Honour and Shame
Shame and Honour: Blunt Instrument or Useful Lens?
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Honour, Shame and Women’s Bodies
Moyra Dale
I vividly remember the first time I became personally aware of the concept of ‘face’—which I now know to be linked with ‘shame.’ I was 18, teaching night classes to workers (who were all much older than me) in East Asia. I was watching my students work on an exam I had set them when I realised that one of them was looking at notes under his desk. I pounced, verbally berating him in front of the whole class for cheating. After that incident, he never returned to the classes. I had received no training in cross-cultural interactions and had never heard of ‘honour’ and ‘shame,’ but it dawned on me that my response had caused him to ‘lose face.’

Fast forward a couple of decades and the themes of honour and shame are all around us in mission circles. There’s a plethora of cross-cultural training courses, articles, books, blogs, and conferences focussing on the need to engage with these values in their cultural contexts, to read the Bible through an honour-shame lens, and to be prepared to present the gospel in a way that resonates with people from cultures more influenced by honour and shame.

Much of this literature and these approaches are helpful and have served to highlight the necessity of understanding contexts where considerations of honour and shame are more pronounced. However, the often-used phrase ‘honour-shame cultures’ is less useful. Its simplistic approach to culture can blind us to the fact that honour and shame are not a package deal that some cultures have, and some do not. It also masks the fact that people’s experiences of honour and shame are not uniform, and that they cannot be addressed by one single gospel presentation. In our efforts to simplify and ‘box’ cultures, we also continue to use our limited English terms of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ to describe phenomena that are, in other languages, described by a far greater number of terms (words, phrases, proverbs) encompassing a wide range of meanings and nuances. Instead of seeing honour and shame as homogenous, we need to look for the multifarious ways honour and shame shape how people act, react, and shape the various relationships they are in.

Furthermore, women’s voices have been less prominent and less often referred to, and yet the way women experience honour and shame is quite different to that of men. Thankfully, more literature is emerging that is written by women, using women’s voices—Audrey Frank’s book, Covered Glory, being one such welcome addition. There are many blogs on the When Women Speak... website, and the When Women Speak... I-View courses are encouraging many women around the world to ask good questions and listen to Muslim women speak about these themes. This edition of the When Women Speak... webzine also provides a platform for women to contribute to our learning and gives us a taste of the diversity of experiences surrounding honour and shame.

Moyra Dale’s first article addresses the problematic use of honour and shame as a “blunt instrument of analysis,” and helpfully unpacks how honour and shame can be a useful lens through which to view some cultural dynamics. It is a tool to add to our toolbox, instead of being a “key” that unlocks every cultural mystery. She encourages us to dig deeper into emic (insider) perspectives on honour and shame, providing a wealth of linguistic and ethnological questions...
we can ask to facilitate this discovery journey. Moyra demonstrates how we can then let our cultural insights shape the way we read the Bible, as well as letting the Bible shape our responses to specific cultural issues and questions.

Acknowledging that those of us who are Westerners will never fully grasp the extent to which women in other societies grapple with shame is an important point brought up in Davina’s rich exploration of shame in Southeast Asia. Davina draws from deep personal experiences of journeying with women living either in fear of shame or in situations of shame, and shares how our love, acceptance, and valuing of women can help them find full freedom from shame in Jesus and restoration into His new community.

The interfaith community centre in Nigeria which Adriana Myland writes about in her article is also fostering a new community. In this community, women from both Muslim and Christian backgrounds come together to learn practical skills, as well as listen to and value each other in order to regain honour and deal with shame. The use of interfaith dialogue between women as a space to reflect on honour and shame is innovative and opens up possibilities for future initiatives in other areas where religious conflict and division is prominent.

The way shame and honour are experienced in Indonesia is changing with the rise of social media and a new movement of Muslim millennials who advocate and promote a ‘pure’ Islamic lifestyle. Maria’s article delves into this phenomenon. She shows how social media has spread new ideals about who and what is honourable, and how it has broadened the impact and extent of shame, particularly for women. Despite this, Maria also writes encouragingly of the way such shaming has been the catalyst for at least one woman to find freedom in Christ. This novel exploration in the Indonesian context warrants further investigation and comparison with women’s piety movements and social media across the Islamic world.

The final article in this edition sums up the shame experience for women. In it, Moyra Dale looks at how women’s bodies are the locus for both ascribed and embodied shame. As we see in the stories of women in the other articles, women are shamed because of how they look, what they do or do not do, and simply because of who they are and what their bodies naturally undergo in menstruation. Moyra details how Jesus Messiah meets women in each dimension of shame, and how he has transformed, cleansed, and redeemed them so their bodies are no longer to be considered shameful, but holy and honoured.

The articles in this webzine all highlight the fact that the burden of shame—both the avoidance of it and dealing with the consequences of it—falls upon women. Thus, relatively little has been said about women’s honour in society. Rather, the articles point towards a desire for women around the world to find true freedom from shame and a new honour in Christ, and acceptance into a new community under Him. They provide questions we can ask, experiences and initiatives we can learn from, and Bible stories we can tell. They encourage us to walk alongside women, to be learners of their perspectives, and to practically demonstrate Christ’s sacrificial love and acceptance of them, knowing that the Holy Spirit works powerfully through our weaknesses for God’s glory.

Louise Simon
In the last decade the concepts of shame and honour have been taken up and widely applied in missiological discussions. From issues which were discussed in isolated anthropological articles¹ and even more occasional Biblical papers,² shame and honour are now commonly invoked in both cross-cultural and western contexts to explain or predict cultural dynamics. A plethora of books, articles and blogs have been published on this area in the last decade.³

**Blunt Instrument?**

However, there is a problem with the widespread use of shame and honour. As a paradigm, a quick rationale for cultural behaviours, it can become a blunt instrument for cultural analysis, to the point where the conclusions drawn, or assumptions made are misleading. Shame and honour are very broad ideas and if they are used as generalisations, they are likely to result in false assumptions, or be so general that there are no useful specific applications. Concepts of honour and shame can be inadequate or even deceptive if they are used as quick explanations of behaviour, with no examination of how they may operate in a particular context.

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¹ Ruth Benedict developed the idea of shame cultures and guilt cultures in her 1946 book on Japan, *The Cross and the Chrysanthemum*.
Another common risk is when understandings of shame and honour in one cultural context are transferred without question to a different cultural or social situation. For example, how shame is felt, where it is constructed (within the individual, or between the individual and society), and what brings shame, is very different between the more individualistic western world, and more collectivist societies. What elicits shame and honour also differs also among collectivist societies. If honour comes through giving birth to sons in the Middle East, or Central Asia, more matriarchal cultures of South East Asia (or particular families) may place as high a value on having daughters.

It is common to speak of the three worldviews of guilt/innocence, shame/honour and fear/power. Setting aside discussion of other paradigms such as defilement/purity and pain/pleasure, the very usefulness of these paradigms as a shorthand runs the risk of a non-nuanced view which does not examine how the different paradigms interact with each other. Most cultural contexts are not exclusively or even dominantly one paradigm or another. Rather, particular paradigms are more or less significant in different environments, and they interplay with each other, reinterpreting and modifying how they function. For example, in cultures categorized as ‘fear-power’ communities, the fear of shame may be a powerful force

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which shapes people’s behaviour. Freeman describes how in sub-Saharan Africa, which is categorized as a fear-power culture, ancestors are feared for what they will do if they are not properly honoured: and people are motivated by the fear of bringing shame on their family.\footnote{Sandra Freeman, “Honour/Shame Dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa,” \textit{The Power of Honor}, Mission Frontiers, January 1, 2015, \url{http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/honour-shame-dynamics-in-sub-saharan-africa}.}

Cross-cultural gospel workers have learned to retell their testimony using shame and honour rather than a framework such as the Four Spiritual Laws, or Two Ways to Live, which are built on a guilt / innocence framework. However, it is not uncommon for such testimonies to simply substitute ‘shame’ for ‘guilt’, and ‘honour’ for ‘innocence,’ yet still be built on a basic transactional penal understanding of sin and righteousness in explaining what Christ has done for us. This is a thoroughly Biblical understanding: but it is not telling the gospel from a Biblical understanding of honour and shame and Christ’s redemptive work of at-one-ment.

\textbf{Useful Lens}

Despite the risks of over-generalization or too simplistic applications, the framework of honour and shame can still remain an important and productive lens which we can look \textit{through}, rather than looking \textit{at} it as the answer. It is a productive lens if we use it as a tool to generate questions of the particular local context, rather than as a blunt instrument of analysis or an overused key which is assumed to unlock all doors. It is a useful lens if it takes us back to ask linguistic and ethnographic questions of the local...
context:° and then to bring those local questions back to Biblical reflection. What kind of questions can be helpful when thinking about of shame and honour?

**Linguistic questions**

If a concept is important in a culture, it is usually reflected by having a significant number of similes in the language. In English, similes for honour and shame include glory and respect: and disgrace, humiliation, scandal. Other languages may have a far more extensive lexicon in the semantic fields of honour and shame. For example, Chinese includes 113 terms for shame.°

Using honour and shame as a productive lens requires us to ask what the different words are that are associated with honour and with shame in any given language. Some of the words will be close similes: others will have different meanings. They may cover different aspects of shame or disgrace, or honour or respect.° Arabic terms for shame, some of which have found their way into other Muslim languages, include *khajal, fadhiyah*, ‘*ayb, ‘ar*. Honour elicits Arabic words such as *sharaf, karamah, ‘ird*. These linked words need to be explored in local languages and mapped into a semantic field. Li et al. offer an example of a concept map around shame:°

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° Similarly Herzfeld points to the need to: “(a) to examine each terminological system as an independent whole in its local setting; (b) to elucidate the relationships between such systems within each linguistic area before proceeding to wider cross-cultural comparisons.” Michael Herzfeld, “Honour and Shame: Problems in the Comparative Analysis of Moral Systems” *Man*, New Series 15, no. 2 (1980): 339.


