

Shame and Honor: Biblical Understandings and Islamic Cultural Reflections

by Cristian Dumitrescu

East and West have long been used as symbols of different cultural and religious perspectives. Christianity, associated with the West, would like to communicate its tenets to the Islamic world. But is Christianity prepared to speak in intelligible terms to people in a different culture? What are the unspoken epistemological assumptions that lay behind language and behavior? What process does a Muslim have to pass through in order to become a Christian? What are

the implications of such radical change for a Muslim? These are only a few of the questions that need to be answered if the gospel is to become relevant to people raised or living in a Mediterranean Muslim culture.

Cultural Differences between East and West

Western societies have become obsessed with guilt and justice. Western Christians read the biblical account through their cultural glasses and Western biblical scholarship has built a whole theological interpretation of Scripture that frequently misses the intent of the original writers as well as the historical and cultural background of the writing. Basic values of Islamic cultures, such as shame and honor, are almost unknown in the West or have a different meaning. Shame is translated as embarrassment and honor is equated with pride. Yet shame and honor have different connotations that are similar to meanings in the biblical text.



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Missionaries try to convince Muslims to become Christians using a guilt-based approach. Frequently Muslims are puzzled by such a twisted reading of the Scriptures that otherwise sound so familiar to them. This may partially explain why Christianity is not very successful in Muslim cultures. Muslim behavior is not defined in terms of guilt, but it is judged by whether it brings honor or shame to the family, country, or Islam.

In order to become a Christian, a Muslim has traditionally been required to adopt a new lifestyle that is foreign to the local culture or mentality. When converted, Muslims find it difficult to adapt to the new value system which is so distant from their own. There is no question about their seriousness or sincerity. However, in the world of Islam, cultural and family ties are stronger than the ones offered by the new religion, and the end result is often a return to the family religion.

Surveying the causes for shame in Muslim societies, Elmer states that

to become a Christian is to shame the family and the Islamic religion. The shamed family tries to restore honor and face by excommunicating the Christian convert and treating the person as though he/she were dead or never existed. If the family wishes to restore itself from extreme shame, it may physically punish the departed member, sometimes threatening or even taking the person's life (1993, 55).

The same values of shame and honor that are important to

most Muslims also permeate the Bible, since it too was written in the Mediterranean milieu. But in order to be able to read the Bible from such a perspective, one has to understand the social context implied in the text and by the various themes, motifs, and characters associated with biblical stories. Reading Scripture from such a perspective could provide opportunities to communicate Christianity to Muslims.

Definitions

Shame and honor are complex concepts that require a detailed and careful explanation. They form the basis for behavior in societies where external factors play an important role. Shame, the response to the disapproval of others who define morality and ethics, is expressed by the feeling of anxiety, embarrassment, or fear for what others may say or see. It is a personal concern for repute and also for the public recognition of it. Public opinion exerts pressure on the individual, but also recognizes the reputation earned as a consequence of measuring up to expectations.

Shame and honor play on the same continuum, shamelessness being dishonorable. Peristiany (1966) considers that a person of good repute has both shame and honor, while a person of evil repute is credited with neither (42). However, there is a difference between "being shamed," which is always negative, and "having shame," which means to be concerned about one's honor.

For Pitt-Rivers (1977), honor matches shame as the value of a person in one's own eyes, but also in the eyes of society. It is an indicator of a person's worth, a basis for pride acknowledged by society. Honor is the greatest form of wealth, even more valuable than money. It implies an expected mode of conduct that unconditionally requires a certain treatment in return. Pride becomes the right to status, and status is marked by the recognition of a certain social identity (1).

Public opinion plays a fundamental role in the dynamics of honor and shame. Even the presence of an affronted person is highly relevant to one's honor.

Islamic cultures, prestige has to do with wealth, numbers of men, and numbers of sheep. On the other hand, honor has to do with integrity, nobility of spirit and body. A man is honorable when he meets certain exacting standards of manliness and maintains his own reputation or his women. Honor is also intimately related to wealth (95-96).

Psychologists describe shame as a very heavy feeling. Smedes (1993) considers that shame appears when "we do not measure up and maybe never will measure up to the sorts of persons we are meant to be. The feeling, when we are conscious of it, gives us a vague disgust with our-

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Strange as it seems, a statement offensive if said to the person's face may not bring dishonor if said behind the person's back. Pitt-Rivers considers that the offense "is not the action in itself but the act of obliging the offended one to witness it" (5). A person's honor depends on how an action is interpreted. Certain actions have a clear agreed meaning, while others are interpreted according to the nuances or interplay of the manners (6-7).

Trying to define honor, J. Davis (1977) delineates the difference between prestige and honor. In

oneselves, which in turn feels like a hunk of lead on our hearts" (5).

In the same line, Fossum and Mason (1989) describe shame as

an inner sense of being completely diminished or insufficient as a person. It is the self, judging the self. A moment of shame may be humiliation so painful or an indignity so profound that one feels one has been robbed of her or his dignity or exposed as basically inadequate, bad, or worthy of rejection. A pervasive sense of shame is the ongoing premise that one is fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid as a human being (5).

Elmer points to the fact that guilt is the equivalent of shame in cultures where internal factors shape behavior and lifestyle. Guilt becomes self-condemnation for violating our acquired definition of right and wrong (2002, 173). Thomas believes that, on the other hand, “guilt is a feeling and/or a condition occurring when one has broken or not kept a divine or human law, while shame is a feeling and/or a condition stemming from a shortcoming in one’s state of being either before God or peers (1994, 288).

In comparing guilt to shame, Smedes considers that guilt is a more mature feeling, although vio-

litical events from a psychological perspective, they should not forget that “Western psychology is a monocultural science. It is so rooted in Western values as to be misleading and often useless for understanding other cultures.” When cultural psychology is employed instead, “it is so distinctly different that in this perspective one meets these ancestors in the faith again, as if for the first time” (1999, 13).

Collective Shame and Honor in Mediterranean Cultures

The Arab Muslim lives in a group-oriented context in which the emphasis is on hierarchical

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lating a personal value brings a painful feeling of regret and responsibility for one’s actions. Shame is an equally painful feeling about oneself as a person. It is a sense of unworthiness: we become unacceptable in our own eyes. Shame becomes a life-wearying heaviness. When Jesus invited the “weary and heavy laden” to trade their heaviness for His lightness, He had in mind such shame-burdened people (6).

