

The Long Silence

The Origins of Shunning in Western Civilization and Its Social-Emotional
Consequences for Individuals and Groups Today

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Sometime in the fifth century BCE, an Athenian citizen scratched a name onto a broken shard of pottery and dropped it into a roped enclosure in the agora. If six thousand of his fellow citizens did the same, the man named would leave Attica for ten years. He would not be flogged, fined, or killed. His property would remain his, his citizenship intact, his family unharmed. He would simply be absent or removed entirely from the city's conversation. Two and a half millennia later, a woman in Ontario is told by her congregation that she has been disfellowshipped. Her parents will not answer the telephone. Her siblings will pass her in a grocery aisle without turning their heads. Nothing has been done to her body. She has merely been removed from the conversation.

The distance between these two scenes is enormous, and this paper does not propose to collapse it. But the institutional logic that connects them is remarkably stable, and it deserves to be treated as a subject in its own right. Shunning, the deliberate, collectively coordinated withdrawal of social acknowledgment from a member of a community, is not a marginal cruelty that Western societies occasionally lapsed into. It is a governing technology that Western societies invented, refined, sacralized, exported, and repeatedly defended as the most humane instrument of correction available to them. Its persistence rests on a single, remarkably durable premise: that withholding is less harmful than striking, that silence is a lesser violence than the blow.

This paper argues that the history of shunning in the West is the history of that premise, and that the premise is empirically false. From the Athenian *ostrakophoria* through Roman interdiction from fire and water, from Pauline church discipline through medieval canon law and Benedictine anathema, from Calvin's consistory through the Anabaptist *Meidung* and its Amish inheritors, exclusion was adopted precisely because it appeared to be the merciful alternative to

bloodshed. Contemporary experimental and clinical research shows that this appearance is deceptive. Ostracism reliably and rapidly threatens four fundamental human needs, registers in the nervous system in ways that overlap with the processing of physical pain, provokes aggression rather than compliance, imposes measurable psychological costs on the people asked to carry it out, and, in its most totalizing familial and religious forms, produces long-term outcomes that resemble bereavement. The moral intuition that made shunning attractive to lawgivers, canonists, and reformers was an empirical claim about proportionality, and that claim does not survive contact with the evidence.

Two methodological caveats are necessary. First, the argument here is institutional rather than experiential: it does not assert that an ostracized Athenian aristocrat and a disfellowshipped Jehovah's Witness felt identical things, only that the mechanism their communities employed against them, coordinated, public, indefinite withdrawal of acknowledgment, is recognizably the same mechanism, and that it targets a stable structure of human social need. Second, the psychological literature invoked below is contemporary and cannot be run backward as evidence about the interior lives of medieval excommunicates. What it can do is explain why an institution with these features would be adopted so widely, why it would prove so difficult for communities to moderate, and why the historical record contains such persistent evidence of unintended consequences.

Exclusion as the Merciful Alternative: The Classical Inheritance

Athenian ostracism has attracted disproportionate scholarly attention relative to the number of times it was actually used, and for good reason: it is the clearest surviving case of a democracy building exclusion into its constitutional machinery. Sara Forsdyke's study of expulsion in ancient Greece situates ostracism within a much longer archaic history in which

exile was the standard weapon of aristocratic factional conflict: a weapon typically accompanied by confiscation, the destruction of houses, and killing.¹ Her central argument is that ostracism was not an anomaly or a paradox within the democracy but was central to its self-justification. By claiming for the *demos* the power that competing elite factions had previously exercised against one another, and by exercising that power in a bounded, procedurally regular, non-violent, and time-limited form, the Athenians turned exclusion into a demonstration of democratic moderation.²

The details of the institution reinforce the point. The ostracized man retained his property and his citizenship; the sentence ran for ten years and then expired; recall was possible; no charge was laid and no verdict rendered. Ostracism was, in short, engineered to be conspicuously less than the alternatives. Athens also possessed a harsher instrument, *atimia*, the loss of civic rights, which left its subject physically present in the city but civically annulled, a distinction worth noting, because it shows that Athenian practice already recognized a difference between removing a person and hollowing one out. Forsdyke's larger claim is that the representation of exile in Athenian literature and public discourse made expulsion into a term in a continuing argument about what kind of rule was best.³ Exclusion was not merely something the city did; it was something the city said about itself.