°° Li, “The organisation of Chinese shame concepts,” 780.
In both Greek and Hebrew, the words for honour and for shame are associated with honour being heavy, weighty, substantial, lasting. In contrast, shame is light, insubstantial, perishing. These contribute significantly to our understanding of how the Bible constructs honour and shame: however, they are not dimensions that are necessarily found in other languages.

A note of caution: it can be hard to talk with people in a community about shame. Particularly if it is associated with dimensions of sexual transgression, it can be uncomfortable or threatening for people to discuss it. We may need to find ways of distancing the discussion from the people we are talking with. For example, “In other communities,” or “a long time ago, what would happen...”?

**Ethnographic questions**

Paradigms find their grounding in specific cultural contexts, and vary in their expression according to the local culture. So if honour and shame are to be used as a
productive paradigm, they need to generate questions for us to explore the specific culture(s) in which we are involved.

We ask what confers (what kind of) honour and what brings (what kind of) shame in each context? How is honour acquired? Is it through courage, educational attainment, generosity, poetic prowess or piety, having a son? What causes shame? Is it on the basis of factors such as cowardice or stinginess, sexual transgression, having someone who in the family who is disabled, or who was viewed as dishonourable in society? In Indonesia, having a grandfather suspected of being a Communist sympathizer can bring associated shame on the family.

Honour can come through genealogy (as seen in the gospels of Matthew and Luke). This leads to the question of whether shame and honour are associated more with particular groups. This could be on the basis of family, class, ethnicity, or geographic location. So for example, people from regions close to a centre of power may be ascribed more honour than those from peripheral areas.

In particular we need to ask how honour and shame are gendered. This is a major area for research, which has still received too little exploration in the burgeoning missiological literature around honour and shame. In many cultures, honour is embodied more in the male body and shame in the female body. Malina, describing the male and female aspects of honour, comments:

12 Cozens and Ochs cite Clementine van Eck’s study showing that seref and namus correspond to the male and female aspects of honour. Simon Cozens and Christopher Ochs, “Putting the shameful body to death: some critiques and a way forward in the soteriology of shame” Transformation 36 no. 4 (2019): 235.
In the moral division of labor, in the concrete activity of concrete people, honor and shame became gender specific, gender embedded. The male is to defend both corporate honor and any female honor embedded in the corporate honor. The female, on the other hand, symbols the shame aspect of corporate honor, that positive sensitivity to the good repute of individuals and groups.13

We see this in how in some parts of the Muslim world, women (not men) are described as having ‘positive shame’. This term can carry associations of modesty or shyness. What does it mean for women in daily behaviour? What kinds of dress and conduct embody ‘positive shame’? What behaviours of women bring honour or shame on themselves, or on the men in their family? Is it how they dress? Laughing loudly in public? Whether or not they have undergone Female Genital Mutilation? Being divorced is commonly shameful for women, even if they have been abused or betrayed. In diaspora communities in the west, women who have been divorced or have left abusive marriages, are often separated from their community by shame, and associate with other women in the same situation. We can also ask what behaviours of men bring honour or shame to themselves or to the women in their family?

In any given context, we need to ask how shame can be removed (if it can) once it has been incurred. In some Pacific and sub-Saharan cultures, shame is removed through isolation: the people who have incurred shame leave the community for a

In some cultures, shame can only be overcome by the shamed person killing themselves. In others, shame is erased by killing the person who has brought shame on their community.

We ask also, not only how honour is acquired, but how honour may be restored once it is lost. Can it be restored? Are there some kinds of honour that once lost cannot be regained?

If shame is expressed in broken relationships, how are relationships resolved or restored? What is the role of mediators in any particular cultural context? Who can become a mediator? And what are their responsibilities? How is the restored relationship signalled? In many communities, eating together, a communal meal, is the signifier of communal relationship restoration. One cross-cultural worker had a relationship breakdown with her local colleagues. Some years later, she was invited to share in a community meal with them. The disagreement was never referred to: but the shared meal told her and the whole community that forgiveness and reconciliation had taken place. The Old Testament had fellowship meals, where part of the sacrifice was offered on the altar, and the people offering the sacrifice ate the rest of it. These were effectively fellowship meals between God and worshipper. The image of a meal as the

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16 For example, Stéphanie Thomson, “5,000 women a year are still being killed in the name of ‘honour,’” World Economic Forum, July 22, 2016, [https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/07/honour-killings-pakistan-qandeel-baloch/](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/07/honour-killings-pakistan-qandeel-baloch/).
symbol of reconciliation gives weight to the Lord’s supper as expression of our reconciliation with God now in Jesus Messiah, as well as a portent of the final heavenly banquet to come.

Stories are an important way to understand how honour and shame are expressed in any particular cultural context. What are the stories that are told about honourable people and about what happens to those who are shamed? They may be folk stories, or stories or real happenings. Who tells the stories, and where are they told? An Egyptian film “Il ‘Ar” explored different understandings of honour and shame in the story of two brothers. One was a devout man who prayed and fasted regularly but lived by smuggling drugs. His brother was a successful doctor who neither prayed nor fasted, but drunk whisky. Who demonstrated honourable behaviour? And who acted in ways that was shameful? We ask, what are the proverbs that talk about shame and honour? And how are they gendered?

Much of the research and writing on honour and shame is in societies that are more collectivist or group-oriented than the west. While there is a developing literature on shame and honour in the west also, it can be helpful to ask both how highly collectivist a society is: and how those dynamics affect the expression of honour and shame. If someone is shamed, the group that they belong to is shamed. How wide is the group that is impacted? And how deep is the shame that they bear? How does it impact their relationship with other groups in the society?

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19 This has been helpfully developed by Brené Brown: https://brenébrown.com/.
A common misconception is to see honour and shame as opposites. It is more accurate to see them as complementary, or even at right-angles to one another. Cozens and Ochs suggest that (in some contexts) “The antithesis of shame is not honour, but pride and hubris.”\(^{20}\) Wikan agrees that honour and shame do not operate as binary opposites. “Good, nice, beautiful” are the opposites paired with shame among women in Cairo and Oman. Wikan suggests that ‘shame’ is a more experience-near for these women, part of their everyday life experience and conversation: whereas ‘honour’ is more experience-distant, not part of their conversation, and bound up more with male ideology.\(^{21}\) In a particular community, what is the relation between honour and shame? What are the opposites that are paired with each?

As well as cultural questions, we need to understand the theological issues before seeking to use these cultural tools in explaining the Gospel. For example, a simple application of shame and honour to the relationship between God and people does not work in most Muslim contexts. This over-simplistic application derives from too close an identification of honour/shame with the innocence/guilt paradigm. We can understand shame as an expression of broken relationships: however within the understanding of orthodox Islam, there is no relationship between the unknowable God and his worshipper. God is Other, He is not impacted by the sin of the believer. If God is not in relationship, there can be no break in the relationship, and therefore talk of the believer’s shame before God (or even, more precariously, of God being shamed by us), makes no sense.

\(^{20}\) Cozens and Ochs, “Putting the shameful body to death,” 242.
The only context in which this image may be successfully explored is that of patronage, where God is our patron and we are therefore required to behave in a way that reciprocates His benefactions to us and brings honour to him. When talking to Muslim friends, patronage is a required prerequisite to apply ideas of honour and shame to the relationship between God and his worshippers.22

**Biblical reflection**

The study of a particular cultural context needs to be brought back into Biblical reflection, helping us to re-read the Bible, and also to bring the Bible to re-engage with the questions and issues emerging from a local cultural context.

Cultural issues explored in other cultures and societies have helped us understand more deeply the cultural context of the Bible. This has fed the developing literature around honour and shame in missiology, with applications both in explaining the Gospel, and also in discipling and church formation.

The Bible explores the nature of true honour, grounding it in a relationship of covenant obedience to God, and participation in God’s community. Books like 1 Peter are written in the context of when following Jesus Messiah leads to ostracism and shame, looking to God as the only and ultimate source of honour, and how that is expressed in a new community context.

The Bible is particularly rich in offering ways to reconsider gender and shame. In the Bible, in contrast to almost all societies, the stories of women who are raped or

sacrificed are told, not hidden. The women are often named (Dinah, Jephthah’s
dughter, the Levite’s concubine, Bathsheba, Tamar). Their shame is not hidden away
in the community, but named and exposed, even when it is perpetrated by patriarchs or
leaders. Contrary to the prevailing view that locates the honour of a community in the
bodies of its women, the book of Judges measures the moral degeneration of a nation
in part by its treatment of women.

In contrast to some western descriptions of the cross, the gospel narratives
focus primarily on the shame of the crucifixion more than the physical torment
involved. The cross embodied shame: even the word was considered too shameful to be
on the lips of a Roman citizen. For many women especially, Jesus’ exposure and bodily
invasion offer a real embodiment of experienced shame taken on our behalf and fully
redeemed. Jesus’ “own nakedness is a necessary component in redeeming and healing
all those whose bodies have been violated.”

These are general explorations. For particular cultural issues and how shame
and honour are experienced and expressed in any given cultural or social context,
analysis needs to be followed by reflection on how those issues may be expressed and
the Biblical response. Then this reflection is taken back to the culture.