Pilch warns that, while West-

erners are prone to analyze relationships. The most cherished cultural value is honor. No effort and care is spared in order to avoid shame. For a Muslim, life consists of the intricate dynamics that take place between honor and shame.

The Oxford Dictionary of Islam indicates that different Arabic words are used for honor (*sharaf, ird, ihtiram, izzah, namus*), which is expressed through the display of “owned land and resources, family solidarity, the chastity of women and the personal charac-

teristics of courage, generosity, hospitality, independence, wisdom, honesty, self-control,” and other character traits. Honor is part of a Muslim’s identity and considered a sign of God’s blessing.

As hospitality, honor means to accept to be someone’s guest. This brings satisfaction and honor to the one who invited. Abraham, Lot, and other Old Testament patriarchs, as well as Mohammed and other Muslim leaders, showed honor by inviting unknown travelers to their homes. Visiting and accepting invitations bring honor to both the host and the guest. Hospitality is shown primarily toward strangers. Pilch considers that hospitality “is to provide a stranger with safe passage through a region where he is suspected of up to no good simply because he is no kin to anyone or known to anyone” (1999, 50).

Basic to Middle Eastern societies is the bond between persons. Everything is related to the family. The extended family is the basic building block of Islamic societies with the status of the family measured by the concepts of honor and shame.

Honor comes from one’s lineage. Genealogy is very important when it comes to honor. In this context, age is considered to bring with it wisdom and honor. In Mediterranean cultures old age is in such high esteem that people often exaggerate their age. Hierarchical societies teach children to respect the wisdom of those family members who are older.

The aged are often asked for wisdom and advice in managing the household and relating to neighbors. Politeness and respect, shown especially towards the elderly, is a sign of honor. In cases where an unruly child needs to be disciplined, it is considered normal that any member of the older generation participate. Musk (1995) indicates that “a child’s learned role is to show exaggerated respect” (69).

Social groups claim a quota of collective honor that is shared with all members. If one member of the group commits a shameful act, the whole group is dishonored. According to the Spanish proverb: “Tell me whom you associate with and I will tell you who you are.” The size of the group does not matter when it comes to honor. This applies to both the family and the monarchy where a single person symbolizes the group whose collective honor is vested in that person.

In Mediterranean societies every person receives at birth a certain amount of honor deriving from the name and lineage, indicating the child is a part of the whole. In response, it becomes a duty to protect that “share” or quota of collective honor. On the other hand, Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers (1992) describe honor as belonging “*in solidum* to the family or the lineage as such and [being] transmitted from one generation to another as a legacy.” It works as a bank account being credited or depleted by individual members through their actions (151).

The different visible aspects of honor have their source in the non-visible realm. They relate to the two fundamental concepts between which the politics of honor are balanced: *blood* and *name*. The most fundamental function of honor is to create a bridge between the past and the future of a society, for “honor is the first visible expression of society’s awareness of itself in time and of its determination to become involved in history” (152).

The concept of collective honor is behind tensions between Kurds, Shiites, and

cause of shame. Honor is indicated by *sexual purity*. The foremost duty of a woman is to protect the honor of herself and her family from accusations or remarks regarding her sexual modesty. A Mediterranean family’s honor often rests with the females if the family or its lineage is unstable or if the family has no long-term economic interests. In Mediterranean cultures, the male’s role is to protect the females’ honor and sexual exclusiveness in order to maintain his own honor. Women are the most vulnerable point at which a

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Sunnis in Iraq today. It is very puzzling, however, to see how these tribal tensions disappear when the common territory has to be defended.

What Brings Honor in Islamic Societies

The domain of the forbidden (land, women) is the area in which honor is defended at any price.

Sexuality

Sexuality is a great cornerstone of honor and the likeliest

family’s honor can be challenged or even destroyed. Barth Campbell (1998) indicates that, strange as it may seem to a Westerner, “if one’s daughter or wife becomes immoral, the man publicly denounces her conduct to preserve his honor” (163).

Marriage is arranged by parents who look for a suitable partner for their child, but most important for someone with a good reputation and honor. Musk says that “in the honor/shame syndrome lays a strong motivation

for making success of a marriage. Personal human relationships, in Arab cultures, mostly begin with family honor and, hopefully, move on to mutual love” (81).

Matthews explains that

the object of marriage, beyond the economic considerations of the families who had arranged it, was to produce children who would inherit the parental property, care for them as they aged, and continue to make the offerings necessary to the ancestor cult (as cited in Ken Campbell, 2003, 16).

Jamous points to premarital virginity for girls as a point of honor. It reflects on the honor of the entire family. If proved, it is the sign of the successful seclusion of females by their male relatives (see the Song of Songs). If a woman is properly guarded, the men’s honor and family prestige are strengthened. Their obsession with honor leads to aggressive and violent behavior if honor is affected (as cited in Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1992, 168).

Land

Land is even more valuable than a wife. If an individual’s honor is threatened, the honor of the whole group is threatened. If family land is in jeopardy, the territory of kinship is affected. Land is the most sensitive issue in Mediterranean countries and is directly related to honor.

Each head of a household is considered a full member of the group if his land becomes part of the group’s property. Land brings honor to a man and “distinguishes

him from those who have no land and who are thus placed in the position of dependents” (Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1992, 169). This explains why most of Israelite marriages happened within the clan. In the year of Jubilee the land was supposed to return to its original owner.

The sons of the head of the household inherit the land. Thus they acquire the right to enter into the contest for honor. Until their father’s death, sons only act in behalf of their father, and only in his name. If they try to assert their own personal honor while their father is alive, they are considered irresponsible. Identity is irrevocably tied up with land in Middle Eastern cultures. The father in Luke 15 gives away his own life (economical, social, and personal) when he accepts his younger son’s request. The family inheritance is life for that family. Bailey translates the passage in Luke 12:2, “He divided his life between them” (1992, 120).