Rome arrived at a functionally similar instrument by a different route. Gordon Kelly's study of exile in the Roman Republic emphasizes that exile there was, in its classic form, not a

¹ Sara Forsdyke, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: The Politics of Expulsion in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Forsdyke, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy*.

³ Forsdyke, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy*.

penalty imposed by a court but a right exercised by a citizen: a defendant facing capital proceedings could withdraw from Roman territory before judgment, after which the assembly would enact a decree of *aquae et ignis interdictio*, interdiction from fire and water, barring his return and, in effect, converting his self-removal into permanence.⁴ The Roman citizen's celebrated protection from execution was therefore purchased with total and irreversible removal from the community. Here again the moral logic is explicit: the state does not kill; it simply ceases to include.

Two features established in the classical world recur throughout the rest of this history. The first is the justification: exclusion is legitimate because it is the alternative to violence. The second is the form: exclusion is public, procedurally staged, and collectively ratified. The Athenian assembly voted; the Roman *concilium plebis* decreed. It is this collective and coordinated quality that distinguishes shunning from ordinary interpersonal rejection; the shunned person is not avoided by someone, but by everyone, simultaneously and in concert, and, as the psychological literature discussed below indicates, it is precisely this feature that makes the experience so difficult to metabolize.

From Civic Boundary to Cosmic Sentence: The Sacralization of Exclusion

Christian church discipline did not emerge from nothing. Göran Forkman's comparative study of expulsion within the Qumran sect, rabbinic Judaism, and primitive Christianity remains the foundational demonstration that the earliest Christian communities inherited a repertoire of exclusionary practices already well developed in Second Temple Judaism, including graduated

⁴ Gordon P. Kelly, *A History of Exile in the Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

penalties, temporary separation from communal meals, and permanent expulsion.⁵ The decisive early Christian text is 1 Corinthians 5, in which Paul instructs the congregation not to associate with a sexually immoral member, to “put away from among yourselves that wicked person,” and to hand him over to Satan. Gerald Harris reads the passage as the beginning of a system of social control within the early church, arguing that scholarship’s traditional theological framing had obscured the sociological function of the sanction.⁶ The efficacy of the instruction depended entirely on the small, dense, high-commitment character of the Corinthian community: withdrawal of association is a trivial penalty in a large and loosely bound society and a devastating one in a group that supplies most of a person’s social world. That relationship, between a community’s density and the destructive power of its exclusion, is the single most important variable in everything that follows.

Over the following millennium, canon lawyers converted a congregational practice into a juridical institution with enforceable consequences in the secular world. Elisabeth Vodola’s study of medieval excommunication traces the development of the doctrine’s legal architecture: the distinction between major and minor excommunication, the disabilities imposed on the excommunicate, exclusion from the sacraments, from ecclesiastical office, and from the right to bring suit, and the corresponding obligation on the faithful to avoid ordinary social contact with him.⁷ What is most instructive for the present argument, however, is that the medieval church

⁵ Göran Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community: Expulsion from the Religious Community within the Qumran Sect, within Rabbinic Judaism, and within Primitive Christianity* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1972).

⁶ Gerald Harris, “The Beginnings of Church Discipline: 1 Corinthians 5,” *New Testament Studies* 37, no. 1 (1991): 1–21.

⁷ Elisabeth Vodola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

found this system unworkable in its rigorous form and had to build in brakes. The canonical category of the *tolerates*, the excommunicate whom the faithful were permitted to associate with, as distinct from the *vitandus*, who must be shunned, exists because comprehensive avoidance imposed intolerable costs not only on its target but on everyone obliged to enforce it.⁸ Shunning, left to its own logic, escalates; institutions that use it must invest continuous effort in limiting it.

Exclusion in this period was also ritual, and the ritual mattered. Lester Little's study of Benedictine maledictions reconstructs the liturgical *clamour* and formal cursing employed by monastic communities in France between roughly 990 and 1250, chiefly against knights and local notables who encroached on monastic property.⁹ These were staged performances, the humiliation of relics, the tolling of bells, formal maledictions pronounced before the assembled community, and their power derived from their publicity. The community did not merely learn that someone had been cut off; it participated in the cutting off. Anathema made the whole congregation a party to the act.

