

Summary of ***Honor & Shame*** by Roland Muller

Three world views relevant to us all

*Since King's is located in southeast London, the issues that surround cross-cultural ministry are very relevant for us. Input from Dave Devenish, with his wide experience in this area, has been very useful and I am always happy to follow up his recommendations for relevant reading. One of the books he suggested is **Honor & Shame** by Roland Muller – this article will cover some of Muller's insights.*

Roland Muller identifies three building blocks that together make up the worldview of every society/culture – fear, shame and guilt. In each case man strives for the opposite so that the dynamic becomes fear/power, shame/honour and guilt/innocence. Muller observes that most of the 10/40 window is shame based, the Western nations (N Europe, N America, Australia & New Zealand) are primarily guilt based, and primal religions and cultures (such as tribal Africa, much of Asia and South America) are mostly fear based.

Christian missions have done best at presenting the work of Christ in fear-based cultures, where the victory of Christ has been the main message. Work in shame-based cultures, such as the Muslim cultures of the Middle East, has often struggled historically.

Our Western culture is primarily guilt based – we maintain a foundational belief in right and wrong and plot everything on a continuum between guilt and innocence. The unspoken goals of our society are righteousness and innocence (as we define them!). Wars are justified on the basis of established guilt and situations that aren't clear disturb us – e.g. the hungry child who steals.

Many Christians believe that a culture based on right and wrong is built on Judaeo-Christian principles and is therefore correct. The origin of thinking that this is the whole picture comes from the Greek and Roman cultures and continues to impact the church and our understanding of Scripture.

Why right and wrong isn't the whole picture...

Western Christianity's predominant concern with guilt/innocence and the law had early roots. The foundation of the Roman Republic established that no-one was above the law – not even the ruler. Prior to this the ruler WAS the law. This elevation of the law can be found in the thinking of early church theologians such as Tertullian who was steeped in Roman law and an outstanding apologist of the Western church and the first known author of a Christian systematic theology. Augustine used rhetoric for debates in Roman law. Even during the Reformation this thinking is traced in the work of Calvin – a lawyer as well as a theologian. Concerned with establishing guilt and innocence in law, each of them brought this thinking into their theology which was absorbed by a developing western civilisation. The New World and ultimately the US was built on these principles that were foundational to their thinking.

In the East, meanwhile, Christianity centred on the shame/honour relationship. Historically, Eastern Orthodox theology majored on being able to stand in the presence of God and was not primarily concerned with sin, guilt and redemption. From this tradition, Chrysostom wrote 680 sermons/homilies – not one on justification – and was banished for speaking against western theological views.

Muller maintains that the book of Romans has become the centre of our biblical explanation of the gospel because of our guilt-based culture and because Paul contextualised his message to them as he had done to the Greeks at Mars Hill. Muller observes that

'Most western believers have a hard time finding the Gospel in the Gospels' (p33)

and concludes that we must put aside our Roman, guilt-based understanding of the gospel, strive to understand other world views and discover a way to communicate the Gospel to a mindset not pre-occupied with right and wrong and guilt and innocence.

Who me, officer?

Muller challenges western theologians who work within the guilt/innocence paradigm to wrestle with developing other approaches to salvation and examines what he sees as the principles behind fear-based cultures and then shame-based cultures.

Fear-based cultures deal with the need to appease unseen powers and to live in peace with these gods and spirits. The fears are directed toward other men or other tribes as well as toward the supernatural and involve explanations of how the world works, with sickness being a sign of gods/spirits reaping revenge. The struggle to acquire power and control over the universe results in the establishing of rules in an attempt to protect the wary from harm. If bad things strike, there are procedures to appease offending powers and to oversee these principles a priesthood comes into being – priests, shamans and witchdoctors become the mediums through whom the god/spirit communicates. In this context missionaries are involved in a very real power struggle.