In 1 Kgs 21:1-16 the importance of land is clear. Naboth is more willing to die than to sell the land of his fathers, even to the king. The vineyard is the basis for Naboth’s status in society, his basis for honor. The king’s offer to purchase the vineyard offends Naboth and shames him: how could the king think he can sell the inheritance and his own honor with it? By refusing the deal, Naboth preserves his honor but the king is shamed. It is such a deep shame that Ahab wants to die. Jezebel,

the queen steps in and systematically destroys Naboth's honor by false accusations and deception, and finally orders his death. By taking over the vineyard, Ahab's honor is augmented.

To prove the ability to exercise authority over the domains of the forbidden, one is expected to follow a certain code of conduct in relationship to one's dependents. A man of honor must ensure that his wives are obedient and loyal. The same unquestioned obedience is expected from his sons. However, life demonstrates that conflicts arise between a father and his sons when

The head of the household is usually a relatively elderly man. His claim to honor derives from the fact that he is master over a forbidden domain. This position makes him responsible for his patrilineage and the other segmentary behavior of the group.

Responses to Shame

Restoring Honor

In a Mediterranean society, an offense is typically met with a response in defense of one's honor. When property or life is at stake, the loser or the shamed party

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the latter are no longer willing to wait for the proper moment to enter the contest for honor on their own behalf. Sometimes parental authority must be enforced in order to keep things under control and to prevent conflicts from being exposed (see Luke 15).

For a young man, the only acceptable form of honorable conduct is to serve his father with courage and intelligence. He must learn, in the company of his elders, how to master his words and harness impulsiveness.

must take revenge. Honor is cause for the exchange of violence, which, on the social plane, transcends and subsumes individual actions. This powerful motivation constantly drives individuals and groups toward confrontation, disowning, and even death.

The act of resentment is the benchmark of honor. Any affront, including physical ones, is a dishonor even if no moral issue is involved. The honor of an affronted person has been wiped out and requires "satisfaction" in

order to be restored. This restoration is achieved through a verbal self-humiliatory apology. If this is not issued, or not accepted by the offended party, avenging is in order. Pitt-Rivers (1977) considers that “to leave an affront unavenged is to leave one’s honor in a state of desecration and this is, therefore, equivalent to cowardice” (5).

Even where a polite society has outlawed physical violence, the traditional slap on the face is still considered as a challenge to settle an affair of honor. In Muslim cultures it is widely admitted that offenses to honor can only be settled through blood. The ultimate vindication for honor is brought by physical violence and, when other means fail, the obligation exists to use violence both in the formal code of honor and in societies that do not function primarily on such code (see Pitt-Rivers, 8).

Endless disputes between Palestinians and Jews, Iraqis and Kuwaitis, Kurds and Turks, are the direct result of an offended land-based honor. Westerners seem to have a hard time understanding that intruding into Arab land disputes infringes on their personal and national honor. Atrocious pictures of US citizens being dragged through streets and public places, or simply killed, are the horrendous results of shame that has to be avenged and an honor that needs to be restored.

Both words and actions are significant in Muslim societies because they assign or take away

honor. As a result, words and actions are carefully guarded and watched, especially when others are present. Honor is assigned only when expressed in the presence of witnesses or public opinion. Public knowledge is essential to the control of the extent of the damage. Paradoxically, a person can be dishonored even if the issue is not publicly known. The extent of the damage to reputation relates to the range of public awareness of the damage. However, it is difficult to restore or do justice without publicizing the dishonor. Public opinion becomes, therefore, a tribunal where claims to honor are judged and reputations are decided; against its pronouncements there is no appeal. For this reason it is said that public ridicule kills.

As a result, honor is continuously being won, lost, and regained, in an ongoing process. The peoples of the Middle East are marked by their desire to accumulate honor and avoid its erosion by shame.

“Saving Face”

Musk (1995) indicates that in Muslim cultures shame is a social phenomenon. It is equivalent to disgrace or humiliation. Preserving appearances is very important, often becoming one of the leading motivations in life. (81) Christians do not easily understand the seriousness of “saving face” for Muslims or Christian believers from a Muslim background.

In Mediterranean cultures, honor and shame have become

the mechanisms for social control. In a community-oriented society, “everyone knows everything about everyone.” Control is achieved by means of “gossip,” the public arm of the shaming mechanism, which uses innuendo, ambiguity, and conceit, while preserving the appearance of harmony and friendship on the outside.

Everyone in this type of culture minds everybody else’s business. Both personal and societal news are passed in the street. There are many public places, walking venues, and even squares for people-watching. Privacy or secrecy is almost impos-

the jurisdiction of the law. Sin is named by its name and guilt is assumed. Muslims, however, can tell you what you would like to hear, not being concerned of the truthfulness of the answer. They resort to outright lying or deception in order to protect your honor and save their own face at the same time. It is considered impolite and inappropriate to question an incident or a person’s integrity, for such an approach is viewed as a challenge to someone’s honor. The very act of questioning communicates that, for the sake of “honesty”, which is an impersonal

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sible to achieve. If in danger of being ashamed, one has to *save face*. A single shame experience may damage the whole self, as well as the extended family. *The Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* states that “gossip helps maintain group unity, morality, and history” (Rapport 2002, 266). Davis (1977) describes Mediterranean neighborhoods as “gossip-centers, run by women, deserted for the most of the day by men. It is in neighborhoods that reputations are made” (178).

For Western Christians, lying is a serious sin and falls under

ideal, relationships can be disregarded. Muslims consider that relationships sometimes demand a small “lie”. Although lying is not an approved behavior in Muslim cultures, there are many other subtle ways of letting the other person understand that you know what the case really is. If they really tell the truth, an oath accompanies what they are saying. Pilch explains that “a centuries-long standing Mediterranean conviction is that going to court is an admission of failure” (2002, 68).

As a result, “face” becomes the outward sign of honor that

is preserved even if the individual has to commit a dishonorable act. People do not blame themselves. They look for excuses or make up a story to prove their innocence. When it comes to saving somebody else's "face," lying becomes a duty. Musk (1995) indicates that "lying and cheating in many Mediterranean cultures are not primarily moral matters, but ways of safeguarding honor and status, and of avoiding shame" (75). The key concept is preserving the integrity of honor.

