

Reading the American Urban Context through an Honor-Shame Code

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Honor and shame as a pair of cultural lens were first introduced to America as something non-American through the research of the anthropologist Ruth Benedict in her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, published in 1946, right after the end of the Second World War. The purpose of Benedict's research was to understand Japan, the archenemy of the United States, back then. What she found was something remarkable, namely a culture of honor and shame. For example, in Japan, when loaning money from someone, the borrower tells the lender that she will not mind being put to shame when failing to repay, "I agree to be publicly laughed at if I fail to pay this sum."¹ However, closely observing this situation, the renowned missiologist Timothy Tennent writes that in case of defaulting on the loan, the Japanese debtor was practically obliged to committing ritual suicide both to cover the shame incurred and to restore the lost honor.² This is the typical narrative of honor and shame as a pair of cultural lens.

Foreign as this may sound, surprisingly enough, honor-shame as a cultural lens is not at all in the strange territory to those living in the US cities, albeit unconsciously so to the dominant cultural radars of many. In particular, shame has become prominent of recent date (which means honor, while still in the background, is already present also as shame's flipside). An American cultural icon of a sort in this respect is Brené Brown, research professor of social work at the University of Houston. Her first book dealing with shame and vulnerability, *Daring Greatly*, has not only become a New York Times best seller,³ but her TED lecture based on the book has reached the honorable status of being among the top ten TED videos in terms of the number of viewers.⁴ Compared to the popular conception toward Ruth Benedict's work on shame, this is a drastic change in the cultural landscapes of the US cities for the past couple of decades. Below I would like to explore three contextual keys to make sense of this so-called cultural turn to shame, followed by some implications for Asian American theology and ministry. Before anything, I should begin with defining the pair of honor-shame as a cultural lens.

Three Contextual Keys for Honor-Shame Code in US Cities

Honor-shame is to each other like a flip side of the same coin. While there are many ways of defining and characterizing the pair, the common denominator in such definitions is that it is all about one's self-worth in the eyes of others, which is most likely to be internalized in one's own estimation of self-worth. Honor accrues when one's self-worth is lifted up in the eyes

¹ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1946), 151.

² Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 77.

³ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable transforms the way We live, love, parent, and lead* (New York, NY: Avery Books, 2012)

⁴ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?referrer=playlist-the_10_most_popular_tedx_talks#t-479125

of others, while shame takes place when it is belittled or downsized.⁵ Given this understanding, I hope that my readers are now a little less puzzled about why honor-shame gains foothold in the US urban culture. To clear up the fog of honor-shame in the US cities, I will provide three contextual hints as to how and why honor-shame is gaining momentum as a cultural lens to interpreting and understanding the US urban culture: 1) identity-based political relationships, 2) the instability of self-worth in the capitalistic economy, 3) the influx of immigrants from honor-shame cultures.

First, many scholars and critics of Western culture are reporting that the Western culture itself, especially for those living in urban contexts, has turned out to be more and more shame-based, albeit a different one from traditional honor-shame cultures. I have already alluded that honor and shame is all about one's self-worth either uplifted or looked down upon. In our meritocratic, postmodern society, how each of us is valued or recognized has come to be very much dependent upon *how others see us*. John Forrester's argument in this regard is quite eye-opening.

In postmodernity, ontology was replaced by hermeneutics. We no longer, at the level of culture, have the courage (or audacity) to simply declare what is. What we see depends on our interpretation. Truth becomes a matter of perspective. The problem here is that we ourselves are inside the circle. Within this hermeneutical atmosphere, our own human identity loses its fixity. Our identity now rests on the interpretation of others. How am I seen by my group? This is the big question. But it is also a place of great vulnerability, for to be seen negatively is to be ashamed. To take this a little further, it is often pointed out that one result of this cultural development we call postmodernity has been the "retribalization" of society as common interest groups huddle to establish a private context in a fragmented, post meta-narrative landscape... At street level this is reflected in the proliferation of "communities": the gay community, the ex-con community, the diplomatic community, the homeless community, the various ethnic communities, and the like.⁶

