

# Are US Cities Culturally Affected by Honor-Shame?

*By Sang-il Kim*

## **What? Honor and Shame? Isn't that a Middle-Eastern, or an African, or an Asian thing?**

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict first introduced honor and shame as a pair of cultural lenses to America—as something non-American—in her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, published in 1946, right after the end of World War II. The purpose of Benedict's research was to understand Japan, the archenemy of the US back then. What Benedict found was something remarkable, namely a culture of honor and shame.

For example, in Japan, when borrowing 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.”<sup>1</sup> However, observing this situation, the renowned missiologist Timothy Tennent writes that in case of defaulting on a loan, Japanese culture practically obliged a debtor to commit ritual suicide, both to cover the shame incurred and to restore the lost honor.<sup>2</sup> This is the typical narrative of honor and shame as a pair of cultural lenses.

Does this sound at all congenial to contemporary US culture, especially urban ones, such as those of New York, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles? Probably not. Nevertheless, the cultural pair of honor and shame is increasingly critical to understanding American cities and its people. Here I make a case for why this is so, and what it might mean for pastors and ministry workers in US urban contexts.

Before proceeding to the main arguments, then, what is honor-shame?

## **Honor-Shame Domesticated in US Cities**

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

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

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

one's own estimation of self-worth. Honor accrues when one's self-worth is lifted up in the eyes of others, while shame takes place when it is belittled or downsized.<sup>3</sup>

Given this understanding, I hope that my readers can see how honor-shame has gained a foothold in the US urban culture. To clear up the fog of honor-shame in 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 U.S. urban culture. I will go into some detail for each of the following three: 1) identity-based relationships, 2) the instability of self-worth in the capitalistic economy, 3) immigration from honor-shame cultures.

### **Identity-Based Relationships**

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. Remember that honor and shame is all about one's self-worth raised or lowered, respectively. In our meritocratic, postmodern society, how each of us is valued or recognized has become very much dependent upon *how others see us*.

John Forrester's argument in this regard is quite eye-opening:

*In postmodernity, 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.<sup>4</sup>*

### **Unstable Self-Worth in a Capitalistic Economy**

Next, while we are living in a society where "retribalization" is a common occurrence, our capitalistic economy uniformly leaves us in constant instability about our self-worth. You are

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<sup>3</sup> 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 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)

<sup>4</sup>John A. Forrester *Grace for Shame: The Forgotten Gospel* (Toronto, Canada: The Pastor's Attic Press, 2010), 75.

measuring others and are measured by them according to what kind of profession you are in, how much money you are making, and which neighborhood you are living.

While these things cannot be the true criteria for knowing and understanding a person, capitalism has been training all of us to see our worth and those of others by materialistic 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.<sup>5</sup>

### **Immigration from Honor-Shame Cultures**

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 have settled. 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 U.S., compared to 36% of total US population living in big cities.<sup>6</sup> Among them, Boston boasts 180,000 immigrants, ranking it ninth among US cities.

Note that the vast majority of these immigrants are coming from what missiologists call the Majority World, where honor-shame tends to be an essential cultural norm.<sup>7</sup> But honor-shame culture is already on US cultural soil. Even without immigrants, US cities increasingly take honor-shame as their cultural key.

### **What does this mean for Urban Mission and Ministry? – A Brief Reflection**

After all, the question of the day is: *What do all the observations so far lead up to for ministers and community workers in the U.S. urban contexts?*

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. We can no longer dismiss honor-shame culture as un-American, or un-urban—we must acknowledge it working among the lives of so many communities in US cities, whether immigrants or not.

Sharing the gospel (in word and deed) with people steeped in honor-shame culture has to be approached differently from those living with a typical western guilt-innocence cultural code. We need a shift of theological focus, from solely the dominance of guilt and innocence as an interpretive key, to that which also takes into account the influence of honor and shame.

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<sup>5</sup> See Allain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> See the Pew Research Center report:

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/09/us-metro-areas-unauthorized-immigrants/>

<sup>7</sup> See Tim Tennent's description of the Majority World in his *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 14-15.

Many more urban ministers and theologians need to engage what it means to do theology with honor-shame culture in view. US cities are culturally affected by honor-shame, and we need to be ready.