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helpful resources on using some of these Biblical stories as a resource to explore how to respond to violence against
women.
24 Cicero described it as a “cruel and disgusting penalty,” and claimed that “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed
not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears.” Brittany E. Wilson, Unmanly Men:
25 Robin Stockitt, Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012): 79, cited in Cozens and
Ochs, “Putting the shameful body to death,” 239.
The popularising of the concepts of honour and shame have meant that they risk becoming a catch-all, a convenient explanation for all sorts of cultural dynamics. However the honour and shame paradigm retains the potential for explanatory value if we can go beyond seeing it as the answer to using it as a productive lens through which to look at different local communities. It can contribute the linguistic and ethnographic questions that we need to ask, in order to understand the specific contexts and social relationships in which we live and work.
A Path from Shame to Belonging
Several months ago a Muslim friend of mine came over to visit. As soon as she walked in the door I could tell that something was troubling her, but I made tea and we sat together and chatted for a while about our kids. As I asked her about her extended family she slowly started to share with me what was worrying her. A few days previously she had found out that a niece from her husband’s side of the family had given birth completely out of the blue. No-one, not even her own mother, had known that she was pregnant. The girl was seventeen, and not yet married. My friend told me that the girl’s father was extremely angry while her mother was very upset and crying all the time. The grandmother refused to come out of the house because she was so ashamed. The neighbours were already starting to gossip as they had heard the cries of a newborn baby and seen the baby clothes drying on the rack outside the house. Shame had been brought on the whole family. Even my friend, who lived in a different area of town, felt the shame, and was afraid that her neighbours would hear about what had happened. She was worried that her kids would be teased at school, and that people would stop buying snacks from her husband’s little tea stall. They too would be shamed by their own community.

This story is maybe a familiar one to many of us. However it still made me feel profoundly uncomfortable, and if I’m honest, angry. No-one appeared to be considering the needs of the girl and the baby. Everyone was too busy considering their own shame and working out how to protect themselves. My friend, while sad, was resigned to think that things would only get worse, but couldn’t see any way to help. Indeed, a
couple of months later I heard that the father had rejected his daughter and she had had to move out of the house along with her baby, to a new community who didn’t know her past.

It is through stories such as these that I have learnt a little of what shame means from a specifically Southeast Asian, and maybe more generally, an Asian perspective. I say ‘a little’ because I know that as a Westerner I will never fully understand something that is so intrinsic to who my friends are, to how society views them, and to how their culture operates.

But it is also through stories such as these that I have learnt to keep listening to people’s stories, because the gospel is big enough to speak into every situation, into every language and culture, and to redeem and restore. Our job is to be ready to present the gospel in such a way that it meets people where they are and speaks to their hearts’ longings. So how could I as a follower of Isa Al-Masih speak into this situation? How could I speak about a gospel that sets us free from the burden of shame?

What is the heartfelt need in this story? What needs to be restored? The emphasis is not on the moral failure of the girl, or the guilt that she might feel for having done something wrong, but rather the emphasis is on the shame brought on her, her family and her baby, by her actions. When I asked my friend how I could pray for her and her family, she didn’t ask for prayers that God would forgive her niece, but rather wanted me to pray that they could quickly find the father of the baby and get him and the niece married so that people would forget what had happened, and the shame would be forgotten by the community and the family’s honour would be restored.
In the minds of most Southeast Asian Muslims sin is not something that affects God, and therefore only needs to be dealt with if it will damage relationships or cause shame. So I’ve found that in conversations with my friends talking about sin usually gets me nowhere. But if I start to talk about shame, it is something that they can all identify with and it has given me opportunities to share stories from the Bible.

I sit cross-legged on the porch of a friend’s house, sipping cool water and watching the daily activity of life in an urban village. We greet everyone who passes by, most on their way to the well to wash, others selling snacks, some chasing after their kids. I ask them questions about who people are, where do they belong in this community? After a while I gently try to move the topic forward and ask about who is most respected in the community and why? The answers come quickly and everyone is in agreement: the leader of the mosque, those who have been on the Haj, the appointed community leader, those who do good for the community especially helping others who are in need. What about the opposite of this I ask? What about those who are not respected, or maybe even are shamed by the community? I am met with silence! Backtracking a little I explain that I don’t want to hear specific details, but what kind of things warrant shame? They talk in hushed tones now, mentioning adultery, pregnancy outside of marriage, rape. They speak of parents shamed by their children who are troublemakers, those who have monetary loans they cannot repay, those who deceive others. Is there any way of getting rid of this shame I ask? Sometimes they say there is a practical solution (such as adoption in the case of infertility, or a quick marriage if a girl is pregnant), sometimes people leave and find a new community, but mostly
‘it just takes time, eventually things are forgotten.’ I take a deep breath and ask if they know the story of Hagar from the Scriptures. Most of them recognise her name and are happy to listen as I share Hagar’s story with them. A story of a woman who carried deep shame, who was shunned by her community, but who was met by a God who saw her, who knew her shame, but who showed great compassion and provided for Hagar. As I speak about a God who “not only sees the shamed, but also pursues them.”26 I pray that my friends will remember this story. That when they experience feelings of shame in their own lives, or when they receive shame from others, they will remember a God who sees them, who cares and who will provide for them.

Shame clearly has many faces and devastating consequences. In Southeast Asia alone these will vary between ethnic groups. I have heard stories from an ethnic group on one island where people experience shame because they haven’t spent enough money on their parents’ funeral. One woman from this ethnic group shared with me how she wasn’t able to visit her parents-in-law after she got married as she and her husband were too poor to travel. The parents-in-law still pile shame on her every time they speak with her on the phone, over 20 years later.

Despite its many faces shame can be defined as “the deep sense that you are unacceptable because of something you did, something that has been done to you, or something associated with you. It is characterised by feelings of exposure or

Perhaps more simply, shame can be described as a ‘loss of face.’ Shame always entails a relational and public aspect. So it is a loss of face before someone, or in someone’s eyes, which may include a loss of face in our own eyes. We experience shame when we fall short, or don’t measure up to the standard that is considered to be honourable, whether that is our own standard, God’s standard, or standards imposed by our friends, by society etc.

The world has many remedies for shame and their focus is usually on remedying our experience before others. In the Western world this can involve self-help books which boost our self-esteem and help us to flood our minds with positive thoughts. Or it could involve doing good works so that others think more highly of us. In collectivist cultures the remedies are more extreme. As people try to regain their honour, those who have caused them shame need to be removed, whether it is through honour killings or ostracism. In Southeast Asia the shame is often covered up, in the hope that even though people know what has happened they won’t talk about it and in time it will be forgotten.

But our primary experience of shame is actually our broken relationship with God. This is what needs to be restored first. Unless our friends can understand that the honour God bestows on them is unconditional, that it is not flawed like the human honour they seek to gain, they will continue to live under the fear of the threat of

\[\text{27 Edward, T. Welch, } \text{Shame Interrupted: How God lifts the pain of worthlessness and rejection (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2012), 2.}\]
\[\text{https://www.podcasts.com/journeywomen/episode/shame-with-abbey-wedgeworth-ep-60.}\]
\[\text{29 For a good discussion of this point see Simon Cozens and Christopher Ochs, “Putting the shameful body to death: some critiques and a way forward in the soteriology of shame.” Transformation 36, no. 4 (2019): 238.}\]
shame. As one friend explained to me, she is constantly wondering what others think of her, to the point that it dictates her behaviour. She is a slave to the opinions of others.

So how can we help our friends find freedom from shame and from the fear of shame?

During my first few years in Southeast Asia I met and was befriended by a lady who was a believer from a Christian background. She was kind to me and after a while I started visiting her in her home and she was happy for us to read passages from the Bible together. As her trust in me grew she opened up about her life, and the deep and hurtful pain she carried from years of abuse, that she had been unable to share with anyone else for fear of being judged. She wept a lot, she apologised a lot and her whole body demeanour displayed a lady who believed she was worth nothing. My local language was completely inadequate for this situation, and so I hugged her a lot, I read Bible passages to her in the local language over and over again about God’s love for her, and I prayed with her (usually in English which she didn’t understand but it was all I could manage). Then our lives went in different directions and I didn’t see her again for many years. Until one evening we met again at a wedding reception, and she was transformed. Her face beamed, she was confident as she chatted with others, and she didn’t stop saying thank you to me. I apologised that my language had been so bad, that I had been out of touch for so long and she stopped me. She looked me in the eyes and said ‘You loved me and you pointed me to the one who loves and values me’. Her relationship with Jesus was the cure for her shame. Her new confidence came from Him.
Sharing stories about Jesus is powerful. Jesus, during his life on earth didn’t shy away from those who were in a place of shame, he didn’t scorn those who carried the burden of shame. Rather he met them where they were at. He loved them, he valued them, and their association with Him restored them to a place of honour. My favourite story to share in my context is the story of the sinful woman in Luke 7. I ask my listeners to imagine a woman from the red-light district of our city coming to the official building at the centre of town to try to meet the President. Everyone knows who she is. She is gossiped about, dirty, avoided by others. Of course if she is caught trying to get near the President she will be thrown in jail. What a risk this lady took to meet Jesus. Why? Because she knew He was her only hope, and because of that she loved Him. And this woman who has only known humiliation, who has only known scorn, who has only known rejection, this woman is accepted and praised by Jesus. He exchanges her shame with honour and she is valued by Him.