The same instrument developed in parallel within European Jewish communities as the *herem*. Steven Nadler's reconstruction of the ban pronounced against Baruch Spinoza by the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish congregation in July 1656 illustrates both the severity the instrument could reach; the text of that ban is exceptionally harsh, and unlike most contemporaneous bans, it was never rescinded, and its social function within a diaspora community whose authority over its members was entirely voluntary.¹⁰ This points to a pattern

⁸ Vodola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages*.

⁹ Lester K. Little, *Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

that becomes decisive in the following century: the less coercive power a community holds over its members, the more heavily it relies on exclusion. A state that can imprison does not need to shun. A congregation that can do nothing but withdraw belonging will make withdrawal of belonging carry the entire weight of its discipline.

Voluntary Communities and the Intensified Ban

The Reformation shattered the assumption that religious belonging was coextensive with civic membership, and in doing so it made exclusion more important rather than less. In Geneva, the Consistory established under Calvin's influence subjected the population to systematic moral oversight, with suspension from the Lord's Supper as its characteristic sanction. Scott Manetsch's study of Geneva's Company of Pastors from 1536 to 1609 documents the ministers' understanding of discipline as an aspect of pastoral care rather than mere punishment: the aim was the offender's restoration, and reconciliation was the intended terminus of the process.¹¹ This dual character, punitive means directed toward restorative ends, is not a Genevan peculiarity. It is the standard moral grammar of shunning, and it is what makes the practice legible to its practitioners as an act of love. Every community examined in this paper has described its exclusion in these terms.

The Anabaptist tradition carried the instrument furthest. The Schleithem Articles of 1527 placed the ban among the marks of the true church, and the Dordrecht Confession of 1632 codified strict avoidance of the banned.¹² Menno Simons, in a tract on church discipline written

¹¹ Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹² Karl Koop, ed., *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition, 1527–1660* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006).

in 1541, insisted that the excommunicated were to be shunned without respect of persons, parent or child, sibling or spouse; no relation exempted.¹³ This is the decisive innovation. Classical ostracism removed a man from the political community while leaving his household intact; Roman interdiction removed him from Roman soil but not from his family, who might follow. Menno's formulation drew the boundary of the community straight through the household, requiring spouses, parents, and children to impose the sanction on one another. Total exclusion becomes possible only when the family is enlisted as an instrument of the church.

That the practice was contested from within is itself evidence of how difficult it was to sustain. The Amish emerged from a schism fought explicitly over the question. Between 1693 and 1700, the Swiss Anabaptist elder Jakob Ammann pressed for literal enforcement of *Meidung* against the more moderate position associated with Hans Reist, and when his opponents would not agree, Ammann excommunicated them: bishops, ministers, and congregations alike. John D. Roth's edition of the surviving correspondence assembles the documents of the division and shows how quickly the dispute over the terms of exclusion consumed the community arguing over them.¹⁴ A practice justified as the guarantor of unity produced the most serious schism in South German Anabaptist history.

Contemporary Amish practice preserves the logic in recognizable form. Donald Kraybill, Karen Johnson-Weiner, and Steven Nolt describe *Bann* and *Meidung* as a form of community-wide corrective love, expressed in concrete refusals: the shunned member eats at a separate table,

¹³ Menno Simons, "A Kind Admonition on Church Discipline" (1541), in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496–1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956).

¹⁴ John D. Roth, ed. and trans., *Letters of the Amish Division: A Sourcebook* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1993).

is not transacted with in business, and does not accept gifts or rides from others.¹⁵ What is theologically striking about the Amish account, and analytically important here, is its candor. The sanction is designed to be felt. It is expected to hurt, and the hurt is the mechanism by which the erring member is expected to return. In this, the Amish are not outliers; they are simply saying plainly what Athens, Rome, Corinth, and Geneva all assumed. Shunning works when it generates suffering in a person whom the community intends to keep.