When we look through the lens of honor and shame, we truly see how local people perceive reality. We can then value what they value, understand how and why they act the way they do, and appreciate what really drives them.

Honor and Shame in the Bible

The above mentioned conclusions should cause us to ask for a re-evaluation of biblical accounts and stories according to the shame-honor paradigm. The Bible is usually read from the guilt-redemption perspective. Most of current theology and doctrines are also based on this motif. With a Semitic cultural background, the Old and the New Testaments reflect local cultural values. Uprightness of character, integrity, and piety are themes that appear frequently in Scripture. All these are related, not so much to a law or laws, but rather to the concept of honor and glory. Honor is the way of

living reflected by hard work, wealth, success, and generosity.

Honor in the Old Testament

The root word for honor (*kbd*) and its derivatives occurs 115 times in the Old Testament. Musk (1995) rightly asserts that "the Semitic culture of the OT times reflects the tensions of a society operating along equivalent lines" (89). Honor is carefully guarded and showcased, every violation of honor being perceived as "sin". Such a perception is basic to the Bible where many stories deal with the disgrace people suffered. Judah and Tamar in Gen 39, Tamar in 2 Sam 13:13, Job in Job 19:19, and the references to Jesus in Heb 12:2 and Acts 5:41 are only a few examples.

The first pages of the Old Testament record the story of creation and the fall of the human race. Adam and Eve primarily experience shame, not guilt. God's honor is questioned. In Genesis, shame is the only emotion that is discussed at length. Lewis (1992) considers that "shame behaviors, Adam and Eve's recognition of their own nakedness, their sense of exposure before God, and their attempt to hide their nakedness are central to the story" (85).

Adam and Eve moved from a state of unshameful nakedness (Gen. 2:25) to the realization of sin's impact on their nature: "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig

leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (3:7). Leaf coverings would not wash away shame, which proves to be more than a mere feeling; it is an objective state of defilement (3:10). Only God could offer coverings that would really provide a solution for shame. “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (3:21). If the skins covered the external aspects, shame could be covered only by means of sacrifice and blood.

Sin brought death to the created world. Death is considered the result of separation from God

ready shown, in a Mediterranean culture the principle of hospitality is underwritten by the process of acquiring and bestowing honor. The announcement that Sarai will become pregnant, at her advanced age, made her laugh because she has suffered shame for so long for not being able to bear children. God honors her, changing her shame into honor by a miracle.

Abraham is confronted in Genesis 22 with a command from God to sacrifice his son. If the son would have shamed his father or his family, the killing

Old Testament passages give ample proof that restoring honor is the background of the whole sacrificial system. Shame in such cases is expressed by the defilement that needed to be cleansed.

(2:17). However, the biblical account indicates that the result of sin was felt as a different type of nakedness. Thomas (1994) believes that even the fact that the word for “naked” takes different forms before (*’arūm*) and after (*’ērom*) the fall, may also indicate a case of defilement. The sequence in Genesis 3 seems to indicate that “shame for nakedness comes before and stronger than fear of disobedience” (287).

In Genesis 18, Abraham entertains three guests who prove to be heavenly beings. As al-

would have been justified in that culture. But Isaac “submitted” to his father. Abraham struggled with the prospect of bringing shame upon himself by sacrificing an honorable son. He left his servants behind so there would be no eyewitnesses to this killing. However, God provided a way out, a ram to be sacrificed so Isaac’s life and honor, as well as Abraham’s, would be spared.

The conflict between Esau and Jacob is caused by the shame Jacob and his mother bring upon Esau. They use a trick in order to

obtain the blessing that pertained to the first born. Aware of Esau's rage and oath of revenge, Jacob flees and lives ashamed and in terror for years.

Joseph, the "dreamer", annoys his brothers by repeatedly telling them that they will have to bow down before him, which was not an honorable position (Gen 37). This is too much for them to bear, so they decide to kill or at least to humiliate Joseph by selling him as a slave. God uses this "shaming" act to honor Joseph in Egypt and bring the dreams to fulfillment.

Moses, after fleeing from Egypt and spending forty years in the desert, is reluctant to return to the country to which God intends to send him (Exod 3-4). He invokes every reason that comes to his mind to avoid being sent to a place he left in shame. He also considers that not being able to speak Egyptian fluently, as in his younger days, will shame him once more in front of his family and Pharaoh. This is a source of his stubbornness and excuses.

The story of David and Bathsheba is saturated with shame and honor (2 Sam 11-12). Knowing that he will fall from grace if his own evil act is found out, David decides to recall Uriah hoping that this deception will cover his shame. Since Uriah does not go home to sleep with his wife, David decides to kill Uriah and defend his honor in the eyes of a supposedly ignorant Israel. Nathan comes to remind

him that the whole story is known to God. As a result, David takes off his crown and royal attire and humbles himself before the Lord, taking upon himself the merited shame.

Other Old Testament passages give ample proof that restoring honor is the background of the whole sacrificial system. Shame in such cases is expressed by the defilement that needs to be cleansed. The priests' cleansing ritual was so important that death was associated with non-compliance (Exod 30:17-21). Crippled or defective animals could not be brought as sacrifice (Num 21). All sanctuary utensils went through a consecration process by oil or blood anointing (Lev 8). Thomas cites Paul's allusion (Col 2:11-13) that even circumcision "probably had some connection to ceremonial cleanness," the foreskin being a symbol of the sinful nature (1994, 288).

The cities of refuge mentioned in Num 3:5 functioned as a place of escape for those who fled from someone seeking revenge for the unintentional killing of a family member. Interestingly enough, the act of revenge in this case is not considered murder; it is rather honor-related (Exod 21; Num 35-37). Other passages in the Bible describe God as taking revenge when offended (see Ezek 16:42-43 or Lev 26).

The concept of honor is strongly related to the virginity of daughters (Deut 22:13-17). There are specific instructions on how

to preserve sexual purity, as well as on how to proceed in exceptional situations. Most of the illicit sexual involvement was punished by death in order to restore or avenge the affected honor.