Our love and acceptance of others, our valuing of them can also play a part in helping others to move from a place of shame to one of knowing they are loved and valued as God’s child. I am very aware that this is much easier for me to do as a foreigner, and that associating with those who are shamed will sometimes come at a great cost to my Southeast Asian friends, as they run the risk of losing their own honour in the eyes of others. This was the first question one of my MBB friends had for me after I had shared with her more about this topic: what should our own attitude be to those who are being shamed by the community? Again, God sets the example for us, whether it is illustrated in the story of Hosea and Gomer, or by the father who risks his own honour to restore his prodigal son to a place of honour, or ultimately as Jesus endures the shame of the cross in order to relieve us of our shame.
Time and time again Jesus takes people from a place of shame, a place where they are looked down on, made to feel worthless, small and not valued. And he restores them. He restores their reputation in front of those who had shamed them. He touches them and makes them clean. He tells them that they are forgiven and that they belong with Him. He gives them a new identity, as he makes them acceptable before God, and He restores people to a new community, to His community. This is hugely important as shame is firstly about our standing before God, but it is also about our standing in community. As people who are forgiven and restored from a place of shame to a place of honour, we become part of a community who are running towards God with our shame. Together we become a community who know that we follow the one who identifies with us because he scorned the ultimate shame, the shame of the cross (Heb 12:2), and we become a community who believe the promise that ‘the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame” (1 Peter 2:6).

30 Wedgeworth, “Shame.”
The Role of Nigerian Women in Interfaith Community and Dialogue:
Exposing Shame and Restoring Honour
Abstract

The purpose of exploring shame in the context of Nigeria with emphasis on the North and Middle Belt will show how interfaith community is an avenue to restore women’s honour. Examining how shame manifests in Nigeria’s history and social structure explains the embeddedness of shame in the experience of Muslim and Christian women amidst religious division. An interfaith community centre in the Middle Belt exemplifies how honour occurs through relationships and the significant need to openly address shame. A theological and cultural anthropological perspective provides ways for engaging in mission and the valuable role of women in interfaith community.
Background and history

Nigeria is the sixth most populous country in the world, booming in cultural diversity and expected to reach a population of over 392 million by 2050.\(^31\) The rapid growth has contributed to the long history of tension between the two most prominent religions, Christianity and Islam. Nigeria is one of the few countries with a population balance of Christians who primarily reside in the South (49.3%) and Muslims in the North (48.8%).\(^32\) This demographic divergence continues to create religious tension today especially among minority Christians in the North. A transition zone, known as the Middle Belt, stretches across central Nigeria and straddles both populations.

Complex influences, including the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in the North during the 19\(^{th}\) Century, the slave trade, British colonial rule in the 20\(^{th}\) Century, and the presence of Boko Haram, have all contributed to the reinforcement of a traditional hierarchical society, the marginalization and disenfranchising of women, and continued religious violence. These in turn have impacted upon both Muslim and Christian women’s experiences of shame and have led to the need for interfaith dialogue and community as a way of restoring honour.

The implementation of sharia law in twelve northern Nigeria states between 2000–2001 drastically increased the growth of Islam, contributing to increased religious tension with minority Christians.\(^33\) Each state enforces different laws that

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impact the spiritual freedom of Christians. Sharia law reinforces unity among Muslims strengthening their religious identity while neglecting minority Christian women. This amplifies the need for interfaith initiatives that apply to the twelve sharia states and the Middle Belt where religious communities collide.

Further, many Nigerian Christians fear the misapplication of sharia law that extends beyond legal reform.34 Fear brews among Christian women preventing them from expressing their faith. Sarah and Esther, both Christians originally from Borno State in northern Nigeria, explained that they once hated Muslims, and did not wish to associate with them, and Esther expressed fear of being targeted as a Christian, eventually leading her to flee to the Middle Belt.35 Fear prevents the disenfranchised from flourishing and neglects their spiritual freedom. Women must emerge from their experience of fear that contributes to social shame in order to form positive views of themselves and humanity.

**Interfaith Community Centre in the Middle Belt**

The interfaith community centre in the Middle Belt was established by American missionaries Toby and Alycia, the late Joseph, a Nigerian Christian, and Sadiq, a Nigerian Muslim. They recognized the tensions between Muslims and Christians during ethnic clashes in the Middle Belt in 2010. Alycia said they asked, “what would [it] look like if Christians chose to show love to their neighbors rather than hate?”36 The centre opened in January 2011 and is intentionally located two blocks from the central

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35 Interview with Sarah October 19, 2017; Interview with Esther November 12, 2017.
36 Personal communications with Alycia, April 22, 2020.
mosque that is a “no go” zone for Christians. The purpose of the community is to “Build Relationships in City Centre” and the acronym “BRiCC” was adopted as its name. The board and staff include Muslim and Christian Nigerians, men and women, who seek to develop programs from one to three months long, for students ranging from primary school age to older adults. Programs include basic education for men and women (math, English, computers, and health education for women only), as well as skill acquisition training for women (catering, makeup, decoration, and tie-dyeing cloth). From this foundation, intentional dialogue for women to express their personal experiences, such as shame associated with religious tension, can be instigated. Interfaith dialogue can vary from informal relationships to formal seminars, depending on the community’s needs. Staff collaborate with community members and peace organizations to meet the community’s growing needs, such as child abuse prevention, peacemaking, and trauma healing workshops, along with a community library and occasional health clinics. Sandra, a Nigerian Christian who is defying the traditional structure of male leadership and is the youngest staff member at BRiCC, stated that BRiCC’s “hope is that trust and community spirit that has been lost due to fighting and turmoil will be rekindled.”

BRiCC was one of the first interfaith initiatives in the Middle Belt. Students attend classes to build their skills, receive extra support, develop friendships, and advocate the centre’s goal to dismantle the religious divide. Students pay a small fee to enrol in programs. Interfaith community seeks to overcome the underpinnings of Nigeria’s history, including the marginalization of women and the enforcement of

37 Personal communications with Sandra, April 22, 2020.
sharia law in the North. Sarah and Esther participated in the interfaith community centre, giving them the opportunity to learn about each other's stories. By addressing their fears and overcoming shame festering from religious stigma, they reconciled with Muslim women, receiving restorative honour through community. BRiCC is a beacon that allows Nigerians to rediscover their identity and experience belonging, though an underlying challenge is the significant need to discern appropriate ways to address the weight of shame women carry. Although BRiCC’s educational programs include the peacemaking and trauma healing workshops, it is necessary to explicitly address shame through formal and elaborate discussions. This will enrich the community where women can thrive and develop future initiatives to serve the community holistically.

**The Intensity of Shame for Being a Women**

An in-depth analysis of honour and shame is critical to create effective ways of sharing the gospel. To deny women’s experience of shame diminishes their humanity and the redemptive intervention of God’s grace. Interfaith dialogue on honour and shame openly acknowledges women’s sense of being human. Andrew Mbuvi, a Kenyan Christian, affirms honour and shame is key to the value system of African societies. This emphasizes that open discussions with Nigerian Christians and Muslims must take place in order to highlight ways the gospel restores human dignity and honour.

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Understanding the psychological experiences of shame in the context of community is vital because community is highly valued in Nigerian culture and plays a strong influence in bearing honour. John Bradshaw elaborates on the psychological experiences of shame, including social constructs such as roles that can become a “refuge of hiding” and the source of one’s shame.39 This applies to the role of Muslim and Christian women who are denied opportunities in community to become their authentic self, especially relating to expressions of faith and spiritual freedom. I have encountered Muslim Hausa women in the Middle Belt who often have limited education compared to men. The lack of reading and writing skills prevents women from learning sacred religious texts in order to encounter God and develop personal understandings of their faith. Similarly, minority Christian women in the North are exposed to religious and gender persecution, minimizing their opportunity to engage in faith without fear.

Muslim and Christian women are highly vulnerable to experience fear and shame, feeling diminished and forced to hide in times of intense persecution without the opportunity to grow spiritually. Interfaith community supports women to navigate through challenges and pursue their faith by learning in community. BRiCC is attentive to women’s needs and provides equal opportunities for women to learn.

Stories give meaning to experiences of shame that women endure. Esther is a Christian who grew up in Borno State renting a home with her family from a Muslim man. She alluded to living in fear of conflict and insecurity because of their differences of faith.40 Seeking interfaith relationships that are non-shaming allows women to

40 Interview with Esther, November 12, 2017.
expose their true self and heal from experiences of shame, including feelings of insecurity and gender-based violence.\textsuperscript{41} Maintaining a holistic view of the person provides perspective to the effects of shame women experience and can lead to their honour being restored. I witnessed Muslim and Christian women grow through learning basic skills at BRiCC such as catering. For example, Esther now shows a sense of accomplishment, understands her self-worth, and feels included and seen in community. Similarly, Fatima, who is a Hausa Muslim, testifies to profound transformation in her view of others, growing in her sense of togetherness while gathering in the classroom with Christians, something she would not otherwise have done.\textsuperscript{42} Sharing common interests becomes a catalyst for fostering intentional dialogue in order to restore women’s value in community. Exposing religious tension often leads women to recall their feelings of shame. Addressing this in interfaith community and being known in new interfaith relationships will redeem their humanity.

\textbf{The Private versus Public Space}

Another major issue understanding honour and shame among Nigerian women involves the division between private and public spaces that is prominent in the North. Women are prevented from entering public spaces and engaging in interfaith community, denying them “genuine human dignity.”\textsuperscript{43} In the Middle Belt, such as the area where BRiCC is located, restrictions for women are not as severe, as seen in the fact that


\textsuperscript{42} Interview with Fatima, May 23, 2018.