Shame-based cultures present a different set of challenges. This is typified by something as simple as being pulled over by the traffic police. Westerners react to this situation on the basis of guilt/innocence (*Who me, officer?*), Africans (say) on the basis of fear/power and Arabs on the basis of shame/honour. A shame-based culture also has honourable and dishonourable ways of doing the same thing and thousands of nuances that convey shame and honour. So – which chair you sit on, who entered the room first, the way you express yourself, the way you walk and hold yourself – all these communicate your place in the world.

In the west, shame is lack of self-esteem – in the east, shame is a controlling force. As an example of this, western youth can act loudly as long as there is 'no damage done', eastern youth represents the family/tribe at all times and must act honourably to uphold that honour. Shameful deeds are covered up and if that isn't possible they are avenged. Such attitudes and actions predate the arrival of Islam and reflect an ancient Bedouin code of practice.

In the shame-based culture, possible responses to loss of honour are lying (if a lie protects the honour of the tribe it is fine – if it is for personal benefit, it is shameful), suicide, and tribal warfare. This last option is often only resolved by the skilful intervention of a third party and hostility may continue for years – or generations.

Why it's cool to be part of a gang

Muller attributes the loss of shame in western cultures to the result of the work of the followers of Freudian psychology which has taken guilt from our culture and

substituted 'guilt feelings' and where any fault is generally attributed to others (e.g. parents). From the 1960s onward the west has seen a shift from 'right and wrong' to 'cool and uncool' – part of the honour/shame paradigm.

According to Muller, the major difference between the east and the west is not the shame concept but the difference between the group mentality and individualism. Eastern shame is the more powerful because it rests on the group and not the individual.

Western culture has lost most of its understanding of shame and honour, but the Bible is full of it. It begins with man's fall into shame and ends with glory and honour for Jesus. Old and New Testaments together contain 190 references to honour, guilt has 40, while shame has over 100. However, counting words is not enough to convey the reality that honour and shame hold a high place.

The story of slavery in Egypt and the Exodus shows God's power to raise his people from shame to honour. It is not just a story about God redeeming his people (legal concept) but of raising them from shame. This leads us directly to the concept of grace since it is an unwritten rule of the east that no-one can elevate themselves. That everyone knows their place and must stay in it is a fact countered by the message of the Gospel: God has the power and the desire to elevate man from his lowly position to one of honour.

God also moves us from defiled to cleansed, naked to clothed, from expelled to visited by God and rescues us from shameful relationships. The story of the Prodigal Son embodies all these elements – he returned in shame, the father raises him from a place of shame to one of honour, covering him in a new robe. The ultimate picture is of Christ on the cross bearing our sin AND our shame. To be thrown out of the family is the ultimate shame - apart from which the family/tribe (with the accompanying group mindset) provides what is needed in life – fellowship, money, opportunity, education, spouse, security. A man without a family/tribe is in an impossible situation.

Why *The Godfather* is powerful

Separation from God takes place because God is honourable and man is shameful. The whole message of the gospel revolves around the restoration of that relationship – one where man cannot elevate himself. Only God can restore man and He used a mediator – one who must be able to speak equally with God and man. For this reason Jesus became human to mediate between us. Once the relationship is restored we have access to the throne room of God. Jesus bestows on every believer the honour and glory that the Father bestowed on Him but humility is called for – God does not honour the proud.

In the guilt/innocence, shame/honour, fear/power world views some cultures operate almost totally just within one, others have a dominant and a secondary influence while others are a mixture of all three. At the same time cultures are changing as their history rolls on. The Roman Empire was founded in a fear/power setting with a pantheon of gods to be appeased. As it developed, law became an important foundation and it moved to a guilt/innocence dynamic. Over the following period shame and honour began to dominate – as embodied in the Godfather movies. Muller observes that southern European culture has lost the guilt/innocence dynamic. In fact cultures are increasingly a mixture of all three paradigms and any clash of cultures often comes down to guilt/innocence v shame/honour – such would be the clash between Christian and Muslim cultures.

Why these things are important to Arab society...