The book of Esther is an excellent example of the honor/shame interplay. It opens with Ahasuerus' concern about his own honor. The banquets are intended to bring honor, with Vashti's exposure being the climax of exhibiting the king's possessions and status. However, the public space is a "male" territory, while the domestic arena belongs to the females by defini-

filled. Esther, a nobody, becomes somebody, gaining status and being honored by the king and general population (Esth 1-2).

In the Esther story the theme of gaining favor is recurring. Haman is enraged that Mordecai does not show him proper honor (3:5-6). At the same time he is pleased to be honored as the only guest, apart from King Ahasuerus, at Esther's banquets (5:4, 12). The King asks Haman to honor Mordecai for the service he provided in unmasking the plot against the King. While Ahasuerus gains honor by granting honor, Haman is disgraced by

Sinners experience the shame brought on God by their foolish behavior. Restoration of the relationship to God is expressed in terms of honor.

tion. Pilch indicates that "only a prostitute would dance before male non-kin or in the public domain" (1999, 35).

Any honorable woman would have declined the invitation to dance for a totally inappropriate audience, so Vashti decides to preserve her honor. When she disobeys the order to show herself in the banquet hall, the king's honor is affected and there is great concern over the shame brought upon him. His most valued possession, honor, is in jeopardy. So, a plan is devised to stop the effects of the shaming. A vacuum has been created that needs to be

having to uplift his enemy (6:7-13). And, finally, Esther appeals to Ahasuerus' honor and asks him to order the Jews to defend themselves against the dishonor that Haman wants to bring upon them (7:4, 8; 8:5, 8). The interplay between shame and honor, challenge and response, is clearly the backbone of the book of Esther (see Laniak 1998).

Jeremiah uses graphic language to describe sin in terms of shame. The vocabulary used is very diverse, from "shame" to words such as "dishonor," "blush," "derision," or even suggestive phrases like "lift up your

skirts” (Jer 3:3-5). The image of nakedness or nudity is unmistakably related to shame: “I will myself lift up your skirts over your face and your shame will be seen” (13:26-27; 51:51). Plevnik explains that “public exposure [of nakedness or nudity] is a typically female punishment” (as cited in Pilch and Malina 1998, 109). The same repertoire of honor, shame, and disgrace is used to express repentance. Sinners experience the shame brought on God by their foolish behavior. Restoration of the relationship to God is expressed in terms of honor.

The prophet Ezekiel speaks about shepherds in terms of shame and honor. The concept of holiness is associated with honor and glory (*kbd* can also be translated as honor and glory). The reason is clearly expressed: “For my sake, to vindicate the holiness of My Great name” (36:22-23). The nations are mocking (shaming) God because His people are in exile. God will not allow this to continue and will act to protect His holiness. The prophet emphasizes the fact that a good self-image, as well as personal dignity and worth, need to be recognized in order for honor to be ascribed. This personal sense of worth is identified as good.

Most of the prophets use the shame theme to wake Israel up to realize her situation and apostasy. Hosea, for example, has to marry a prostitute in order to graphically show Israel God’s unconditional love for them (1:2;

3:1-5)). The terminology of nudity and harlotry seems harsh and improper for a message from God (2:2-4; 5:3-4). However, it seems to be the only way to penetrate the stony conscience of a people who committed spiritual and physical adultery (2:13-23).

Honor in the New Testament

The New Testament presents a similar understanding of honor and shame. The Gospel of Matthew opens with a concern for honor and position. Jesus’ heritage is carefully traced, making sure His Davidic genealogical line stands out (1:1-17; Luke does the same from a different perspective 3:23-38). Joseph is concerned with honor when he is confronted with the news about the Child born of the Spirit and flesh (1:18-20).

The challenge and response pattern abounds in Matthew’s gospel. Neyrey points to the Sermon on the Mount as a clear example that denotes a concern for the honor of the despised. Jesus redefines honor and what should be honored, and challenges the methods traditionally used to gain honor. He honors what others have shamed, repudiating the conventional link between honor, family, and its wealth. He proscribes the traditional ways of achieving honor (i.e., violence, sexual aggression, verbal display, and vengeance), and thus denies His disciples these avenues for gaining honor (1998, 12).

The other Gospels reveal the same elements of the Mediterra-

nean culture of the first century, namely the contests for honor, for status, and naming and labeling. Honor, dishonor, and the competition for honor mark the stories with strong crosscurrents. Luke's gospel, for example, reveals many such instances, especially in Jesus' dialogues and conflicts with His opponents (i.e. 4:23-27; 6:28-35; 9:26; 10:25-37; 13:10-17). De Silva points out that reading Luke's account from such a perspective helps us to better understand "the agonistic quality of that world, and it offers us a literary and social form (challenge-riposte) to interpret the conflicts" (1995, 14).

Jesus indicates that the story of God and mankind follows the

mock coronation of Jesus, which was intended to bring shame, becomes a means of glory.

The Roman way of crucifixion was utterly shameful. The crucified person hung naked before the eyes of family, friends, and passers by. But Jesus "endured the cross, scorning its shame" in order to finally be glorified and seated at the right hand of God (Heb 12:2). By raising Him from death, God restored Jesus' honor beyond any doubt, and also "underscored God's approval of Jesus' standards for what is honorable and what is shameful" (Pilch and Malina 1998, 114).

Another element that revealed Jesus' concern for honor, even on the cross, had to do with the

God is full of integrity and permanently receives honor, except from humans, who dishonor and shame Him.

same pattern of honor and shame. God is full of integrity and permanently receives honor, except from humans, who dishonor and shame Him (John 5:23, 36-44). Surprisingly, in order to put an end to this situation, God sends His only Son to experience the most shameful death and restore honor in this part of the Universe.

Jesus' crucifixion brought both shame and honor. The Gospels present an ironic point of view that death and shame mean glory and honor (John 12:24-26). Thus the

care of his mother. As a widow, she should have been in her son's care. Jesus, knowing that He was going to die, entrusted her to John's care so she would not have to bear the double shame of having a crucified son and being left alone as a widow (John 19:25-27; see also the story of Ruth and Naomi). "In the ancient context, unless a woman was taken in by her father or brothers, . . . she would be without male provision or protection" (Ken Campbell 2003, 51).