Sandra works in a position of leadership. Also, my experience working with Hausa Muslim women parallels Robson Elsbeth’s understanding of “Hausa wife seclusion.” The seclusion of wives in domestic space can communicate social status, economic ability, reproductive capacity and sexuality. For example, a Muslim woman’s participation in a public space, such as trading in the market, could bring shame to her husband who cannot financially support the family. This may lead her to feel inadequate and unworthy because she no longer adheres to her husband’s expectations of domestic responsibilities. This becomes a challenge for Muslim women when expected to conform to traditional practices such as wife seclusion, leading to apprehension when initially participating in interfaith community.

On the other hand, visiting Hausa women in their homes is the greatest honour, as it represents entering their sacred space. Also, I have experienced division of space to ensure women avoid sharing areas with men even within their own home. These experiences of shame emerging from practices such as wife seclusion can be difficult for Christian women to understand and respond to. However, interfaith community and dialogue brings light to these hidden experiences.

BRiCC is strategically located in a “no go” zone for Christians and is conscious of what space communicates. Interfaith community meets Muslim women halfway, in a space that respects their traditional cultural practices such as wife seclusion, developing skills that benefit their domestic responsibilities like cooking, while cautiously crossing religious barriers to engage with Christians. Muslim Hausa women

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bear a great burden seeking to maintain their reputations as a “good wife,” which can lead to internalised oppression. This can manifest into social shame if Muslim women fail to meet high expectations to fulfill their role as wives. Focusing on the transformative role of Jesus in the lives of women will create interfaith community in public and private spaces. Muslim and Christian women will be able to dialogue about personal experiences of shame that emerge from different practices in a shared, sacred and safe space such as BRiCC.

**Jesus Bestows Honour**

Learning from Mbuvi’s perspective on the ways Jesus radically changes social constructs such as public versus private space is valuable. Mbuvi pleads, “the gospel must inform the African church with its inversion of honor and shame, redefining that which is honorable and showing how the honor of Christ removes all barriers (Galatians 3:28).” I believe understanding honour and shame will profoundly impact the advancement of the Gospel in Nigeria. Christians will have richer access to understanding of how Christ transforms relationships and social boundaries through the lens of honour and shame in the biblical narrative. BRiCC does not currently utilize biblical stories to influence its community, but Nigerian churches can be equipped to teach Scripture from this perspective in order to influence congregants to participate in interfaith community. For example, two local pastors in the Middle Belt identify how the gospel is beginning to “germinate” by deeply changing their congregants’ views

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and receptiveness towards their Muslim neighbours. This will prompt Christians to approach Muslim women, leading them to experience new ways of being their authentic self in relationship, including expressing their faith and spirituality in public spaces without fear, shame, or condemnation.

Indeed, Jesus is central to the mission of fostering interfaith community that restores honour to women, reclaiming their value. Jayson Georges and Mark Baker point out how a “common pattern in Jesus’ ministry of honoring the shamed [is] via public association,” such as the women who anointed Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:44-46). Jesus ascribes honour to women in public, which shows women are worthy to hold positions and be highly esteemed. Interfaith dialogue can cover topics such as women’s experiences of public shame and marginalization, in order to expose ways community can help process their stories and restore honour to women in public spaces. This requires BRiCC and future initiatives to formally address views that communities hold of women and ways this affects their experience of honour and shame. Religious leaders are essential to this process as they engage with community outside their religious tradition to show honour to the human person above religious affiliation.

**Contextualizing Interfaith Learning**

Muslim women experience different forms of shame than Christians and interfaith community offers meaningful ways to restore honour to women through learning. For

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example, women under sharia law can receive religious education that can correct misconceptions and change their lives, as each state implements different laws that must be contextualized.\textsuperscript{49} This will allow women to respect local traditions and authorities, as the Middle Belt is different than communities in the North. For example, the rise of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the Middle Belt emphasizes the need to understand the context of where women are fleeing from in order to appreciate their beliefs and practices, reduce religious stigma contributing to their shame, and help them integrate into community. Also, learning the perceptions Muslim and Christian women hold of each other will indicate specific areas for intentional dialogue. Women will develop empathy for one another by resolving misunderstandings of religious beliefs in order to honour the other's personhood and create harmony through learning.

Additionally, it is critical to offer support to Muslim and Christian women navigating unchartered territory to appropriately foster learning regarding religious traditions and practices. For example, the issue of early marriage for Muslim girls, as young as fourteen years old in some states in the North, increases girls’ exposure to social shame from lack of basic life skills, and risk of reproductive health issues if they conceive, as bearing children is an expectation.\textsuperscript{50} This limits the opportunity for Muslim girls to understand the influence of Islamic tradition on their futures, avoiding grievous experiences of social shame such as feeling incompetent and unworthy in their marriages. Muslim girls facing early marriage are less likely to pursue interfaith

\textsuperscript{50} Bunting, “Authentic Sharia,” 156, 158.
community because they may fear Christians are prejudiced against them. Creating intentional dialogue will unveil underlying sensitive issues of shame Muslim women face that differ from Christian women. Community centres must invest time understanding what discussions are a priority, based on relevant cultural issues and misunderstandings, to facilitate conversations that will redeem women's honour.

Further, education for girls and women will allow them to receive basic skills and support as they wrestle with personal convictions. For example, Maryam, a Hausa Muslim, experienced the death of her husband two months after their wedding. She described her determination to further her education after going through the catering program at BRiCC. She received acceptance from Christian women as a new single mother rather than facing hardships alone, as well as improving her baking skills. Maryam is now studying physics in university, demonstrating strength and perseverance instead of succumbing to the pressure to remarry, losing status in community after her husband died and feeling ashamed to express herself. Maryam is fully convinced of her worth and capabilities after exposing her vulnerabilities, and then receiving honour through interfaith community support.

A proverb in northern Nigeria reveals the life and status of Muslim women: “[she] crosses the threshold of her husband’s house twice: when she is brought in as a bride, and when she is carried out as a corpse.” This signifies how Muslim women are dependent on their husbands, and the obligations they are expected to fulfill to receive

51 Personal communications with Maryam, 2017-2018.
honour. The proverb reinforces the role of religion in determining a Muslim woman’s status and prestige.\textsuperscript{53} It is critical women have the opportunity to develop a sense of purpose and value, and to recognize their worth beyond the threshold of their husband’s honour by participating in interfaith learning. The value of such interfaith relationships is seen in Maryam’s experience of acquiring restorative honour and obtaining worth that extends beyond marital status.

While interfaith community involves diverse educational opportunities and skills training, religious leaders’ involvement is also crucial. Basic education programs such as catering tailor well to a woman’s traditional role and equip her with community support. However, Christian theological institutions and Islamic schools must teach the sacredness and protection of all human life, showing honour to humanity and increasing interfaith dialogue.\textsuperscript{54} Jonathan Abbas believes Christian theological education will reduce gender-based violence against Christian and Muslim women and seek to restore their humanity and value.\textsuperscript{55} Formal interfaith discussions can include experiences relevant to women’s roles as wives, mothers, daughters and aunties. It is important that BRiCC and future initiatives weigh the significance of understanding specific religious traditions while assessing the impact on community. For example, BRiCC’s peacemaking workshop could devote more time to exploring the differences of Islamic and Christian views on topics such as family. Theological educators must encourage Christians to initiate conversations with Muslim neighbours and support

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\textsuperscript{53} Werthmann, “Matan Bariki,” 121, 127.  
\textsuperscript{55} Abbas, “The Role of Theological Institutions,” 41.
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women’s voices in discussions. Although I have witnessed Christian leaders and pastors welcome Muslim neighbours to discuss the person of Jesus, I have also heard testimonies of pastors expressing dislike towards Muslims. It is vital the church actively fosters space for interfaith dialogue that includes women demonstrating the importance of loving humanity created in God's image and leading to admiration for the Creator (Genesis 1:27). This will reshape women’s views of their self-worth and humanity that will contagiously affect their neighbourhoods, decreasing the religious division.

**Theological Reflections: The Samaritan Woman**

Humera Khan expresses the benefits she experiences from engaging in interfaith dialogue as a woman. Khan describes the desire to “discover [her] own spiritual depths without having to constantly defend herself or be reactionary,” which should drive Muslim and Christian women to participate in interfaith relationships. Mutual respect will remove misunderstandings and allow women to grow in their faith without having to defend their beliefs or practices. Christians have a great responsibility to reflect Jesus Christ by forming interfaith relationships. For example, Jesus crossed many barriers when encountering the Samaritan woman, and developed relationships with the marginalized (John 4:1-42). Also, the Samaritan woman immediately makes ethnic distinctions about Jesus, a Jew, and the disciples were “surprised to find [Jesus]...”

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talking with a woman” (John 4:9, 27). Jesus’ openness must shape the way Christians approach others, as He extends acceptance to others because of His unconditional love. It is critical that interfaith community leaders discern ways women can integrate smoothly into discussions, which requires religious leaders to exemplify humility in their engagements as well.

