the present joy in the life that now is" (*Epistle to the Ephesians*, chap. 11; ANF 1, pp. 90–91). The *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 100/2002) similarly regards the affects as "helpers of our faith" (*Barn.* 2.2; ANF 1, p. 212). Justin Martyr (ca. 155/2002) rejects irrational fear produced by idolatry in favor of a fear grounded in real divine judgment (*1 Apol.* 28; ANF 1, p. 265).

The picture that emerges is coherent but fragmentary: in each author, fear, guilt, and shame appear in turn as *ad hoc* responses to a concrete pastoral problem—communal disorder, the imminence of martyrdom, moral choice—rather than as an explicitly articulated system. The texts examined here suggest that neither Scripture nor the Apostolic Fathers treat fear, guilt, or shame as defects to be eliminated. They orient these affects constructively, treating them as moral and spiritual realities capable of shaping faithfulness and the relationship with God. What they lack is only the internal connection between them, formulated as such, as a system. This is exactly the step that Tertullian takes, and it is what justifies treating him separately, in the following section.

3. Tertullian: The Architecture of an Affective System

Tertullian inherits the fear of God, repentance, and holy shame from Scripture and from the Church's experience. His contribution, as noted in the Introduction, is the articulation of the three affects into a single system. The present section traces this architecture, not the disciplinary rigorism that accompanies it.

3.1. Fear: From Political Terror to Timor Dei

Tertullian's Carthage was governed by fear of the emperor: "you are more sincerely afraid and circumspect in your devotions to Caesar than to Olympian Jove" (*ap.* 28; Tertullian, ca. 197/1997, ANF 3, p. 41). Tertullian does not deny this fear, he relocates it. The only legitimate Lord of fear is God, not Caesar. His most architectural argument appears in the polemic against Marcion: if God were merely good, without judgment, He would no longer be a legitimate object of fear, but then He could no longer be loved seriously either, "But how are you going to love, without some fear that you do not love?" (*Marc.* I, 27; Tertullian, ca. 207/1997, ANF 3, p. 392). Fear and love do not exclude one another; they condition each other. This is why fear becomes, for Tertullian, "the *first* baptism of a learner is *this*, a perfect fear" (*paen.* 6; Tertullian, ca. 203/1997, ANF 3, p. 662), the point of entry into the whole of Christian life, not a threshold to be crossed.

3.2. *Guilt: From Sin to Restoration*

For Tertullian, sin is not a juridical error, but a betrayal of faithfulness: "that from which God bids us abstain is to be accounted sin" (*paen.* 3; Tertullian, ca. 203/1997, ANF 3, p. 658). It is the fear of God that makes guilt felt, not merely noted: without a God truly feared, sin remains a mere statistical error. Precisely because guilt is relational, not merely legal, it calls for an equally personal response: repentance. Tertullian describes a second repentance, difficult and harsh, through which a person saves what was lost (*paen.* 7; Tertullian, ca. 203/1997, ANF 3, p. 663), made concrete in *exomologesis*—a public, painful confession through which individual guilt once again becomes a communal fact (*paen.* 9; Tertullian, ca. 203/1997, ANF 3, p. 664). Guilt, in Tertullian, does not paralyze the conscience; it reactivates it.

3.3. *Shame: From Roman Dishonor to Confessed Faithfulness*

Roman culture treated shame as an irreversible loss of public honor. Tertullian completely reverses this calculation: "The only shame or regret he feels, is at not having been a Christian earlier" (*ap.* 1; Tertullian, ca. 197/1997, ANF 3, p. 18), and concerning the crucified Christ—the most dishonorable execution for a Roman—he writes, "we are neither ashamed of Christ" (*ap.* 21; Tertullian, ca. 197/1997, ANF 3, p. 34). Shame is not eliminated, but redirected: the only thing a Christian should be ashamed of is unfaithfulness, not public association with Christ. This reinterpreted shame becomes, for Tertullian, a sign of belonging to the community of the pure (*pud.* 13; Tertullian, ca. 213/1997, ANF 4, pp. 86–87), the final step of a process begun by fear and confronted by guilt.