Jesus is continually accused

of accepting sinners and tax collectors, and eating with them. The Pharisees, in the name of preserving the honor of their nation and community, play the shame/honor game when they accuse Jesus that He eats with tax collectors (Luke 15:2). However, Jesus sacrifices His honor in order to wash away the shame of such sinners. Christ changes the meaning of what the Pharisees consider shameful, namely eating with sinners. He came into the world specifically to wash away the sinners' shame. Both Jesus and the Pharisees were aware that the chosen company was a critical symbol of identity. He recognized their plan to regain honor by humiliating Him. Pilch observes that when the Pharisees "make a claim to honor, Jesus makes a counter-claim to honor by counter-challenging His challengers" (1991, 14).

Jesus did not minimize the seriousness of sin. Instead, He demonstrated that the real brokenness produced by sin was broken relationships, not broken laws. The parable of the prodigal son illustrates how God deals with the sin problem (Luke 15). The father in the parable takes the form of a suffering servant. In all his actions he tries to avoid the youngest son's departure by not shaming him. According to the local social customs, he would have had to discipline his disobedient and shameful son and, if he wouldn't redress, to hand him to the communal leaders for discipline (see Bailey

1992). However, the father in the parable does not follow the traditional honor/shame behavior. He rather runs in public through the streets and endures humiliation for his son's sake. He falls on his son's neck and kisses him (the opposite was expected, the son kissing his father's feet). If the father had killed his rebellious son(s), he would have seriously damaged his honor and the future security of his household. Instead, he makes the cost of his love visible. He gets rid of the shame, taking it upon himself. All these actions strike the prodigal's pride and he is overwhelmed (see Bailey 1976).

Jesus frequently used parables as a strategy to protect his honor. He did not want everyone to understand the deep meaning of his stories. He told them in such a way that those for whom the parables were intended, usually Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes, understood. Jesus also used parables to protect himself from outsiders. His parables and stories were mainly based on honor and shame rather than on guilt.

Jesus often talked about shepherds, who were considered to be engaged in shameful work. However, it was not always so. The shepherd is a symbol of God in the Old Testament (Ps 23) and also of the honored leaders of Israel (Ezek 34). Jesus plays on the shame/honor continuum in his parables in order to drive home his points. His hearers under-

stood perfectly well this language.

All of the encounters of Jesus with individuals reveal a deep concern for their honor. Nicodemus does not want to shame himself by associating with this controversial teacher in daylight. Jesus accepts a nightly encounter protecting Nicodemus' honor (John 3). The Pharisee ascribes honor to Jesus by addressing Him as "Rabbi". However, Jesus points to the shaming experience of rebirth in order to receive the most honored status: entering the heavenly kingdom. There will be joy and honor in heaven for the things

hours ago she was ashamed to come to the well when others were present. By forgiving her, Jesus restored her honor.

The same pattern is seen in Jesus' visit with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-9). Despised by his co-nationals for working for the Romans, the tax collector is isolated and rejected by society, considered shameful for collaborating with Israel's enemy. Jesus steps in and offers Zacchaeus a new beginning by washing away his shame (v.9). As a response, Zacchaeus himself offers to pay back four times what he unjustly

Jesus used her shameful past in order to make her thirst for regaining honor. Her evangelistic message to her fellow villagers proved that Jesus' method was successful.

called shameful here, because the repentance process brings change. One must accept shame now in order to be honored then.

When meeting the woman at the well (John 4), Jesus decided to approach her in spite of her shameful reputation. He used her shameful past in order to make her thirst for regaining honor. Her evangelistic message to her fellow villagers proved that Jesus' method was successful. "He told me everything I ever did" (v. 40) demonstrated that she could freely talk now about her past that was forgiven, although several

charged in order to restore honor and relationships.

When talking about the future judgment, Jesus also utilized the honor/shame model to illustrate the outcome. He used the Hebrew antithetical parallelism found in the Old Testament. The pattern of honor now–shame then, shame now–honor then can be clearly seen in passages such as Matt 20:16; 23:12; Mark 4:25; 8:35; 10:31, and Luke 13:30; 18:14 (see Allison 1998, 131-134).

In his Gospel, John describes Jesus as the "son of God," a title of honor (1:18;

3:16, 18). This is intended to reflect Jesus' status as the mediator with special access to the Father. Jesus' honor is part of God's honor. He acts to defend the honor of His Father's house, speaks in such a way to emphasize the Father's honor, obeys and fulfills His Father's will, and even accepts a shameful death. John also emphasizes the fact that one's shame or honor comes from honoring or dishonoring God.

When cleansing the Temple, Jesus based his actions on what Isaiah (56:7) and Jeremiah (7:11) defined as honorable or shameful. The Temple was God's dwelling on earth and the inappropriate transactions taking place there compromised God's honor. In true Mediterranean fashion, Jesus vented his "anger" at such a shameful situation and started to restore his father's honor. Pilch calls this "positive shame" defining it as "a concern for maintaining the requirements of honor, and utter revulsion for its transgression" (1999, 11).

In his letters to different churches, Paul reproaches or comforts Christian communities by alluding to the disgrace and dishonor they acquired from their society through fighting and quarreling, and also to the honor implied in suffering for Christ and for a right cause. Studying the letters to Corinthians, Thessalonians, and Hebrews, De Silva shows that Paul's reproaches are based on appeals to honor and shame (1999, 91-

177). "Behavior control in Paul's Mediterranean world," says Pilch (1991, 77), "are *external* (public opinion) and not *internal* (a sense of guilt)." This was the case of the incestuous person in 1 Cor 5. "Everyone minding everyone else's business is surely a strong social pressure for behavior in this society."

Looking at 1 Peter, Barth Campbell (1998) lists the diverse and nuanced terminology used to describe honor and shame. He finds honor expressed by grace (5:10), inheritance (1:4), praise (1:7), glory (1:11, 21; 4:14; 5:1, 10), credit (2:19, 20), strength (4:11), crown of glory (5:4), or kiss of love (5:14). Actions such as restoration (5:10), doing good deeds (3:6, 16), being hospitable (4:9), or being blessed are also associated with honor.