Remarkably, Jesus brings honour to the Samaritan woman and demonstrates love that is not constricted by boundaries such as ethnicity, gender or religion (John 4:1-42). Women in northern Nigeria endure similar experiences as the Samaritan woman because her body symbolizes boundaries, including ethnicity, religion, class, age, and marital status.58 For example, Muslim women wear veil coverings to express their religious identity, but veils can also communicate social status and prestige.59 Unfortunately Muslim women’s veils hinder some Christian women’s receptiveness to them. This restricts Muslims from pursuing interfaith community because they experience a lack of acceptance. Also, different veil coverings, which can indicate status, may impact the integration of some Muslim women of a lower social class into community because of the hostility they receive from women of a higher class. Interfaith community seeks to remove rigid boundaries and establish bridges not barricades. Rather than symbolic expressions of faith becoming a point of division, they can help women communicate their identity through fostering discussion. Muslim women will become comfortable to symbolically remove their veils, forming authentic

59 Elisha Renne, Veils, Turbans, and Islamic Reform in Northern Nigeria (Bloomington, IN: Indian University Press, 2018), 99-100.
and non-shaming relationships with Christian women. They will receive acceptance and honour for their expressions of faith and ways they experience God. It is vital that BRiCC and future initiatives continually navigate the public versus private space pertaining to Muslim women's participation in faith practices based on the local interpretation of Islam. This is an important area that requires improvement to reduce religious stigma. This will help Christian women understand Muslim women's faith and appropriately cultivate discussions that honour traditions.

Another example of how BRiCC fosters restorative honour to women through dialogue includes a seminar on child abuse prevention offered to Muslim and Christian men and women. The goal was to teach the value of caring for children, and to prevent and identify forms of abuse that bury victims in shame. This avenue creates an allegiance among women apart from their religious tradition and while in the presence of men, acknowledging women's roles as wives, mothers, daughters and aunties in families and the community. BRiCC recognizes the pervasive issue of child abuse and extends care to the community while honouring differences of faith and cultural values. Muslim and Christian women receive honour from being included and recognized as irreplaceable members in families, removing stigma and creating a bridge between religious communities.

Above all, interfaith communities must address how paternal relations and family honour that strengthens community belonging must not trump an individual's relationship with God. Aihiokhai observes that communities who belong to a religious tradition “stop being [a] manifest source of relational encounter with the divine. The
divine ends up being replaced by the idol of the collective self.” Strong kinship relations are central to Nigerian culture and must be a source of encouragement for seeking God, whether Muslim or Christian, rather than collective belonging being the source of one’s identity. For example, the practice of hospitality can consume the identity of Muslim and Christian women, as they fulfill their role to serve others and strengthen social relationships. Similarly, many Nigerian Christians spend time gaining status in community through faithfully attending church fellowships, while neglecting their intimacy with God. This dynamic must be tackled for interfaith community to flourish and fulfill its purpose—discussing individual’s experiences of God in multi-religious community to avoid the idolization of the collective self. Religious communities must look beyond themselves and be shaped first by their intimacy with God and His design for humanity. This will develop healthy interfaith community and instigate a faithful response from the Church. Women will have the liberty to experience God who reveals new meaning to their personhood and positively influences humanity’s reverence for the Creator.

Assessing Motives for Interfaith Engagement

It is especially important women cautiously reflect on their intentions for participating in interfaith community and dialogue. Building relationships must not be rooted in converting the other or developing strategies for evangelism. The desire to learn about the other out of love for one’s neighbour and acknowledge their humanity, aside

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60 Aihiokhai, “Love one Another,” 497.
from their religious tradition, must remain central to one’s motive for interfaith relationships. Muslim and Christian communities must steer away from triumphalism and the duty to convert the other.\textsuperscript{63} Unfortunately, the history of religious violence in Nigeria seems to partially stem from insensitive efforts by Christian leaders seeking to convert people to Christianity.\textsuperscript{64} For example, I spoke with a Nigerian pastor who expressed pressure from his superior to convert people, and confesses to lying about the number of new converts.\textsuperscript{65} Also, Western Christian missionaries have influenced some Nigerian pastors to “perform” and “win” unbelievers into the Kingdom, which can become a source of shame for pastors. This does not represent the meaning or purpose of the Christian faith that is anchored in Christ’s love for humanity. Christ provocatively opposes societal norms to brings restorative justice to the marginalized, including Nigerian women, rather than advocating crusading efforts.

Turaki stresses that Nigerians must appreciate the other’s faith and “[promote and protect their] common destiny as humans and Nigerians” while acknowledging their past. Women can birth new communities that nurture change for the next generation while religious leaders and scholars support their role in interfaith dialogue. The thoughts women bring to the table will provoke theological reflections that enrich our understanding of God.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{63} Aihiokhai, “Love one Another,” 506-507.
\textsuperscript{64} Aihiokhai, “Love one Another,” 506-507.
\textsuperscript{65} Interview with Nigerian Pastor, 2018.
Implications for Christian Mission

There is great risk in inviting the “other” into one’s private world, and women also face risk as they step into public spaces. For example, Muslim and Christian women could risk their reputation in community for engaging with someone outside of their religious tradition. Esther Meek describes “risky knowing” as the “disposing of our being, [and] a passionate commitment to trust things we cannot fully justify at the time of our effort,” which strengthens community focusing on the other through thoughtful dialogue.67 This reflects Jesus who chose vulnerability over comfort and extended honour and dignity to women even in public spaces.

Nigerian Christians must extend unmerited grace to their Muslim neighbours to demonstrate the radical love of Christ. Mbuvi reflects on Philippians 2:6-7 describing how Jesus assumed “the lowest position in social hierarchy. He became like the scum of the earth so that he might save the scum of the earth […] Forsaking his glory and honour […] to be a salve with no honor.”68 Jesus transforms shame for Christian and Muslim women who are disenfranchised and raises them with honour. Lindy Backues urges Christians to adopt Jesus' example of self-emptying and humility as our approach to discipleship.69 This will alter the way Nigerian Christians engage with Muslims because Jesus exemplifies risking comforts without hesitation to compassionately embrace the “dishonourable.” Modeling interfaith relationships

67 Esther Lightcap Meek, Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 59–60.
beyond BRiCC into new neighbourhoods requires a faithful commitment. This involves disposing of one’s self, as Meek describes above, rather than becoming paralysed by fear and religious stigma or threats because of their faith. In this way, women will embrace their neighbours, leading to restorative honour and justice by diminishing the religious divide. A deeper understanding of Jesus’ humility will influence women to approach interfaith relationships because He is faithful to profoundly redeem women in community.

An integral part of acquiring honour in Nigerian culture involves community, because human presence is cherished in relationships. Jesus clearly defines who our neighbours in the narrative of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus commands Christians to respond to human need across barriers because “neighborliness is nonspatial; it is qualitative.”70 Interfaith community that practices neighborliness that will weaken the public versus private divide, transforming the way women receive honour, by reciprocating one another’s needs. In turn, this will influence society to dispose of shameful public responses to women.

Gender-based violence against Muslim and Christian Nigerian girls and women opens up a significant opportunity for both religious communities to respond in a vulnerable and unified way, affectionately honouring the other and seeking justice together. Communities that respond to loss are often described as having less rigid boundaries defining family.71 Nigerian communities value social relationships beyond their immediate family, and the way they extend social ties to other members of the

70 Howard Thurmon, Jesus and the Diheresinherited, Reprint ed (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 79.
community is evident through the national mourning, expressed by both Muslim and Christian communities. Exploring how Muslims and Christians grieve and experience death is a valuable part of intentional dialogue which can improve trauma healing while being sensitive to cultural traditions and practices. It will take courage for Muslim and Christian women to cross the religious divide as they respond to the needs of others risking their comforts to bear honour and compassion even through grief.

Finally, BRiCC embraces women and supports them to overcome social and religious stigma that contributes to their shame. When women expose their vulnerabilities, they receive acceptance and their role in community becomes esteemed. Jesus empathizes with the disinherit ed through this process of unveiling their shame because he too stood with his “back against the wall.” It is our duty as committed Christians to learn how honour and shame impacts the way the Gospel is introduced to neighbourhoods especially among the disinherit ed. Backues reminds us “the Gospel takes on the clothing of its proximate surroundings, honouring and esteeming local context. Like the Word become flesh, the Gospel “moves into the neighborhood,” configuring specific ways to honour women who have been shamed (John 1:14, The Message). Thankfully Jesus redeems women’s experience of shame leading them to flourish and invites them to be their true self, which Jesus forms in His image.

72 Koziel, “Gender-Based Violence,” 47.
73 Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherit ed, 98.
74 Backues, “Humility,” 123.
References


Saving God’s Face on Instagram
She tucked the airphone between her ear and hijab; in front of her there was a laptop and a cup of coffee. Sitting in a luxurious cafe in the city of Bandung, Dewi looks like a typical Indonesian millennial generation Muslim woman who comes from the upper middle class. With confidence she took a selfie and then was busy updating her status on Instagram: “My honor is that I embrace the true religion and I have kept a pure and holy life.” Dewi is a young businesswoman. She has a famous Muslim clothing line with a very high level of online sales. She is also an Instagram celebrity who has 7 million followers.

**The Face of Allah in Indonesia**

In Indonesia, honor and shame are not only related to local culture and community, but also very closely related to religious life. Usually the effort to increase honor is not only done for the benefit of a person and their family but also to defend their religion or to “save the face” of their Lord.

These past few years I have watched the efforts social media users make to save God’s face. They try to maintain the honor of the God they worship by what they display on social media and also through their interactions digitally, especially among the young millennial Muslims.

Since the rise of ISIS and increasing radicalism, the face of God and Islam in Indonesia has changed. Previously, Islam in Indonesia was known as a religion full of tolerance, and there were only a few radical Islamic groups. After the influence of Islamic radicals spread massively, I saw a lot of debate on social media about what true Islam is, what the real face of Islam is, and what the real face of Allah is.
In the midst of debate and discussion about the true identity of Islam, the younger generation try to express their faith in different ways. They try to display their Islamic identity on social media and create a new image of millennial Islam that is exclusive, rich, pious, and fashionable.