Taken together, the three affects form a single economy, not a list: fear awakens the conscience and makes it capable of feeling guilt; guilt confronts the awakened conscience with the concrete deed and calls for repentance; shame, finally, structures the public, ecclesial response of the one awakened and confronted, transforming exposure into a testimony of faithfulness. It is this mechanism—not Tertullian's particular doctrinal content—that justifies using him as an analytical lens in this article. His specific harshness and disciplinary recommendations are products of his context and temperament, not of the affective architecture proposed here for reconsideration. The question that remains open—and which the following section addresses—is whether this mechanism can be recovered without the rigorism that historically accompanied it.

4. Actualizing Tertullian's Discernment

4.1. *The Criterion: The Revealed Object, the Channel of Faith, the Priority of Reference*

From Tertullian's work, one can extract a theological, not psychological, criterion of discernment: an affect—fear, guilt, shame—becomes formative when it takes as its object God as He has revealed Himself, and is brought, through faith, under the light of that revelation. Faith is the channel: it does not eliminate the affect, but moves it from a raw state into a discerned one, capable of transforming the conscience rather than paralyzing it. This does not mean that an affect toward a human, social, or institutional object is automatically negative: guilt over an injustice done to a friend, or shame before a legitimate authority, can be perfectly healthy. Still, the risk of toxicity is greater when the object is other than God. This is why the criterion proposed here is a priority of reference, not a rule of exclusion: a person relates first to God; from this primary reference, affects oriented toward people, groups, or institutions find, in turn, their correct measure, without it, they risk becoming the ultimate, and therefore idolatrous, court of conscience.

The correct object does not merely change the target of the affect, it automatically recalibrates its intensity and the way it is integrated into the conscience. This is why the perception of these affects as potentially toxic actually depends on three interrelated things:

the wrong object, the wrong intensity (either absent or excessive), and the wrong integration (either as paralysis or as denial). A person completely insensitive to guilt is a danger. Without shame, a person trivializes his own degradation. The absence of fear is the path toward accepting other fears. Modern man should not feel threatened by these affects so long as he does not stand before the wrong courts; it is correct reference that produces, as an effect, the right intensity and resolution, not the other way around.

This movement is the article's working hypothesis: the fact that it functions coherently in Tertullian does not demonstrate that it describes a universally human structure of moral life; we propose it here as an open hypothesis, verifiable through application, not as a closed thesis.

4.2. A Deeper Diagnosis: The Wrong Courts of Fear, Guilt, and Shame

Religious history offers numerous examples of the misuse of fear, guilt, and shame. Their instrumentalization, rather than a correct reference to God, has had negative spiritual effects (Delumeau, 1990). The contemporary reaction against these excesses is, therefore, well-founded; the problem is that, in fleeing the excesses, contemporary culture has not eliminated the affects, it has displaced them onto courts incapable of resolving them.

Fear is the clearest case. Contemporary man no longer fears God, but fears, with the same intensity, failure, irrelevance, exclusion, the loss of appearances, loneliness, and, ultimately, death. Guilt undergoes a double movement, more subtle than a simple relocation: in the register where it should matter most—the violation of divine law, responsibility before oneself—it has atrophied, while in the contested social-political register it has intensified, with the same affective intensity once felt before religious norms. Shame, in turn, is amplified by the culture of permanent exposure—social networks, continuous comparison, an identity built through the way we "perform" before an imagined audience—without the real loyalties that should have given shame a worthy object any longer mattering. Sociology, even before the internet, already called this mechanism impression management—the constant presentation of an image of the self before the gaze of the other (Goffman, 1959); digital culture has taken it to a scale that Tertullian, who fought the same logic in its Roman variant, would not have recognized as new, only as more efficient.

This analysis is not intended as a clinical diagnosis. Certain forms of these affects remain dysfunctional and require professional care, not theological correction. The criterion proposed here operates at the level of the affect's object, not of psychological health.