Campbell is also impressed by the richness of vocabulary that describes shame. Suffering (2:19; 3:17; 4:19), ignorance (2:15), evil (3:9-12, 17), abuse (2:23; 3:9, 16), deceit (3:10), sordid gain (5:12), or disgrace (4:16), all constitute sources of shame. Murder, thievery, criminality, and mischief are given a particular category (4:15), while maligning others (2:2, 12), threatening them (2:23), doing harm (3:13), or even blaspheming (4:4), are actions that bring shame upon the recipient (239).

Analyzing the book of Revelation we find the honor/shame theme in all messages addressed to the apocalyptic churches. God advises Laodicea to buy "white

raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear” (3:18). De Silva (1999) describes “worshipping the beast and its image” as the path to dishonor whereas “dying in the Lord” is the path to honor. “In Revelation . . . marginalization and disgrace at the hands of society on account of commitment to the divine patron become a source of honor and assurance of favor within the Christian culture” (198).

The Dynamics and Structure of Shame and Honor in the Bible

The Scripture reveals two patterns or plots in different literary settings. The first pattern

the challenge of honor, with shame. It presumes an innocent victim that is insulted or attacked. Divine intervention usually brings vindication and restoration. Laniak (1998) finds this pattern in the stories of Moses, Joseph, David, Daniel, Nehemiah, Job, Esther, and Mordecai, to mention only a few (8-10).

Structurally, the shame and honor pattern follows a fourfold structure. If we carefully analyze the stories of the characters mentioned we see that the heroes are favored in the beginning as a result of divine election, a key concept in the introductory stage. This first phase is followed by a challenge to the hero’s reputation

It becomes clear that the shame/honor pattern is prevalent in the Bible, suggesting a corresponding social and cultural pattern. Status is more important than being right.

starts with sin, followed by alienation, and ends with reconciliation. It is based on guilt and aims to bring back the sinner to the initial state of favor with society and God. This pattern forms the background for levitical laws and the stories of the judges and kings of Israel. The same pattern is used by the prophets to describe Israel’s history, and as an enticement to repent and return from exile.

The second pattern deals with

or life. The innocent sufferer is disgraced. The situation is reversed in the third phase and God intervenes in behalf of the chosen one(s). Circumstances that initially constituted a threat are changed into sources of honor. The reversal applies to all parties involved; the enemies are humiliated in front of the chosen, as in Job’s case (Job 42:7-8).

The final phase is the completion. Honor is only “complete” when it is appropriately recog-

nized. The previously shamed person receives additional honor by being promoted (Mordecai, Esth 8:1-2), receiving power (Joseph, Gen 41:39-45), wealth (Job, Job 42:10-17), or public respect (Naomi and Ruth, Ruth 4:9-17). Such rewards are usually accompanied by feasting and celebration. Many times the final situation is better than the initial one. Laniak writes that “While pattern #1 [guilt] seeks a return to the original state (i.e. of purity, reintegration), pattern #2 [shame] moves toward an *increase* in prosperity and prominence” (1998, 15).

It becomes clear that the shame/honor pattern is prevalent in the Bible, suggesting a corresponding social and cultural pattern. Status is more important than being right. Laniak (1998) believes that “the overall movement from *low* to *higher* to *lower-than-before* to *higher-than-before* confirms the hypothesis that a concern for social honor is fundamental” (16).

Every story contains a challenge to honor or status and an experience associated with shame. The recovery of honor, after being shamed, is now expected, and this reveals an organizing element of the pattern: up-down-higher up. Laniak indicates that the shaming of the enemy is also part of the pattern: “Those who oppose God’s servants inevitably find themselves, in the end, either as servants of Israel . . . or dead” (17).

Deliverance is also inextrica-

bly tied to vindication; promotion and prosperity require the execution of justice. Laniak describes honor as being reflected and expressed in the Bible by substance (wealth, power, reputation, dependence), status (authority, respect, prestige, rank, titles, formal gestures, hierarchies), splendor (sacrality, glory, visual expressions), and self (the interior of a person, reputation, name). God introduces Himself to Moses and Israel as “I am Who I am,” speaking in self language (Exod 3:14).

It becomes obvious that the concepts of honor and dishonor are enmeshed in Scripture’s structure, and that a serious reading of the Bible should take into account the social and cultural background of the time when it was written. Western people struggle to understand God in His dealings with a shame-and-honor mentality and culture, whereas Muslims find themselves at home in this cultural milieu.

Sin, Defilement, Guilt, and Shame: What Is the Gospel?

A fresh reading of the Bible, paying attention to the cultural and social elements would elicit questions pertaining to the traditional understanding of sin, atonement, and salvation. Muslims agree that mankind sins by nature, but they understand that God created humans this way. They put the blame on God for creating us weak and assume that He is too just to require perfect purity from his creatures. However, the Qur’an indi-

cates that salvation is dependent upon doing good works (Sura 32:19, 20; 99:7, 8). The human nature is considered fundamentally good, while God's love and forgiveness are expected for those who do His will.

Muslims do not have a strong conviction about sin. They are largely unaware that Abraham, Moses, and all the prophets after them until Jesus, brought sin offerings. It is difficult for Muslims to accept that they need a Savior. The Islamic doctrines of God and man make Muslims unaware of their sinfulness and

more serious than the very act of adultery, and a ritual bath or shower is performed in order to cleanse the defilement. Eating pork is another serious issue, but rather an issue of ceremonial cleanness since the pig is considered unclean and a source of defilement.

Muslims live in a permanent state of insecurity about their state of cleanness. There are various degrees of defilement and for each there is a specific way of cleansing. In a culture where ceremonial purity is more important

In a culture where ceremonial purity is more important than moral uprightness, salvation needs to be expressed in terms of deliverance from the basic depravity and defilement of human nature.

inability to save themselves. It is almost impossible to convince a Muslim to accept Jesus and His blood sacrifice for sins through logic or reason.