**Honor and Fame**

According to research by M. Hatta and the Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture at Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University in Jakarta, millennial Muslims in Indonesia prefer to study their religion through social media. This has contributed to the rise of social-media-savvy preachers who build their esteemed image through social media. Social media is helping to drive a new movement known as *hijrah,* in which Indonesian Muslim millennials began to build trends in their spiritual life by exhibiting a pure Islamic lifestyle and showing it on social media.

Because of this phenomenon, the expression of honor and shame in the digital generation has also changed. Before the digital era came to Indonesia, the practice of honor and shame was confined to the local community among extended families. With the advent of social media, the practice of honor and shame has become wider and deeper.

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76 The word *hijrah* refers to the journey Muhammad took from Mecca to Medina. Philip Kitley, *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for Intercultural Studies, 2000), 134.
77 The rules of honor and shame in each community differ, even though in general they have the same values in accordance with the customs and religions of each family. For example, in general women who become pregnant out of wedlock will be considered as carrying shame and need to be exiled. In the Islamic community someone who can perform the Hajj pilgrimage will be considered honorable.
In Indonesia, honor, and fame have been closely related. The more famous people follow a certain religion the more famous that religion is, and the honor of the followers of that religion also increased.

The trend of hijrah has become very popular as many young celebrities practice it and show it off on social media. From May 24 to 26, 2019, several celebrities hosted a festival in Central Jakarta called Hijrah Fest. The main mission of the festival was to facilitate the development of the hijrah trend and encourage the increasing number of millennial Muslim communities in Indonesia. Carrying the theme 'Unforgettable Hijrah,' the festival showcased various figures and Muslim communities sharing their knowledge, experiences, and stories of their hijrah trips. Since the festival, more and more young millennial celebrities have joined the trend, publicly declaring their intention to hijrah, or to leave their less Islamic ways and move toward a more religious way of life.

For example, Ria Ricis, before becoming the most successful female YouTuber in Indonesia and in Asia, was already known on Instagram as a celebrity with millions of followers, posting interesting Islamic content. Now she has 17.7 million followers on Instagram and 18.8 million subscribers of her YouTube channel. Zaskia Sungkar, who promotes hijrah trendy fashion, has 19.5 million followers on Instagram.

This change is not only happening among young people but also among Islamic religious leaders. A few years ago when we talked about imams (clerics), it was usual to refer to religious leaders who were modest and respected by their followers in their local communities. Today imam has a different new category, with many of them now celebrities. Cleric Abdul Somad has more than 10 million followers on YouTube,
Instagram, and Facebook. Hanan Attaki has 8 million followers on Instagram, and Yusuf Mansur has more than 5 million followers on YouTube, Instagram and Twitter. These celebrity imams are not only preachers, but they also often display luxurious lifestyles. Many of their followers are well-known artists who promote their Islamic lifestyles alongside online businesses selling Umrah pilgrimage tours and Islamic-friendly clothing.

Because of the hijrah trend, the face of Islam among millennials has changed. Those who used to be called pious were mostly from lower class groups who went to a pesantren school to become religious teachers. Usually they go to school there because their parents cannot afford to send them to regular school. Pesantren are a good alternative because the cost of education is very cheap, and they can also study religion. However, since the hijrah movement has been heavily promoted by celebrities, piety in Islam has also now become a prestigious trend. They are the generation of millennials that are famous, rich, and very fashionable. The face of God has changed: God is not only in favor of those who are poor and meek but also of those who are rich and famous.

**Honor, Wealth, and Hijrah Fashion**

Not only fame but wealth and fashion have also become important aspects of honor in the society at least in Indonesia. The same thing happens in the church. From Martin

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79 Pesantren are Islamic education schools that usually provide dormitories for students because students come from disadvantaged families.
Luther’s protest about papal wealth and the selling of indulgences to the recent controversy regarding preachers and their shoes that appeared in The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times, there has been tension regarding displays of wealth in the church.

Since it first appeared, the @PreachersNSneakers Instagram account has gone viral. This account features celebrity pastors who wear extravagantly priced outfits. We do not fully understand the reasons behind the appearance of celebrity pastors who use clothes and shoes that are very expensive. But if we look at the theology behind the prosperity gospel we can understand that they want to display the face of Christianity or the face of followers of Christ who are fashionable, prestigious, expensive, and honorable. They want to display the rich, generous, loving face of God. After all, God is the creator and the owner of everything in the world. Therefore, as representatives of God in the world it is important to show to the world that they live according to what they believe.

Similar to what is happening within the church, an elite group of young people who can be categorized as “devout bourgeoisie” has emerged in Islam. These are young people who are successful with their careers and businesses, but on the other hand are also very devout Muslims. Aurélie Biard explained in the Eurasian context that for these young Islamic entrepreneurs, economic success and wealth are rewards from

God. They get the wealth because they have successfully, and faithfully, carried out Islamic law.\textsuperscript{83}

This young generation of Islam not only enjoys life’s luxuries, but also displays them on their social media, especially Instagram. They often exhibit expensive branded items such as shoes, bags, and clothes. They also upload their prestigious socialite activities, and travel to various developed countries, using business-class flights and enjoying halal cuisine offered in world-class restaurants.

Clothing is one of the most important factors in Islam to maintain honor both for men and women.\textsuperscript{84} For this reason, when the hijrah movement became popular, the Islamic clothing business also boomed. Lots of new fashion brands have sprung up that offer modern, fashionable, and elegant Islamic dress styles. The price of these clothes is very diverse and can even be very expensive. Hijab fashion shows in big cities also offer the concept of hijrah for the elite.

**Public Honor and Shamming**

As it is generally understood, in a society that places a high value on honor and shame, the role of a person is determined by public expectations. Public expectation determines the clothes you wear, the person you marry, the way you speak, behave and relate to others.\textsuperscript{85} With the development of social media, the scope of the public is

\textsuperscript{83} Aurélie Biard, “‘Bourgeois’ Islam, Prosperity Theology and Ethics in Muslim Eurasia,” (Central Asia Program Paper 198, The George Washington University, January 2018), 1, \url{https://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/12116}.

\textsuperscript{84} Jayson Georges says, “Because the body showcase a person’s honor, the food people eat and the clothing they wear indicate social status as well. For example, the book of Esther opens with King Ahasuerus’s displaying the splendor of his majesty through lavish dining and royal attire.” Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 41.

\textsuperscript{85} Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, 57.
also growing, the community is becoming wider, and expectations are increasingly
high, especially among Muslim millennials who are embracing the way of
hijrah digitally.

Bilqis, one of Indonesia’s Instagram celebrities, comes from a very devout
Muslim family. Her father arranged her marriage when she was 18 with an imam who
had just graduated from an Islamic university in Egypt. After three months she filed
for a divorce because she rejected his idea of taking a second wife. Soon after that she
received bullying on social media accusing her of being a bad Muslim woman who
refused to submit to her husband. Bilqis became very confused: “I am shocked and
confused, all my haters are very devout Muslims, why... so much hatred... the more
they become pious, the more they are hostile.” She had many questions that she could
not find answers to. She felt lonely and there was no one could she trust, not even
God. Then she made the decision to remove her hijab and more and more people bullied
her, accusing her of disgracing Islam and Allah. She became a disgrace in the eyes of
her followers on Instagram, and their words of hatred and insult make her depressed.
Even though her family and the surrounding community finally become very supportive,
her followers’ opinions on social media were more influential and important for her.
Her role as a woman is no longer determined exclusively by the family or community
where she lives, but also by the online social media community.

Technological advancement apparently not only makes culture increasingly
global, but in fact in some religious communities, technology and social media give
them a platform to become more exclusive and radical. The motivation of those who attack Bilqis is actually to save the face of God. They do not want Allah or Islam to be insulted by the behavior of a celebrity who is divorced and removes her hijab. All the insults and curses that appear on the Bilqis’ Instagram account are wrapped in spiritual words and verses of the Qur’an, and the perpetrators are mostly women who wear the hijab.

**The God Who Lost His Face for The People He Loves**

Does the face of God need to be saved? What if God was willing to lose face and honor for the person he loved? Therein lies the gospel message. The God we know in Christ is not a God who wants to preserve his honor and glory, or a God who will punish his people when they fail to maintain the honor of their Lord. But He, Christ, is God who actually gave up his honor to save people who are full of sin, shame and dishonor.

In the crucifixion, Jesus really lost His glory. He died as a criminal. No one wanted to be associated with Him, and even the disciples left and betrayed Him. He was stripped naked on the cross, his arms and legs nailed so that he could not cover his nakedness. Everyone looked at him with contempt and shame, mocking and laughing at him. That is the face of our God, the face of God who bore our sins and shame.

*In the midst of great loneliness and sadness, Jesus visited Bilqis through her Christians friends who walked with her in her suffering. In her*
testimony she said, "When everyone abandoned me, Christ accepted me as I am, he atoned for my sins and saved me. In the eyes of society, I am a shameful woman, but in Christ I am precious. In my old religion I only found judgment, in Christ I found grace and forgiveness. I found caring friends who supported me in my hardships. I don't have to be alone anymore, Christ will always be here with me."
Honour, Shame and Women’s bodies
Shame is being increasingly recognised as a widespread social dynamic. However there has been less recognition of how much the expression of shame can be gendered.

