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Honour and shame

by *David McIlroy*

*Virtue is the fount whence honour springs.*¹

Christopher Marlowe

*Mine honour is my life; both grow in one; take honour from me, and my life is done.*²

William Shakespeare

Shame is what we feel when 'we...are disgraceful...to those who care for us.'

Aristotle³

*Where there is yet shame, there may in time be virtue.*⁴

Samuel Johnson

Summary

Contemporary Western society suppresses the concepts of honour and shame, although they re-surface in its media in a theatre of the grotesque. Honour reinforces good behaviour through appeals to a shared morality, while shame penalises bad behaviour through disgrace and exposure. The Bible offers a different social vision, in which honour is respected through discretion, and where shame and disgrace can be dealt with through confession, reconciliation and restoration into the community.

Introduction

Honour and shame are expressions of social judgements on the conduct of others which have the capacity to inform people's behaviour because respect and status matter to people and confer a sense of self-worth.

Yet in multicultural Britain there exist attitudes to honour and shame which are so far apart that they appear to inhabit different worlds. On the one hand, Channel 4 wins awards for a TV programme entitled *Shameless*, about a dysfunctional family on a Manchester estate, which it promotes as being 'packed with sex, drugs, gratuitous violence, love and scams. Chaos ensues...'⁵ The show seems to epitomise a society in which any sense of honour, shame or shared morality has disappeared.

On the other hand, the Crown Prosecution Service organised a conference in December 2004 to address the problem of 'honour killings'. In 2004 alone 12 people were prosecuted for honour killings in the British Asian community; 117 women have disappeared over the past decade. In West Yorkshire, a young Asian woman disappeared, presumed murdered, simply because a romantic song was dedicated to her on a local Asian radio station.

There is something obviously wrong with both of these extremes. But what exactly is it?

Honour

The instinctive reaction of horror to honour killings is in large part due to the appalling nature of the crime, but the way it is expressed betrays the fact that contemporary liberal Britain simply does not understand the concept of honour.

Honour is about the preservation of social status, and has connotations of adherence to a code. It is about respect and respectability. An action is honourable if it is praiseworthy. Appeals to honour are appeals to a shared morality. In honour cultures a person's sense of self is heavily dependent on how they are perceived by others. Thus, Proverbs 22:1: 'A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.'

Honour therefore creates incentives for good behaviour, for adhering to commonly accepted standards of conduct. Preserving at least the appearance of respectability contributes to the maintenance of social authority structures.

The idea of honour and dishonour occurs prominently in biblical thinking about family relationships. The Bible commands children to honour their parents.⁶ The Mosaic Law focuses on honour in addressing questions of sexuality (Deuteronomy

1 *Tamburlaine the Great*, Part 1, Act IV Sc. iv.

2 *Richard II*, Act 1 Sc. i.

3 Quoted in Lewis Smedes, *Shame and Grace*, London: Triangle, 1993, p.53.

4 *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, chapter 2.

5 www.channel4.com/entertainment/tv/microsites/S/shameless/

6 Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Matt. 15:4; Mark 7:10; 10:19; Luke 18:20; Eph. 6:2.

22). Deuteronomy 25:5–10 regulates the characteristically Israelite institution of Levirate marriage, with a public dishonouring ceremony for the brother-in-law who refuses to marry his brother's widow.⁷ The writer of Hebrews urges the Christian community as a whole to honour the marriage bed and keep it holy (Hebrews 13:4), while Paul castigates the Corinthian Church for tolerating within its community forms of immorality not even acceptable among the pagans (1 Corinthians 5).

All of these examples confirm that honour is a relational concept. It is a way of maintaining a group's reputation and identity. Honour is a social disciplining mechanism, hence the idea of honour among thieves, which has reached ideological status amongst Mafia-like criminal gangs.

