



Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials

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The Depth of Shame

On April 15, 2013, two pressure-cooker bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon. The tragedy and ensuing manhunt for the Tsarnaev brothers fueled a media frenzy. As the media dug into the bombers' background, they interviewed people whose lives intersected with the Tsarnaevs. Their American friends and classmates expressed mostly disbelief and sorrow about the tragedy. Meanwhile, their Chechen uncle lashed out at them, outraged over the social repercussions. Listen to his words: "You put a shame on our entire family – the Tsarnaev family. And you put a shame on the entire Chechen ethnicity. . . . Everyone now puts that shame on the entire ethnicity." When the Boston Marathon bombing occurred, we suspect most Americans did not think all Chechens are shameful, yet that was the Chechen uncle's primary response. He interpreted the event as fundamentally shame inducing. Americans grieved the loss of safety, but the Chechen uncle feared the shameful actions of two members would infect the whole group.

The testimony of international Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias reveals the powerful force of shame in many cultures. As a young boy in India, he lived to play cricket but was a jokester at school. This conflicted with cultural values. Zacharias explains, "Indian children are raised to live with books and get to the top of the class, or else face failure and shame." His subpar report cards from school reflected poorly on his parents, and led to humiliating thrashings from his father. As a teenager Zacharias made a halfhearted commitment at an evangelistic rally, but his life of failure at school continued to haunt him. He decided to end his life to escape the shame. At age seventeen Zacharias reasoned to himself, "A quiet exit will save my family from further shame." Zacharias's attempt to end his own life was motivated by shame, not depression. His family's reputation was more important than his own life. (His attempt to overdose on drugs was unsuccessful, and he eventually recommitted his life to Christ while recovering in the hospital.) When social reputation is the basic foundation of life and identity, people's pursuit of respect, honor and status frames every facet of life.

In 2014 a group of militant Muslims overtook regions of war-torn Syria and declared themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – ISIS. Interestingly, they interpreted those political events as the liberation from disgrace and restoration of status. Note the honor-shame language in their propaganda magazine:

Soon, by Allah's permission, a day will come when the Muslim will walk everywhere *as a master, having honor, being revered, with his head raised high and his dignity preserved*

The time has come for those generations that were drowning in *oceans of disgrace*, being nursed on the *milk of humiliation*, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the *darkness of neglect* – the time has come for them to *rise*. The time has come for [the Muslim world] to wake up from its sleep, remove the *garments of dishonor*, and shake off the *dust of humiliation and disgrace*, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and *the dawn of honor has emerged anew*.

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“Georges and Baker have taken the seeds of previous work on honor and shame in the environment of the biblical world and in modern cultures and cultivated them into fruitful insights and guidance in the areas of theology, crosscultural engagement and, especially, missions. They provide a culturally sensitive reading of Scripture and of modern non-Western situations, significantly advancing the question of how awareness of this dimension of the texts and our global community can improve our interactions with people living from a decidedly different axis of values and in our thinking about the contextualization of the gospel.”

— **David A. deSilva**, Ashland Theological Seminary, Trustees’ Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Greek

As morbid and evil as the ISIS ideology is, it reflects an inescapable reality – humans crave honor and abhor shame. The desire for honor and glory cannot be dismissed as a byproduct of sin or some cultural abnormality, but an innate part of being human, somehow rooted in God’s creation. God created every human in his image, and “crowned them with glory and honor” (Ps 8:5). According to recent scientific research, the pursuit of honor and avoidance of shame appears hardwired into the human brain. The limbic system within our brain senses social threats (e.g., shame) the same way as physical threats. Both types of imminent danger trigger the same self-preservation instincts and share a common neural basis in the brain. The human brain, and soul, was designed for honor. C. S. Lewis notes,

Glory, as Christianity teaches me to hope for it, turns out to satisfy my original desire and indeed to reveal an element in that desire which I had not noticed. . . . Apparently, then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation.

Though designed to experience God’s true glory, our honor was exchanged for shame in the Garden of Eden. As a result, humans crave honor and grasp for it in warped and destructive ways, apart from God’s original design.

In World War II the American military faced an unprecedented problem. For the first time a Western nation was warring with a modern military not from the Western cultural tradition. So in June 1944, the US Office of War Information assigned the American anthropologist Ruth Benedict to investigate and explain Japan’s “exceedingly different habits of acting and thinking.” Benedict had gained renown for her ability to explain worldviews. To help Westerners understand the anomalies of Japanese culture, Benedict highlighted the unique role of honor and shame. She explained the basic cultural difference as follows: “Shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin.” With Benedict’s analysis, American policy in Japan during the war and subsequent occupation accounted for the realities of shame. In the same vein, contemporary scholars in a variety of fields – diplomacy, crime, ethics, psychology, community development, politics and social reform – now recognize that honor and shame must be considered before developing practices and policies for catalyzing social change.

Despite heightened attention to honor and shame among social scientists, honor and shame play a negligible role among Christian theologians and missionaries. As the US Office of War did during World War II, those involved in global mission would also do well to examine honor and shame at a cultural level. In this book we turn, however, not just to anthropology for insight, but to the Bible itself. Just as Westerners fail to adequately observe cultural underpinnings of honor and shame in today’s world, Western Christians also often overlook the prominent role of honor and shame in the Bible, though it comes from an honor-shame context.

— Taken from chapter one, “A World of Shame”

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