Secular Inheritors: Shunning Without a Church

The disappearance of formal ecclesiastical discipline from most of Western public life did not retire the technology; it redistributed it. The clearest contemporary institutional analogue is the workplace. Jane O'Reilly, Sandra Robinson, Jennifer Berdahl, and Sara Banki compared ostracism and harassment across three field studies and found that ostracism at work was both more prevalent than harassment and more strongly associated with turnover, diminished sense of belonging, and health problems; despite being judged by observers as the less harmful of the two.¹⁶ The finding is worth pausing on because it reproduces, at the level of individual moral intuition, exactly the error this paper traces at the level of institutions. People believe that being ignored is gentler than being attacked. It is not, and the belief that it is grants exclusion a moral licence that overt aggression does not enjoy.

Networked communication has extended the reach of coordinated withdrawal without changing its structure, and the resulting public argument has generated more heat than evidence.

¹⁵ Donald B. Kraybill, Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, and Steven M. Nolt, *The Amish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Jane O'Reilly, Sandra L. Robinson, Jennifer L. Berdahl, and Sara Banki, "Is Negative Attention Better Than No Attention? The Comparative Effects of Ostracism and Harassment at Work," *Organization Science* 26, no. 3 (2015): 774–93.

Pippa Norris's survey of some 2,500 political scientists across more than a hundred countries offers a rare empirical basis for the question. She concludes that so-called cancel culture is not simply a rhetorical myth; a measurable minority of respondents report self-censorship and pressure on academic freedom, while also finding that perceptions of a chilling climate are strongly patterned by respondents' own ideological position and generational location.¹⁷ Her sample is a professional elite rather than a general population, and the finding should not be generalized past it. For present purposes, the important observation is structural rather than partisan. Digital platforms make the two constitutive features of historical shunning, coordination and publicity, cheap, fast, and available to groups that possess no formal authority whatsoever. The *ostrakophoria* required an assembly; anathema required a liturgy. Neither is required now.

Formal religious shunning also persists, and it has become the best-documented contemporary case because its boundaries are unusually clear. Rosie Luther's qualitative interview study of former Jehovah's Witnesses reports long-term detrimental effects on mental health, employment prospects, and life satisfaction, with recurring accounts of loneliness, loss of control, and worthlessness; the sample is small, and the findings are best read as depth rather than prevalence.¹⁸ Heather Ransom and colleagues, surveying 554 former Witnesses on identity transition and recovery, found that experiencing ostracism predicted diminished psychological well-being; and, counterintuitively, that those who left voluntarily reported more ostracism than those who were formally disfellowshipped, suggesting the sanction operates well beyond its

¹⁷ Pippa Norris, "Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?," *Political Studies* 71, no. 1 (2023): 145–74.

¹⁸ Rosie Luther, "What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah's Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning," *Pastoral Psychology* 72, no. 1 (2023): 105–20.

official pronouncement.¹⁹ The same research team's companion study is titled, with precision rather than rhetoric, "Grieving the Living: The Social Death of Former Jehovah's Witnesses," a phrase that names the phenomenon this paper has been tracking from Athens forward.²⁰

Shunning ends the social person while the biological person continues.

What Shunning Does

The contemporary experimental literature on ostracism converges on a model developed principally by Kipling Williams. On this account, ostracism threatens four fundamental human needs, belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence, and does so in stages: an immediate reflexive stage of pain and need-threat that occurs almost regardless of circumstance, a reflective stage in which the person appraises the episode and attempts to cope, and, under prolonged exposure, a stage of resignation characterized by alienation, depression, helplessness, and a sense of unworthiness.²¹ Williams and Steve Nida's review situates the empirical findings within this temporal framework and emphasizes the striking insensitivity of the initial response to moderating variables.²²

The evidence for that insensitivity is unusually strong. In the Cyberball paradigm, participants play a simple online ball-tossing game in which the other players stop throwing to

¹⁹ Heather J. Ransom, Rebecca L. Monk, Adam Qureshi, and Derek Heim, "Life after Social Death: Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, Identity Transition and Recovery," *Pastoral Psychology* 70, no. 1 (2021): 53–69.

²⁰ Heather J. Ransom, Rebecca L. Monk, and Derek Heim, "Grieving the Living: The Social Death of Former Jehovah's Witnesses," *Journal of Religion and Health* 61, no. 3 (2022): 2458–80.