Honour reinforces a group's solidarity. The motivation for honour killings is that the dishonourable actions of an individual within the family group have brought dishonour on the group as a whole. That dishonour is a social pollution which must be eradicated by removing the offender.⁸

Western liberals fail to understand the concept of honour because they claim to have no shared morality; they claim to be able to stand apart from group identity; they claim to be unaffected by the dishonourable actions of other individuals. None of these things are true, because there is, after all, such a thing as society.

In relation to racism, paedophilia and homophobia, Western liberals do have a shared morality. Their shared moral judgements are expressed and imposed through the media, which provides a running commentary on the moral failings of others.

Major sporting occasions and urban gang culture demonstrate the continuing sense of need for group identity. Abuses in the church, the military and the police reveal that groups can be tarnished as a whole because of the actions of a few vicious individuals within them. Admiral Hutson, the US Navy's Judge Advocate 1997–2000, said, after seeing the photographs of soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison, 'I think it does stain the honour of people who didn't participate in it all. People in the military who find that kind of behaviour abhorrent are painted with the same broad brush.'⁹

What the abuses in Iraqi prisons and honour killings highlight is that Western liberal society has lost sight of the social reality of honour. It is given to us as created beings to be in social relationships with others, to be part of communities, of families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, churches and organisations. Each of those has a reputation, an honour, a name, and we all affect and are affected by whether that community is perceived by others outside it as worthy of honour or not.

No doubt appeals to honour can be overstated. The person regarded as having violated a strict honour code may be unfairly ostracised. The person who deems that they have had their honour questioned may instigate a duel or a vendetta. But these are not the prevailing problems today in the West. In contemporary mainstream society, it is not the case that there is a stifling social morality which is strangling the life out of those who fall short of its exacting standards, although total-tolerance is seeking to foreclose the moral debate.

The Christian concept of honour is not merely reactive but is proactive. Honouring is not just a reaction to someone's station or worth; it is a choice to treat people well, and if anything, with more respect than they deserve. If humility is about the way in which we should handle our own reputation, honour is the way in which we should handle the reputation of others. We honour someone when there are praiseworthy qualities about their char-

acter which we declare in public.

We also honour people when we are discreet, when we keep silent about their dirty linen, unless there is an overriding reason to wash it in public. The justifications for acting in this way are at least fourfold. First, it is a courtesy due to others because they too are made in the image of God. Second, it is an act of love towards them to protect them from exposure to the condemnation of those who would look on them without love. The amazing thing about the Christian message is that God, who sees us as we really are, still deals with us mercifully. How much more then, should we who do not see fully, be merciful to others. Third, it is a recognition that there are parts of our lives too, of which we are ashamed and which would not stand up to public scrutiny. Finally, it is an acknowledgement that God does not expose us to the world *yet*. There *will* be a moment when all secrets are revealed and all of us are laid bare, but at that Day of Judgement the disclosure will be mutual and universal.¹⁰

Christians therefore have reasons to treat the reputation of others with charity. The prevalent alternative to discretion and charity with regard to the honour of others is gossip. Magazines peddling such tittle-tattle sell by the millions. We seem as a generation to be tone-deaf to the frequency and the severity of the biblical warnings against gossip and slander.¹¹

It is only if we act with discretion and a concern for the honour of those with whom we are intimate that overexposure can be avoided. Proverbs 11:13 says that 'A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.' When Noah drank too much and fell asleep in his tent, one of his sons, Ham, went and told the others, Shem and Japheth, about it (Genesis 9:22). They acted with discretion by taking a garment and placing it over Noah, walking backwards into the tent so they would not see his nakedness (Genesis 9:23). The story illustrates Proverbs 17:9: 'He who covers over an offence promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.'

The idea of a 'cover-up' has become anathema for our society. Loyalty has become a debased currency, fit only for gangsters. Transparency and disclosure are the order of the day. And yet, the Bible teaches that 'Love covers over a multitude of sins' (1 Peter 4:8). In Genesis 9, Noah is described as 'a man of the soil', as an indication that despite his faith in God he remained a weak and vulnerable individual. This is true of even the best of men. All of us need space in which to fail, within the context of a loving community, without being exposed to unnecessary public disgrace. 'Love covers a multitude of sins' is not a mandate for sweeping things under the carpet, pretending that they never happened or that they are not important; rather it is an instruction to deal with the effects of sin in a constructive manner, and is to be read in conjunction with James 5:20 which reminds Christians that 'Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.'

