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.'³
Aristotle

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...’. 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. The Mosaic Law focuses on honour in addressing questions of sexuality (Deuteronomy
Deuteronomy 25:5–10 regulates the characteristically
Israelite institution of Levirite marriage, with a public dishon-
ouring 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 iden-
tity. 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 erad-
icated by removing the offender.9

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 unaf-
fected 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 judg-
ments 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 indi-
viduals 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
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 rela-
tionships 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
ostacised. 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 contempo-
rary 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 totali-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 wealth; 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 unne-
cessary 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
8 ibid. p.37.
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;
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. Smedes argues that privacy is essential to our mystery, sacredness and identity as human beings. 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 skirts12 or the cutting of a man’s clothing, especially so as to expose his buttocks. 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?13

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 knits us together in our mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13–16), rather than Big Brother, who is constantly watching us with a benevolent eye.

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15 1 Sam. 24:4–6; 2 Sam. 10:4.
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 recognised, brought about a reconciliation, and 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.

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