Next, while we are living in a society where "retribalization" is a common occurrence, our capitalistic economy uniformly leaves us to be in constant instability about our self-worth. You are measuring others and measured by them according to what kind of profession you are in, how much money you are making, and which neighborhood you are living, etc. While these things cannot be the true criteria for knowing and understanding a person, capitalism has been training all of us to see our own worth and those of others by the criteria set forth by the capitalistic standards, and this brews shame among so many of us, while accruing honor to others of us. The point is, honor and shame are very much alive in US contemporary urban culture because of how capitalism operates.⁷

Last, the past several decades have witnessed the steady influx of immigrants in the US. Interestingly enough, urban areas are where a big portion of those immigrants settled into. According to the Pew Research Center report released in 2017, 61% of the 11.1 million undocumented and 65% of legal immigrants live in big cities in the US, compared to 36% of

⁵ For a variety of definitions regarding honor-shame, see Jayson Georges, Mark Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), and Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York, NY: Avery Books, 2012)

⁶ John A. Forrester *Grace for Shame: The Forgotten Gospel* (Toronto, Canada: The Pastor's Attic Press, 2010), 75.

⁷ See Allain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 2005)

total US population living in big cities.⁸ As a case in point, Boston, where the present author resides, has 180,000 immigrant population, making it the ninth in terms of the concentration of immigrants in US cities. Note that such influx of immigrant has become a typical scenario in US cities, and also that the vast majority of these immigrants are coming from where missiologists call the Majority World, where honor-shame tends to be one of the most important cultural norms.⁹ This means that their honor-shame culture is already on the US cultural soil, which, even without immigrants, has slowly grown into a culture that takes in much of honor-shame as its own cultural key.

Implications for Theology and Ministry in Asian American Contexts

After all, the question of the day is what all the discussions so far are leading up to for ministers and community workers in the US urban contexts. Well, the first thing that comes to mind is that we need to know and understand what honor-shame culture is like, and how it operates in the US urban contexts. It is no longer to be dismissed as something un-American, or un-urban, but as something working among the lives of so many in the US cities, whether immigrants or not. Sharing the gospel (in word and deed) with people steeped in honor-shame culture has to be different from those living in typical western guilt-innocence cultural code. How ought it to be different? That is the next task to be taken up on by theologians, especially among Asian American academics, given that we inhabit a more explicit culture of honor-shame. We, Asian American theologians and ministers, need to dig deeper into the differences between the face of honor-shame in US cultural context and in the Asian cultural context, in order to understand who the urban Americans are, and to figure out what kind of the gospel message we should deliver to our brothers and sisters as urban Americans, whether they be Asian Americans or not.

This also means that we need a shift of theological focus from the dominance of guilt and innocence as a theological key (at least in Atonement and Justification), to that which takes into account the influence of honor and shame. Many more urban ministers and theologians need to engage what it means to do theology with honor-shame culture in view. We need to re-read the Bible not only with the Bible's honor-shame code in view, but also our own honor-shame lens in view. Also, we need to re-contextualize the whole set of Christian doctrines with this particular cultural lens, from that of justification to atonement, from theological anthropology to Trinity, from sin to eschatology, etc. One of the urgent issues in this regard would be to show how the matters of justice is in deep connection with honor-shame. Traditionally, honor-shame as a cultural code has been regarded as inappropriate for speaking of justice, at least justice in the Western standard. However, authors such as Fleming Rutledge, in her masterpiece *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, is already venturing into how the honor-shame dynamic is inextricably connected to divine and human justice by reading closely such a theologian as St. Anselm.¹⁰ Even so, this is so enormous a work, still in its embryonic stage; we

⁸ See the Pew Research Center report: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/09/us-metro-areas-unauthorized-immigrants/>

⁹ See Tim Tennent's description of the Majority World in his *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 14-15.

¹⁰ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015): 156-157. In her reading of St. Anselm, Rutledge highlights that honor means righteousness and justice. She provides many hints for correcting the deep-seated Western bias that honor has little to do with justice, yet in the Bible as well as in the theological literature, honor is often associated with righteousness, and we need to restore the link between the two in order to do theology properly for urban America.

need more ministers and theologians to bring a fuller picture to view. In that regard, the present author is working on a dissertation shedding light on the potentials of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith forming persons and communities resilient to shame.

Conclusion

As I have indicated above, doing theology and ministry through the honor-shame code needs much more work and has a great deal of promise for both Asian American and US urban contexts. In other words, many other things need to be said on this topic. In the meantime, I can say this much: the US cities are culturally affected by the honor-shame code, and we need to be ready.