Nonetheless, the considerations in favour of discretion do not always trump all others. If you exaggerate honour too much it becomes its own idol, and can lead to such distortions as the Japanese notion that if you have become dishonourable, the only act of honour left to you is suicide. Furthermore, some actions have public consequences, and have to be dealt with publicly, for that reason.

Shame

Shame is not the exact opposite of honour, but it is a closely related concept. The Bible has a whole vocabulary to do with

7 J. P. Burnside, *The Signs of Sin: Seriousness of Offence in Biblical Law*, Sheffield Academic Press, 2003, chapter 3.

8 *ibid.* p.37.

9 'We Can't Remain Silent', *The New York Times*, reprinted in *The New York Times – Le Monde*, 9 April 2005, p.2.

10 Matt. 10:26; Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17.

11 Lev. 19:16; Ps. 15:3; 50:20; 54:5; Prov. 10:18; 11:13; 16:28; 18:8; 20:19; 26:20, 22; 30:10; Jer. 6:28; Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:22; 2 Cor. 12:20; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; Titus 3:2; Jas. 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:1; 2 Pet. 2:10.

shame, reproach and disgrace. There are over 10 Hebrew words which are translated into English by these three words which have been almost evacuated of meaning. This means that we have to read the texts about shame in the Old Testament very carefully, taking account both of their original social context and of our own.

The key ideas with regard to shame are disgrace and exposure. Disgrace is the loss of approval, of status and of respect. The ways in which the Nazis treated their concentration camp victims were designed to disgrace them and to deny their humanity. Mockery and ridicule are calculated to demonstrate that the recipient is worthless.

However, shame is also what we feel when we are exposed. Some things were not meant for public display.¹² Smedes argues that privacy is essential to our mystery, sacredness and identity as human beings.¹³ Our society, with its obsession with eroticism and its addiction to pornography, has lost its sense of shame just as it has lost its bearings with regard to guilt.

The ideas of disgrace and exposure combine in the biblical metaphor for shame, which is the lifting of a woman's skirts¹⁴ or the cutting of a man's clothing, especially so as to expose his buttocks.¹⁵ Such was the utter disgrace which Jesus endured when crucified naked on a Roman cross. He endured the shame of the cross and was honoured by God raising Him from the dead and exalting Him.

Today, matters which were regarded by former ages as shameful and to be 'hushed up' are now staple fodder for journalists. It is exposure for exposure's sake, whether or not it is in the public interest and serves the common good. Whilst it is trite to criticise the media for their prurience, if gossip did not sell papers, then it wouldn't be printed. If *Shameless* did not attract an audience measured in the millions, it would not have been recommissioned for a third series. Fallen human nature is curious for knowledge of damaging things about other people. This both panders to our desire to know secrets and gives us the luxury of looking down on others who have been caught acting in such reprehensible ways. Christians ought to be conspicuously different in this regard. We should be more discerning about what we read and listen to. We should be prepared to ask the question: what *practical* business do I have in knowing this about that person?¹⁶

The social elements in shame of disgrace and exposure are the driving force behind ASBOs (Anti-Social Behaviour Orders) which are the government's current weapon of choice in the fight against petty crime. But such orders presuppose the existence of a moral community to which the perpetrators of antisocial behaviour are answerable. The very legalism of the mechanism and anti-relational aspects of the criminal justice system militate against their effectiveness.

In a society with a stronger shared morality and better relationships such shameful/dishonourable behaviour, particularly among young people, would be dealt with through more informal mechanisms. There would be relational means of positively reinforcing what is honourable and negatively reinforcing what is shameful. The decay of these 'unofficial' mechanisms requires less efficient substitutes in the form of increased use of contracts (such as those recently proposed for council tenants), more law, and more police.