4.3. The Benefits of a Theological Revaluation of the Affects

If the criterion above is correct, the theological recovery of fear, guilt, and shame is not only possible, but brings a gain that exclusively therapeutic discourse can no longer offer, in at least four directions.

First, we would recover a spiritual lucidity that contemporary moral ambiguity has eroded: the capacity to call things what they are (Matthew 5:37). A conscience accustomed to blurring its own moral verdicts, in order to avoid the discomfort of fear, guilt, or shame, loses precisely the instrument it needs to discern correctly.

Second, we would rediscover moral gravity and the possibility of authentic repentance. Guilt felt correctly, before God, does not paralyze, it opens a real path of change; guilt that is avoided or reduced to emotional regulation leaves, in fact, nothing to change.

Third, we would rebuild authentic responsibility. Almost anything today can be explained through trauma, context, or vulnerability, sometimes rightly so, because these explanations are real and deserve to be taken seriously. But without assuming responsibility beyond explanation, the person, institution, or society that explains itself also loses the chance to mature.

Fourth, we would once again fix an ontological goal for the formation of character: the capacity to accept a perspective wider than one's own interest—altruism, conformity to the divine will, faithfulness as a trait of character, not merely as a passing sentiment.

Fear, guilt, and shame are uncomfortable, and the natural temptation is to consider them pathological and eliminate them from the vocabulary of spiritual life. But eliminating them has produced neither freedom, nor balance, nor the meaning they promised — only a conscience less equipped to recognize evil as evil. From the perspective of Scripture, lived out by the Apostolic Fathers and systematized by Tertullian, things are more realistic: fear becomes *timor Dei*, the awareness of divine greatness, which frees one from all other, smaller and more numerous fears; guilt, referred to a real law, becomes objective, and through the acceptance of grace finds the resources for its own justification, it does not destroy the person, but helps him understand the truth about himself; shame, finally, guards against degradation, instead of erasing it through denial.

4.4. *The Middle Way: Between Rigorism and Complacency*

What, then, are the practical implications of this recovery? Two paths remain clearly inadvisable. The first is a return to a form of religion, characterized by the instrumentalization of fear and abusive guilt induction. The second is more discreet and, for that reason, more dangerous: remaining in an illusory comfort zone, sustained by an "ostrich culture"—present alike in certain forms of humanist philosophy and of domesticated religion—which avoids the real assumption of the moral danger that fear, guilt, and shame correctly signal.

From a Christian theological perspective, the alternative proposed here is to anchor these affects in the belief that God is good and that man can bring to Him, for real resolution, exactly what weighs on him (Matthew 11:28–30). Scripture offers, for each of the three affects, a relational, not merely conceptual, response. Fear warns of man's real fragility; the answer is not the denial of fragility, but the assurance that God offers refuge (Psalm 91:1–2). Guilt holds up the mirror of failure and a debt that man cannot pay on his own; the answer is not the minimizing of the debt, but its payment by Christ (John 1:29). Shame whispers, in many voices, how inadequate, exposed, and incompetent man is; the answer is not the numbing of that voice, but the restoration of dignity in relationship with God (Isaiah 61:10).

Human beings may seek peace by fleeing from fear, guilt, and shame into the cultural comfort of conformity. This is not the solution proposed here, but rather their confrontation on the ground of faith (John 14:27). In the light of revealed truth, the three affects may become formative factors through which God makes His presence felt and offers, at the same time, peace and dignity.

5. Conclusions

In Christianity, according to Scripture and religious experience, fear, guilt, and shame are not neglected, but theologically reordered. Tertullian explicitly binds them into a single affective system, from which we have extracted a criterion of discernment: these affects become formative when, through faith, they are oriented toward God as He has revealed Himself, and remain exposed to a major risk of deviation when their object is otherwise, lacking the primary reference to God that would order them.