²¹ Kipling D. Williams, "Ostracism: The Kiss of Social Death," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 1, no. 1 (2007): 236–47.

²² Kipling D. Williams and Steve A. Nida, "Ostracism: Consequences and Coping," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20, no. 2 (2011): 71–75.

them. Lisa Zadro, Williams, and Rick Richardson demonstrated that ostracism in this task reduced self-reported belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence, even when participants were explicitly told that the other players were computer-generated.²³ Being excluded by an entity one knows is not a person, in a game with nothing at stake, is sufficient. A meta-analysis by Chris Hartgerink, Ilja van Beest, Jelte Wicherts, and Williams synthesized 120 Cyberball studies with nearly twelve thousand participants and reported an average effect exceeding $d = 1.4$, very large by the standards of social science, which generalized across the number of players, the duration of the episode, the participants' gender, age, and country, and the type of outcome measured.²⁴ Whatever else is true of ostracism, it is not a phenomenon that requires the excluder to be a factor.

There is also evidence that exclusion is processed in ways that overlap with physical injury. Naomi Eisenberger, Matthew Lieberman, and Williams found that dorsal anterior cingulate activity during social exclusion correlated with participants' self-reported distress, in a pattern paralleling the neural response to physical pain.²⁵ The interpretation warrants caution: the region in question participates in many processes, and the strong reading that social and physical pain are neurally identical outruns the data. But the weaker and better-supported claim is sufficient for the present argument: the folk distinction between wounds and withdrawals, on

²³ Lisa Zadro, Kipling D. Williams, and Rick Richardson, "How Low Can You Go? Ostracism by a Computer Is Sufficient to Lower Self-Reported Levels of Belonging, Control, Self-Esteem, and Meaningful Existence," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 40, no. 4 (2004): 560–67.

²⁴ Chris H. J. Hartgerink, Ilja van Beest, Jelte M. Wicherts, and Kipling D. Williams, "The Ordinal Effects of Ostracism: A Meta-Analysis of 120 Cyberball Studies," *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 5 (2015): e0127002.

²⁵ Naomi I. Eisenberger, Matthew D. Lieberman, and Kipling D. Williams, "Does Rejection Hurt? An fMRI Study of Social Exclusion," *Science* 302, no. 5643 (2003): 290–92.

which the entire moral case for shunning has rested since Cleisthenes, does not correspond to a clean distinction in how the two are registered.

Nor does exclusion reliably produce the compliance it is designed to produce. Jean Twenge, Roy Baumeister, Dianne Tice, and Tanja Stucke found that experimentally induced social exclusion increased aggressive behaviours on average: not only toward those who had done the excluding but toward neutral third parties who had given no offence. Notably, excluded participants were not more aggressive toward someone who had praised them, which suggests the effect is blunted by an intervening signal of acceptance.²⁶ For a practice whose stated purpose is the restoration of order and the recovery of the offender, this is still a serious result: the sanction can generate precisely the antisocial behaviour it means to suppress, and it does so most readily in the absence of any countervailing acceptance, which is exactly the condition that comprehensive shunning is designed to create. Finally, where shunning succeeds in producing sustained isolation, as the intensive religious and familial forms are designed to do, the long-term stakes are not merely emotional. Julianne Holt-Lunstad and colleagues' meta-analytic review found that social isolation and loneliness are associated with a roughly 26-32% increase in mortality risk, placing them alongside better-known behavioural risk factors in the epidemiological literature.²⁷

²⁶ Jean M. Twenge, Roy F. Baumeister, Dianne M. Tice, and Tanja S. Stucke, "If You Can't Join Them, Beat Them: Effects of Social Exclusion on Aggressive Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 6 (2001): 1058–69.

²⁷ Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, Mark Baker, Tyler Harris, and David Stephenson, "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10, no. 2 (2015): 227–37.

The Costs to Those Who Shun

An account of shunning that attends only to its targets misses half of what the historical record shows. Nicole Legate, Cody DeHaan, Netta Weinstein, and Richard Ryan assigned participants to ostracize another person in a Cyberball task and found that those who complied reported diminished satisfaction of their own needs for autonomy and relatedness, along with reduced positive affect.²⁸ Being instructed to exclude is itself psychologically costly, even in a laboratory game between strangers, and even when the instruction comes from a legitimate authority. Extrapolating from a laboratory paradigm to a lifetime of enforced avoidance within a family requires care, but the direction of the finding is corroborated historically by the very evidence of institutional strain surveyed above. The canonical invention of the *toleratus* and the schism of 1693 both record communities discovering that comprehensive avoidance is extremely difficult to ask of people who must live alongside those they are avoiding.