Like honour, shame is a social reality. It cannot simply be done away with. Those in the public eye who are caught doing something shameful seek to limit the damage to their reputation

via the exclusive interview in which they put their own 'spin' on events. Princess Diana and Prince Charles used 'the exclusive' against one another, as a bid for public sympathy after the breakdown of their marriage. Michael Jackson resorted to it in his plea to his fans when accused of child abuse.

For the non-celebrity, the alternative is a 'confession' on daytime television. Jerry Springer is the most notorious exponent of the art of 'zoo TV', but he has many imitators. What is extraordinary, in our so-called non-judgemental era, is how such programmes manage to operate both as public pillory and as forum for self-justification. Those whose behaviour is sufficiently bizarre to merit airing are both subjected to the condemnation of the *vox pop* from the audience and encouraged to justify themselves by means of a perverse pseudo-psychology. Society, in the form of the audience, expresses its views on their shameful behaviour while at the same time those on stage are encouraged either to be brazen or to seek the sympathy and understanding of the audience.

If contemporary Western society is in denial about honour and shame, the other extreme – of a society in which honour is upheld to the point of regarding allegations of rape as admissions of adultery and sexual failings as grounds for murder – is even more unpalatable. Shame can be destructive, if it leads to feelings of worthlessness and if it is a stigma which can never be lifted. What is the Christian alternative?

Beyond honour and shame: confession, repentance and restoration

In the Christian social vision, honour and shame are taken seriously. However, their importance is placed in a proper context in relation to the more fundamental concepts of sin and guilt. The Bible teaches that one of the primeval forms of sin is pride. Appeals to honour can disguise pride and self-reliance. Honour can become a means by which human beings seek to establish their identity on the basis of how they are seen through the eyes of others; the Christian knows that their identity is given to them by God.

Although Christians are careful and charitable with regard to the honour of others, Christians are able to hold lightly to their own honour because they find their identity, their sense of self-worth, in God. Instead of depending on the approbation of the social groups to which they belong, Christians can be secure in their identity as people deliberately and uniquely created by God and loved by God. Our identity is *given* to us by God not by the media, nor by the public, nor even by our close personal relationships. It is not that having a good reputation is undesirable, far from it. It is rather that chasing after it is unhealthy. 'It is not good to eat too much honey, nor is it honourable to seek one's own honour.' (Proverbs 25:27; 27:1).

With regard to shame and guilt there is a distinction to be drawn, although the two are often found together. Sometimes, shame is a proper reaction to guilt, and to the fact of guilt itself, rather than just having been caught out. But we can experience feelings of shame, such as those of a raped woman or an abused child, which have nothing to do with our own guilt, but which are the consequence of being disgraced and exposed by others.

The Bible teaches that God sees all the shameful parts of our lives, even those hidden from the people who are most intimate with us (Proverbs 5:21; 15:11). Yet even though we are the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus loved us enough to die for us (1 Timothy 1:15). The Christian has the assurance that we are fully known and fully loved, despite our faults and failings and irrespective of how badly others have treated us. For the Christian, it is the God who knit us together in our mother's womb (Psalm 139:13–16), rather than Big Brother, who is constantly watching us with a benevolent eye.

12 Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, OUP, 1984, p.61.

13 Lewis Smedes, *Shame and Grace*, p.61.

14 Ezek. 23:26–30; 16:39; Jer. 13:22.

15 1 Sam. 24:4–6; 2 Sam. 10:4.

16 Oliver O'Donovan, 'The Concept of Publicity', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 13(1), 2000, p.21.

It is because Christianity recognises sinfulness and guilt that it is able to cope with dishonour and shame. These are not the end; these are not things which must be avoided at all costs. Where serious wrongdoing has taken place and public trust seriously violated, the way to return to social health is not through closing ranks but through acknowledgement of what has taken place and of the need for God's forgiveness and grace. As 1 John 1:8–9 puts it: 'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.'

The transmutation of the Christian practice of confession into the exclusive interview and zoo TV is the equivalent of turning gold into lead. Each of the elements which make Christian confession a means of grace has been watered down and its restorative power evaporated.