Dr Sania Hamady (Arab scholar and authority on Arab psychology) states that the three fundamentals of Arab society are shame, honour and revenge and the following issues are important to consider.

group mindset – the extended family is the key unit and all relatives are part of the tribe and are defined as 'near' or 'far'. Marriage and adoption can bring someone 'near' and a foreigner adopted as a son of the tribe is greatly honoured. For those who are 'near' a high level of conformity is demanded – it brings honour, social prestige and a secure place in society, those who do so receive support against outsiders and help to further his own interests.

relationships – Arab society is permeated from top to bottom by a system of rival relationships and there is great value and prestige placed on the ability to dominate others. Rivals will seize on any 'shame' to destroy the other's influence and picking off individuals and targeting them will often be a successful ploy with the whole tribe responding on either side of the situation. Arabs fear isolation as one on his own can be overcome and enslaved by others while there is protection in the company of others – knowing who to trust is a matter of family/tribe ties.

shame – failure to conform leads to shame for the wider community – a damning indictment. Westerners with their high value on individualism fail to understand that the meaning of Islam is conformity to the point of submission, with public prayers and universal fasting as powerful means to that conformity. Few things are right or wrong – those that are acceptable or unacceptable being so defined by society. Contravention may result in acting shamefully but not necessarily wrongfully in God's eyes. Muslim men living in western cultures will use this to justify sexual escapades and indulgence in alcohol as the new society does not define these things as shameful. So 'where you are not known, do what you like' is the order of the day.

Shame is not only an act, but the discovery of the act by outsiders. The view here would be, 'he who has done a shameful deed must conceal it, for revealing one's disgrace is to commit another disgrace' and 'a concealed shame is two thirds forgiven'. The shame that comes from failure produces an unwillingness to accept challenges and responsibilities while an Arab out of his own safe context can change temperament drastically. Outside influences will be blamed for failure, and anger, resentment and violence will be displaced. It is easy to offend an Arab – they have a detailed code of conduct which includes pouring too much coffee or making a visit too short. Shame will result for an Arab when he is not made a special case – rules are expected to be bent for his convenience and he will expect to be the favourite, with friends constantly reassuring him that he is preferred above others.

'Ask' and 'tell' are the same word in Arabic – so I don't ask you to lend me something, I tell you, as it would be shameful to be refused such a request. When such a thing is 'asked' the claim of the tribe is greater than the opinion of the owner of the object.

revenge – eliminates shame and is sanctioned by the Quran. Payment of a blood price (agreed between the two parties) can be substituted for bloodshed. Honour killings, especially of women who are deemed to have dishonoured the family/tribe with unsuitable relationships would come under this heading. Increasingly, younger Arabs who have been educated in the west, where such treatment is viewed with horror, are questioning the appropriateness of such killings and are demanding that the criminal code and justice system should reflect this.

peace – has a secondary value in Arab culture in comparison to shame and revenge. Thus the western impression has grown that in the Arab context, peace is the temporary absence of conflict. The permanent state of peace is reserved for the Islamic community and jihad for the non-Islamic states. 'There is honour within Islam and shame without'.

It would be an honour...

Honour for an Arab is the absence of shame - every Arab desires and strives to be more honourable. Honouring elders has a high value – exemplified by the story of two sons, each asked by their father to go and fetch water. The elder says no, the younger says yes, but does not go. In western eyes both have dishonoured the father while in eastern eyes the younger is seen as the better son for saving face for his father.

Honourable acts would include *hospitality, flattery and gift-giving*. Hospitality is one of the most important ways of showing honour – it honours the guest and covers any shame the host may have. It is the aim that any visit to an Arab home to honour the guest. The opposite is also true – a visitor kept at the door will be shamed for all to see. They will not return. Flattery meanwhile honours the recipient and is a public display of honour from the flatterer. As far as gifts are concerned, if you admire anything in an Arab home the hosts will be quick to insist that you receive it as a gift. Even if you don't admire something gifts will be offered and the host will insist that you eat and drink – this is considered an obligation by the host. The guest must be willing to accept such hospitality.

Family history accrues honour and it is the duty of the eldest son especially to maintain that honour.

Education bestows honour and many poor families sacrifice almost everything, parents working endlessly to help an elder son receive a higher education thus elevating the status of the whole family and tribe.