Although Muslims do not seem to worry much about cheating, lying, or other frequent sins, they do try to avoid everything that would affect their ceremonial purity. All their religious rituals respond to a deep insecurity that has become the basic human problem for Muslims. This insecurity is the equivalent of sin for Christians. Uncleaness after sexual intercourse is

than moral uprightness, salvation needs to be expressed in terms of deliverance from the basic depravity and defilement of human nature. Such an emphasis is found throughout Scriptures. Thomas (1994) points out that, while Christians make every effort to offer Muslims assurance of salvation from sin, their desperate need is for "deliverance from the tyranny of being in a state of defilement" (285).

By acknowledging the fact that all flesh is defiled, Muslims identify with the patriarchs and prophets in the Qur'an, who admit they

are sinners. Sultan Muhammad Paul quotes the Qur'an where Adam and Eve declare: "We are lost" (Sura 7:23), and Abraham who prays for forgiveness for him and his parents (Sura 14:41). The prophet Muhammad himself prays in *Bukhari*: "O, God, wash my iniquities with snow-water" (200). This coincides with what both Paul and Isaiah conclude: "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom 3:10); "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). The only prophet for whom the Qur'an does not record any sin is Jesus. He is also the only one able to cleanse us from our depravity and defilement.

Shame and guilt share the same causes and remedy, both being a subjective feeling and an objective condition as well. Thomas points to the fact that both Paul (Rom 9:33) and Peter (1 Pet 2:6) quote Isaiah when referring to the solution for sin: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame" (28:16). He concludes that "the one who trusts in the cornerstone laid in Zion (Jesus) has the objective basis for feeling shame permanently removed" (288).

The Qur'an itself makes reference to the moment when God prepared skin clothes for Adam and Eve to "cover their shame," but goes on to mention that there is a better covering, *taqwah*, the "raiment of righteousness" (Sura 7:26).

Strong describes one of the Hebrew words for shame, *bosheth*,

as "the feeling and the condition, as well as its cause." Many passages describe shame as a consequence for sin. Ezekiel uses shame to refer to Israel's sin:

Samaria did not sin half as much as you have. You have acted more disgustingly than she ever did. Your corruption makes your sisters look innocent by comparison. And now you will have to endure your disgrace [shame]. Your sins are so much worse than those of your sisters that they look innocent beside you. Now blush and bear your shame, because you make your sisters look pure (16:51, 52).

Many other Old Testament passages reveal the same relationship between sin and shame (Jer 3:25; Ezek 34:29; 44:13; Hos 4:7; Obad 1:10).

From this perspective, sin is not so much inherited as stemming from our being. We are unclean and everything we touch or do, despite our good intentions, becomes contaminated. This defilement forms the basis for the Muslim's shame and insecurity, which becomes a felt need for the gospel in shame cultures. Ceremonial rituals, though not bad in themselves, cannot cleanse a person's interior, and human flesh cannot cleanse itself. Only God can drive defilement from human flesh by becoming human. Through baptism, the symbol of true cleansing, we celebrate Jesus' victory over the most serious consequence of defilement, death.

Defilement is integral to human's sinfulness and shame is

one of its consequences. However, Christ's death atones not only for sin but also for defilement. If Christians truly want to communicate the gospel to Muslims, they must pay more attention to shame and being, elements to which Mediterranean cultures are so sensitive. Even more, biblical commentaries, translations from the original languages, creeds, and belief statements need to be revised to include the missing paradigm of shame and honor, defilement and perfect cleansing. Instead of answering irrelevant and unaddressed questions, the good news of as-

the Bible. Christian outreach literature may have to be revised in order to include the shame/honor perspective, thus making communication more efficient. Christian commentaries of the Bible, confessional creeds and belief statements, and even Bible translations may need a careful revision in order to allow the rich cultural background of the original texts to speak to the Muslim mind.

Second, there is an urgent need for rethinking the strategy of communicating Christianity to Muslims. A contextualized presentation of the gospel,

The only prophet for whom the Qur'an does not record any sin is Jesus. He is also the only one able to cleanse us from our depravity and defilement.

surance and security in Jesus Christ must be presented. This gospel is the true message that Muslims need to hear.

Conclusion

This comparative study of honor and shame in Muslim and biblical cultures leads to several conclusions. First, in sharing the gospel with Muslims, Arabs and other people who operate within honor/shame concepts, it helps to read the Scripture from their perspective. We may be surprised to see how much support there is for this view in

which addresses both human defilement and shame, as well as guilt and sin, is long overdue. The Bible presents the idea that, on the cross, Jesus bore both our sins and shame. He "scorned its shame" (Heb 12:2) and "became sin for us" (2 Co 5:21). On the cross, He conquered our defilement by assuming it, "taking up our infirmities and carrying our sorrows" (Is 53:4, 5). There are also enough Qur'anic references that parallel the Old and New Testament in these areas so that an honest and careful pre-

sentation, using both sources, would open Muslims' understanding to the good news.

Third, the atonement must be presented in the defilement context, not only as a divine Substitute taking our punishment. Muslims find this concept repulsive. A reevaluation of the Old Testament stories and the Sanctuary services may provide the appropriate vocabulary and visual aids to introduce the atonement concept to Muslims. A Bible-based approach that starts with the defiled human nature is perfectly appropriate. Our Muslim friends would understand that their disloyalty to God is known and is shameful. They will be willing to repent, knowing that their honor has been affected by their own embarrassing attitude and acts.

The cross can be expressed in terms of God's honor. Jesus' submission to his Father's will and the fact that the cross in the end brought glory to God are clearly expressed in the Bible (John 5:22; Phil 2:9-11). Muslims may have difficulty seeing a God of love in the crucifixion story of Christ, but they will immediately recognize Christ's loyalty and submission to His Father. They have no difficulty admitting that the Father was honored and glorified by a son who obeyed Him to the end, restoring the heavenly family's honor. The honor of the cross is as scriptural as the love of the cross.

In Musk's words (1995, 88), "a concern for God's glory, honor, blamelessness and unmerited generosity seems rather to be documented—themes that make profound sense in the kind of cultural settings we are considering."

The gospel contains the solution for the deep insecurity Muslims feel. Their obsession with ritualistic cleansing finds its solution in the perfect cleansing that Jesus offers. Mission and discipleship, must be tailored to meet people where they hurt. The shame/honor approach could revolutionize outreach and church planting among Muslims, the most resistant religious block in the world.

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