First, Christian confession is the acknowledgement that our actions are sinful and evil, that we have violated our obligations to love God and to love one's neighbour. The fact that we are guilty is recognised and faced up to. Because the exclusive interview is intended for public consumption, by one whose career is at stake, it does not represent, cannot represent, an unvarnished presentation of the subject's actions. With regard to zoo TV, the moral relativism of contemporary liberalism means that an authoritative denunciation of certain actions as evil cannot be given.

Second, precisely because in Christian confession there is an acknowledgement of guilt, the need for forgiveness is recognised and addressed. Christians confess their sins to God in anticipation that, because of what Jesus has done, they will receive forgiveness from guilt, cleansing from shame, and empowerment to live righteously. The subject of the exclusive interview or zoo TV expects only to obtain the sympathy and 'understanding' of the audience and the public.

Third, the biblical solution to character flaws and failings is not *usually* immediate public disgrace but, in the first instance, private management of the issues involved. Joseph was commended as a righteous man because his initial reaction to the discovery of Mary's pregnancy was not to expose her to public disgrace or even possible death by stoning, but instead to divorce her *quietly* (Matthew 1:19).

Jesus taught his disciples a mechanism for dealing with disputes and moral failings within the community which began with private reconciliation mechanisms and went public only when necessary. According to Jesus, the issue should first be aired only between the parties directly concerned. If that failed to bring about a reconciliation, then one or two others should be involved. Only then would the matter be taken to the 'church', i.e. to the assembly (Matthew 18:15–17).

Each of us lives within circles of responsibility and accountability. Accountability is the true correlate of privacy. Above all, and in every respect of our lives, we are accountable to God. He is the one who has the right to full disclosure. He is the one who sees everything (Jeremiah 16:17). However, although there are

some aspects of my life which are, properly speaking, between me and God, in relation to other matters, my family, my neighbours, my work colleagues, and or my fellow church members are affected by my behaviour and have a legitimate interest in calling me to account.

Where public action *is* required, and public disclosure warranted, it is either because of the effect of the incident in question upon the community as a whole (1 Corinthians 5) or because of the public trust which has been betrayed. Although, within limits, a husband's relationship with his wife is their affair; if he beats her up, or worse, kills her, the community is entitled to intervene. Public values are at stake.

With regard to matters of public trust, Paul taught Timothy that when elders, holding office within the church, sin publicly, they are to be rebuked publicly, i.e. before the church community as a whole (1 Timothy 5:20). Those who are seen to have failed in their discharge of public duties ought to apologise publicly.

Oliver O'Donovan argues that the Church needs to rediscover the practice of public confession in respect of notorious sins. He urges not just the judicious use of church discipline but also the reintroduction of a service of public reconciliation of the penitent.¹⁷ Church discipline is needed to maintain the moral life of the community, but also to call the notorious sinner to repentance. Christians can rejoice over the success of church discipline when, through public confession and repentance, the notorious offender is restored into the community of God's people, resolved to live again by the standards of biblical morality.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that contemporary Western society has such a diminished sense of honour and shame, they remain inescapable social realities, and hence find expression in the parodies of exclusive celebrity interviews and zoo TV, on the one hand, and the naming and shaming policy of ASBOs on the other.

James Jones concludes that these phenomena illustrate the fact that 'what our society is deprived of, through its diminished experience of Christianity, is a mechanism of public forgiveness.'¹⁸ As this paper has revealed, the problem is more fundamental than that – it is because we have lost sight of the biblical concepts of honour, shame and guilt that we don't even know how to conceive of such a mechanism. It is therefore imperative that Christians should not only demonstrate how to honour others but also to model mechanisms for confronting sin which bring recognition of its character and lead to repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration.

17 Oliver O'Donovan, 'Liturgy and Ethics', *Grove Ethical Studies*, No. 89, pp.16–17.

18 James Jones, *The Moral Leader*, Leicester: IVP, 2002, p.121.

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