

Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures

Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker

PRA663A – Leadership in Cross-Cultural Contexts: Foundations

Martin Edward Lee, January 13, 2020

Jayson Georges and Mark Baker recognize that the Christian guilt-innocence paradigm in Western cultures does not properly address the predominantly honor-shame paradigm of Majority World cultures. To reach Majority World cultures, the authors believe it is necessary to “use an ‘honor-shame missiology’ – a biblically rooted approach to Christian ministry among the nations that proclaims and mediates God’s honor for the shamed.”¹ As a Lutheran, this observation is stunning. Our theology is grounded in a doctrine of Christology where Christ has become the guilty sinner’s advocate. Christ presents a perfect and prevailing defense before God the Father which thwarts the sinner’s adversary, the Devil, and secures a verdict of justification. The authors would argue this Gospel picture is the product of a Western cultural context handed down from Augustine and Luther;² and it does not address the Majority World immersed primarily in honor-shame cultural contexts. They note, “The difference between the culture types is not ‘Western cultures believe in right and wrong. Majority World cultures believe in honor and shame.’ Honor-shame cultures do have morality, but their basis for defining right and wrong happens to be communal and relational (not legal or philosophical). For them, what is best for relationships and honors people is morally right; what shames is morally wrong.”³

In the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, the reaction from Westerners was grief over the tragedy and harm done to the victims. In contrast, the Tsarnaev brothers’ uncle reacted, “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.”⁴ The authors conclude, “When social reputation is the basic foundation of life and identity, people’s pursuit of respect, honor and status frames every facet of life.”⁵ It appears that in the Chechen honor-shame culture, the family’s (community’s) honor is more

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., 22.

³ Ibid, 37.

⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁵ Ibid., 15.

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important than the individual lives that were harmed. Our transcendent God honors both the community and the individual. This is seen nicely on the cross where Jesus addresses the community, “Father forgive them” while also addressing the thief on the cross “today you will be with me in paradise.”⁶

The general premise is that there are three primary cultural philosophies in the world: shame cultures, guilt cultures, and fear cultures.⁷ The authors note, “People in honor-shame cultures communicate indirectly. Words are for the purpose of managing relationships and social identities, not presenting information. Harmony takes priority over ideas. Truth in communication is defined relationally, not logically. Being truthful means being loyal in your relationships, respecting others and helping preserve face. A person who ‘cuts to the chase’ or ‘gets to the point’ runs the risk of offending others, so it is preferable to ‘beat around the bush’ in honor-shame contexts. Western communication is like a download that efficiently transfers information; Majority World communication is more of a dance where you avoid stepping on toes. Indirect communication is a strategic technique for minimizing shame.”⁸

The authors observe, “Learning to address problems and resolve conflict while maintaining relational harmony is crucial for living in honor-shame contexts.”⁹ They recommend the “Eight Commandments of relationships in honor-shame societies”— find a cover, reconcile symbolically, become a client, give gifts, be pure, guest well, be a patron and give face.¹⁰ I Peter 2:17 says, “Honor everyone.” Of the authors’ Eight Commandments, both ‘find a cover’ and ‘give face’ stand out to me, given my background in the African American and Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod communities. I find

⁶ Luke 23:34 and Luke 23:43.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁹ Ibid., 134.

¹⁰ Ibid., 135.

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that both these communities operate to a strong degree in an honor-shame context. Honor and shame doctrines are persistent in Scripture: for instance, God calls David a man after his own heart, thereby providing David a cover after his sin with Bathsheba (I Chronicles 14:3); God calls the church, a community full of sinners, radiant, without stain or wrinkle, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:27); the scapegoat takes away the sin and shame of the community (Leviticus 16:7-10). God gives us cover and saves face for us.

The authors intend to help “readers to relationally mediate God’s honor to Majority World peoples.”¹¹ This concept of giving one another “good honor” as opposed to bad honor, aligns well with our Lutheran doctrine of bearing one another’s burdens. In describing what being in community with others looks like, Bonhoeffer exhorts believers to bear each other’s burdens and embrace each other’s shame: “The Christian, however, must bear the burden of a brother. He must suffer and endure the brother.”¹² Rev. Dr. John Kleinig would have Christians give others a “good conscience” and in this way show one another “good honor.”

In summary, the authors note, “The mission of God has always included removing shame and restoring honor. God pursues glory for himself by honoring and welcoming people from all nations...”¹³ And thus, honor-shame clearly must play a more significant role for our Western theology to be effective in ministering not only to Majority World people but also to Western culture peoples.

¹¹ Ibid., 158.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (Harper, San Francisco, 1954.), 100.

¹³ Ibid., 27.