Why, then, does the practice recur so persistently? Robert Kurzban and Mark Leary's functional account argues that human systems of stigmatization and exclusion serve identifiable group-level purposes, avoiding contagion, disengaging from unreliable cooperative partners, and managing exploitation between groups, and that the readiness to exclude therefore arrives already equipped with a sense of justification.²⁹ Margaret Gruter and Roger Masters, framing ostracism as a phenomenon with both social and biological dimensions observable across

²⁸ Nicole Legate, Cody R. DeHaan, Netta Weinstein, and Richard M. Ryan, "Hurting You Hurts Me Too: The Psychological Costs of Complying with Ostracism," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 4 (2013): 583–88.

²⁹ Robert Kurzban and Mark R. Leary, "Evolutionary Origins of Stigmatization: The Functions of Social Exclusion," *Psychological Bulletin* 127, no. 2 (2001): 187–208.

species, made a similar case for its deep roots.³⁰ These accounts explain the recurrence without excusing the institution: they suggest that exclusion is an available and easily moralized response, which is precisely why the historical work of building limits around it (the *toleratus*, the ten-year term, the possibility of recall) has been so consistently necessary.

The group-level ledger is genuinely mixed, and honesty requires saying so. Shunning does deliver real goods to the communities that practise it. It resolves ambiguity about who belongs, communicates norms vividly and cheaply, and protects a group's distinctiveness in a surrounding culture that would otherwise dissolve it, which is why high-commitment minority communities have relied on it most heavily. But the same instrument suppresses internal dissent, deprives the group of the correction that dissent supplies, and, as Ammann's division demonstrates, is fully capable of turning on the community that wields it. The costs of exclusion are not confined to the excluded.

Conclusion

The West did not stumble into shunning. It built the practice deliberately, repeatedly, and with what its builders understood to be the best of motives: as the merciful alternative to killing in Athens and Rome, as the loving correction of the erring in Corinth, Geneva, and Dordrecht, and as the necessary boundary of the voluntary community in Amsterdam, Alsace, and eventually Lancaster County. Every one of these justifications contains the same embedded empirical claim: that withholding acknowledgment is proportionately less harmful than inflicting injury, and that a sanction which spares the body is therefore a moderate one.

³⁰ Margaret Gruter and Roger D. Masters, "Ostracism as a Social and Biological Phenomenon: An Introduction," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 7, nos. 3–4 (1986): 149–58.

The contemporary evidence does not impugn the sincerity of that claim, but it does refute it. Coordinated exclusion threatens fundamental psychological needs immediately and almost unconditionally, with effect sizes that dwarf most findings in social psychology; it is registered in ways that overlap with the processing of physical pain; it frequently produces aggression rather than the contrition it seeks; it damages those who are conscripted to carry it out; and, in its total familial forms, it generates outcomes that its own subjects and the researchers who study them describe in the vocabulary of death and grief. The instrument chosen because it seemed gentle is, in the respects that can be measured, not gentle at all, and its apparent gentleness is precisely what has allowed it to escape the scrutiny that overt violence attracts.

None of this establishes that every form of social withdrawal is illegitimate. A person leaving an abusive relationship, a community protecting a vulnerable member from someone who has harmed them, an individual declining a relationship that damages them: these involve distance, but they are not what the historical institutions surveyed here were built to do. The analytic value of the history lies exactly in this distinction. What Athens, the canonists, Menno Simons, and Jakob Ammann constructed was something narrower and more specific: a coordinated, public, indefinite, collectively enforced withdrawal of acknowledgment, imposed by a community on one of its own and, at its most developed, extending into the household. That instrument has been in continuous use in the West for two and a half thousand years, and it has always been defended on the grounds that it is the kind thing to do. The historical and empirical records now agree that this defence has never been examined as carefully as its consequences deserve.

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