Fear, guilt, and shame, therefore, are not, by their nature, enemies of spiritual life, but may become, on the ground of faith, where God is present, formative elements and real resources of Christian identity, faithfulness, and morality. This claim must not be confused with a recommendation to cultivate sin so as to have, thereby, more guilt to put to use (Romans 6:1–2). The resource proposed here is not sin, but the correct reference of the affects. Their theological recovery does not call for a harsher religion, but a more serious one: capable of recognizing, once again, to whom they are owed and who resolves fear, guilt, and shame.

References

- Beale, G. K. (1999). *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary). Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.
- Brown, R. E. (2008). *The Epistles of John: Translated, with introduction, notes, and commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible). Yale University Press.
- Clement of Rome. (ca. 96/2002). *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (A. Roberts & J. Donaldson, Trans.). In P. Schaff (Ed.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Christian Classics Ethereal Library). <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.html> (Original work published ca. 96 CE).
- Craigie, P. C. (2002). *Psalms 1–50* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 19). Word, Incorporated.
- Delumeau, J. (1990). *Sin and fear: The emergence of a Western guilt culture, 13th–18th centuries* (E. Nicholson, Trans.). St. Martin's Press. (Original work published 1983).
- Epistle of Barnabas. (ca. 100/2002). (A. Roberts & J. Donaldson, Trans.). In P. Schaff (Ed.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (p. 210). Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.html> (Original work published ca. 100 CE)
- Fitzmyer, J. A. (2008a). *The Acts of the Apostles: A new translation with introduction and commentary*. Yale University Press.
- Fitzmyer, J. A. (2008b). *Romans: A new translation with introduction and commentary*. Yale University Press.
- France, R. T. (2002). *The Gospel of Mark: A commentary on the Greek text*. Paternoster Press.
- Georges, J. (2014). *The 3D gospel: Ministry in guilt, shame, and fear cultures* (Kindle ed.). Timē Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday.
- Gould, S. J. (1999). *Rocks of ages: Science and religion in the fullness of life*. Ballantine Books.
- Hagner, D. A. (1993). *Matthew 1–13* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33A). Word, Incorporated.
- Iannaccone, L. R. (1994). Why strict churches are strong. *American Journal of Sociology*, 99(5), 1180–1211.
- Ignatius of Antioch. (ca. 110/2002). *Epistle to the Ephesians* (A. Roberts & J. Donaldson, Trans.). In P. Schaff (Ed.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (p. 80). Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.html> (Original work published ca. 110 CE)
- Justin Martyr. (ca. 155/2002). *First Apology* (A. Roberts & J. Donaldson, Trans.). In P. Schaff (Ed.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (p. 247). Christian Classics Ethereal Library. (Original work published ca. 155 CE) <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.html>
- Mathews, K. A. (1996). *Genesis 1–11:26* (The New American Commentary, Vol. 1A). Broadman & Holman.
- New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition: Holy Bible. (2021). National Council of the Churches of Christ. (Original work published 1989).
- Rotaru, I.-Gh. (2024). Moral Values and Human Values: Support for Sustainable Societal Development. In Chivu, L., Ioan-Franc, V., Georgescu, G., De Los Ríos Carmenado, I., Andrei, J.V. (Eds.), *Europe in the New World Economy: Opportunities and Challenges* (pp. 301-318). *ESPERA 2023. Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71329-3_17
- Sarna, N. M. (1991). *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary). Jewish Publication Society.
- Smalley, S. S. (1984). *1, 2, 3 John* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 51). Word, Incorporated.
- Smith, C., & Denton, M. L. (2005). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. Oxford University Press.
- Tate, M. E. (1990). *Psalms 51–100* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 20). Word, Incorporated.
- Tertullian. (ca. 197–212/1997). *Apologeticum; Adversus Marcionem; De paenitentia; De pudicitia* (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, & A. C. Coxe, Trans.). In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the writings of the fathers down to A.D. 325* (Vols. 3–4). Logos Research Systems. (Original works published ca. 203–213 CE)
- Waltke, B. K. (2004). *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament). Eerdmans.
- Winell, M. (2011). Religious trauma syndrome (Series of 3 articles). *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today*, 39(2–4).