Marriage brings honour - but if the behaviour of a wife injures a man swift judgment will result. The arrival of the first son brings higher status to the couple and so to the wider family.

Honour in the Arabic language: Arabs will wish each other joy on three specific occasions – the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet and the foaling of a noble mare! Language is so powerful that Arabs will listen intently to someone speaking well – whether he speaks the truth or not. Arab poetry is full of vainglory – the Arab hero is defiant, boastful and will fight to the death for his women!

What it takes to make a Sheikh –

What makes a man honourable enough to become a sheikh?

- *Money*. There is great respect for wealth and to use it to help a good cause (the poor) is considered very honourable. It allows hospitality and generosity – the two things that can obliterate shame and restore honour. It can cover a multitude of sins.
- *Heritage*. Great leaders in one's history are an advantage while shameful characters are expelled/killed to preserve the tribe's honourable heritage.
- *Wisdom*. Elders are listened to with respect as repositories of wisdom. They are the traditional counsellors and are often wealthier than their younger family members.

- *Charisma*. Good looking, confident, such leaders have often accomplished something of note and capitalised on it. Often they are also good communicators and shrewd politicians, finding honourable solutions to difficult problems.
- *Physical strength*. Arab lore is full of heroes and Arab boys are brought up to highly value manliness and strength. Physical strength + charisma + financial strength = winning combination!
- *Alliances*. Strong alliances give influence and can give an individual great power. Combined strength can be relied upon.
- *Bravery*. The act of bravery is honourable in itself, though Arab stories often have the hero overcoming overwhelming odds.
- *Loyalty*. Loyalty to the family/tribe is paramount in order to maintain family honour. The tribe sticks together in order to survive and the rightness of the elders (and the tribe) is never publicly questioned.
- *Violence*. 'Life is a fearful test, for modern Arab society it is ruthless, stern, pitiless. It honours strength and has no compassion for weakness.' Violence is a way of demonstrating honour and removing shame from the tribe.

Most societies accept that everyone has to deal with a measure of shame – how it is dealt with is the revealing thing. And can a person move from a position of shame to one of honour? Arabs would agree that you cannot honour yourself – someone else has to honour you and this seldom happens without a cause.

Communicating the Gospel to a Muslim culture

The Bible has three salvation themes which correspond to the types of culture – guilt, shame and fear. In the west we emphasise the guilt theme and filter our understanding through it.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were *guilty* – this led to the plan of salvation. But they were also *ashamed* - this theme also runs through the Bible. And when Adam hears God's voice he is *afraid* – a third theme.

Our inability to understand shame-based cultures is matched by our inability to impact much of that world. Well-meaning western ways may lead to unforeseen consequences in a shame-based society, where the hearers may feel the missionary is shaming them by drawing attention to certain areas of their lives. Church attendance may occur simply to avoid shaming the missionary.

Muller is keen that we should not develop different models of salvation for the different settings but should address all three elements in each. He identifies certain key areas to address:

- Repentance. Accept His way and turn from pride (= pursuing one's own honour) and from fear.
- Sacrifice. This deals with sin, shame and fear.
- Redemption. Our western concern with guilt meets the shame-based view where a mediator pays to cover our shame and redeem our honour
- Propitiation. Removal of wrath by offering a gift.
- Reconciliation. Restoration of the relationship between man and God. This is more than the removal of guilt, it is God bringing us into the Father/Son relationship – shame is removed and honour restored.

A three-fold message is needed – hope for those in shame, freedom from the bondage of fear, cleansing from guilt – each culture enters through its own door. Paul had a threefold message – the Jews were shame-based, the Greeks were

guilt-based and the Barbarians were fear-based. New believers who receive only one of the three threads will not ultimately be strong in their newfound faith.

Muller believes that cross-contextualisation of the gospel is simply knowing how to start the gospel message from a place of common understanding.

The influence of each of the dominant cultures has changed with the passage of history. Muller concludes by observing that currently Islam is growing in influence and evangelical Christianity is recorded as the only religion growing by conversion. He asks - what of the next century? To whom will it belong?

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