Women's bodies are often at the centre of conflict, or the vehicle for the expression of communal emotion. In many cultures, during a funeral or prolonged time of family mourning, it is the women who wear black. In both colonial and nationalist discourses, women are used as the symbol of family honour, civic order, and of the nation's backwardness or enlightenment. David deSilva describes how in some societies the woman “is embedded in the identity and honour of some male (her father, if she is unmarried, her husband after she marries).”

Bruce Malina, in his book on the New Testament world, comments that “In the area of individual, concrete behaviour, honor and shame are gender specific. ... individual males symbol honor and individual females symbol shame. ... feelings of ‘shame’ to reveal nakedness, modesty, shyness, blushing, timidity, restraint, sexual exclusiveness – all this is positive shame (sic) for the female and makes her honorable.”

Shame finds particular female embodiment across different cultures in three dimensions: ascribed shame, embodied shame, and the female universal of menstruation and reproductive body fluids. These are part of the lived experience of women around the world. If shame is symbolized more in women’s bodies in cultures

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around the world, how does the good news of Jesus Messiah speak to the embodied nature of female shame?

**Ascribed shame**

Shame is ascribed proportionally more to women in many situations. Sometimes even when they are the victims they bear the blame for what has happened to them.\(^{89}\) So traditionally women carried the responsibility when a couple were unable to have children (or only produced daughters instead of sons).\(^{90}\) And a recent British report noted that after a divorce, women were found to be twice as likely as men to feel shame.\(^{91}\) Even when it was the man who walked out of the marriage or initiated the divorce, the women (wives and daughters) describe their feelings of shame. In New Testament times, it was almost impossible for women to initiate divorce: that power belonged to men.\(^{92}\) Yet the Samaritan woman\(^{93}\) who had had five husbands is often described by commentators as an ‘immoral woman’, despite the fact that in her situation Jesus makes no mention of sin or forgiveness. A group of Bangladeshi women, hearing the story, commented, “She was probably unable to have children, which is why they kept divorcing her.”

Around the world, women are made to carry the responsibility for men’s desire or violent actions. This is used to justify some of the required rules of women’s

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\(^{89}\) A colloquial term for this is ‘slut-shaming.’


\(^{92}\) Hence Jesus’ warnings to those men who took too easy advantage of their power: Matthew 5:31-32.

\(^{93}\) John 4.
covering in different cultures. In the west also, by preferring language which
describes a woman as ‘hot’ rather than talking about his own sexual desires, the man is
placing the locus of control within the woman’s body, thus absolving him of
responsibility for his sexual feelings – making it ‘her fault’ if he gets turned on – or if
he doesn’t.94 When desire is wrongly directed it can demean and distort human
relationships: and by ascribing to women the responsibility for creating desire, shame
becomes embedded in women as female bodies.95

Shockingly, even in situations of violence such as rape, women are frequently
told it was their fault because of how they dressed or behaved. Is this the reason that
some commentators prefer to ascribe blame to Bathsheba for David’s actions?96 While
some might question the power imbalance between a woman and the king, the Bible is
clear in attributing fault to David.97 And similarly in domestic violence, it is often
assumed that the woman provoked the violence or was responsible for it. More
frighteningly, women are encouraged to remain within the lived fear and shame of
experiencing violence in the home – often even in the name of religion: and this can
occur from religious leaders within Christianity as well as Islam.

**Embodied shame**

As well as socially ascribed shame which women receive through life situations, women
also experience shame in embodied form. In the west and beyond young women and

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94 Emma Lindsay, “Why Does Dating Men Make Me Feel Like Shit?” Medium, February 18, 2017,
96 For example, Kenneth E. Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels (Downers Grove, IL: IVP
Academic, 2008), 40-41.

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**Honour and Shame**

*When Women Speak... Webzine*

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men experience shame associated with their bodies. Eating disorders have been linked with shame. External shame, feeling of less value than others, is associated with anorexia nervosa symptoms. Internal shame, believing that we have not lived up to our own standards or expectations, is connected with bulimia nervosa symptoms. While both women and men experience these disorders, they are far more prevalent in the female population.

But shame is more particularly localised in a woman’s body. The proverb that ‘a man’s honour lies between the legs of a woman’ locates the honour of men, of families, even of nations, in a woman’s sexual chastity. This contrasts with male sexuality, where the expression of virility can be even valorised, or at least not sanctioned in the same way. In many societies, the notion of honour encodes shame with femaleness. The strength of this association governs not only what happens to women in sexual terms, but also shapes where and how women may move, what they wear, and what they can or cannot do. Lama Abu-Odeh suggests that Arab women “are supposed to perform a ‘public’ virginity with a certain body ‘style,’ the body moving within a defined and delimited social space. Each one of the above borders, the vaginal, the bodily, and the social is enforced through a set of regulations and prohibitions that the woman is not supposed to violate.” Where women can walk (particularly in public places), how they walk (bodily comportment), with whom, how they dress, how loudly they can talk

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99 This oft-quoted Arab proverb is also found in other countries, including Latin America. Valerie M. Hudson et al., *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 8.

or laugh, are all mandated towards the goal of guarding their modesty. Sadaf Ahmad notes that for women in Pakistan “any activity deemed culturally inappropriate thus results in the loss of honor, and not just hers but also her family’s, and eventually her nation’s.”

101 Family and national honour is protected through ensuring that women keep within carefully prescribed community cultural guidelines for modest dress and behaviour.

When shame is located in the woman’s body, if she is thought to have transgressed community expectations for female behaviour, then family honour may be restored by killing her. The UNPF estimates that 5000 women are killed each year in ‘honour’ killings (almost all in the Muslim world). Authors Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn estimate that the real figures are at least 6000 annually. Beyond honour killings, women are also victims of ‘honour rapes’. Allying women’s sexuality with shame allows the use of rape as a weapon to disgrace the victim’s family, clan or nation. Militias in many countries have recognised that the most effective way to terrorise a civilian population is to commit brutally savage rapes. Rape was formally recognised as a ‘weapon of war’ by the United Nations in 2008, now so widely used that one commander suggests “It has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in an armed conflict.”

I heard of stories from Syrian women refugees

102 They suggest that many of the executions are disguised as accidents or suicides. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity For Women Worldwide (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010) 82.
103 Kristof and WuDunn, Half the Sky, 84.
of unspeakably sadistic rape at the hands of occupying militias. Mukhtar Bibi\textsuperscript{104} in Pakistan has given other women courage by her refusal to suicide after a gang rape ‘punishment’\textsuperscript{105} of her family, but rather being willing to face public shame to see her rapists charged, and provide help for other women.\textsuperscript{106}

A related dimension of embodied shame is the injunction for Muslim women to cover or hide their ‘\textit{awrah}.’ \textit{Awrah} is ‘that which must be concealed’. While it is often translated as ‘nakedness,’ in literary Arabic it actually means ‘defectiveness, faultiness, deficiency, imperfection; genitals; weakness.’\textsuperscript{107} What constitutes \textit{awrah} differs both according to different Muslim schools of law, and also according to context. It includes some parts of men’s bodies, but it is more extensive in relation to women’s bodies and can include even their whole body form. Gabriele Vom Bruck comments about Yemeni women: “On attaining physical maturity, a woman is said to be ‘\textit{aurah}, literally, that which is indecent to reveal. … One of the guiding principles of learning to be female is to conceal one facet of identity – the surface of the body – from \textit{non-mahram}\textsuperscript{108} both at home and in the street.” Women’s perfume and voices are included in their ‘\textit{awrah}.’\textsuperscript{109} The inclusion of women’s voices in their \textit{awrah} is the reason

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\item \textsuperscript{105} Declan Walsh, “She was gang-raped on the orders of village elders. Yesterday, Mukhtaran Bibi’s nightmare began again,” \textit{The Guardian Australia}, March 4, 2005, \url{https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/mar/04/pakistan.declanwalsh}.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Waheed, “Hope of belated justice” and Walsh, “She was gang-raped.”
\item \textsuperscript{107} Hans Wehr, \textit{A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic} (1974). \textit{Awrah} is a term used within Islam which denotes the intimate parts of the body, for both men and women, which must be covered with clothing. Exposing the \textit{awrah} is unlawful in Islam and is regarded as sin. The exact definition of \textit{awrah} varies between different schools of Islamic thought. \url{https://islamic-dictionary.tumblr.com/post/5658467793/awrah-arabic-%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-is-a-term-used}.
\item \textsuperscript{108} Non-related males.
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that women Qur’anic reciters do not perform in public today in the Middle East. I have been told that if a woman’s voice is heard outside her apartment, it is as if she walked outside naked. Even in Indonesia, where women reciters of the Qur’an are common, they may face restrictions in international competitions, and also around the question of whether they can perform if they are menstruating.\footnote{Fedwa Malti-Douglas quotes Nawal El-Saadawi’s childhood “sensation that my body was ‘awra.’\textsuperscript{111} The English translation of El-Saadawi’s book renders it as “Shameful! Everything in me was shameful, and I was a child of just nine years old.”\textsuperscript{112} In early twentieth-century Indonesia, Ahmad Dahlan (1868-1923) asked his female students, “Aren’t you ashamed of showing your awra to men?” “It would be a deep embarrassment, Sir!” they replied. “Then why do you go to male doctors when you are ill, even when you deliver your baby [and let them see your awra]? If you are ashamed, then continue studying and become doctors, so that we have female doctors for women.”\textsuperscript{113}}

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**Menstrual shame**

Embodied shame finds particular and universal female form in menstruation. Menstruation is both a specific and all-inclusive aspect of how shame may be embodied

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in the natural cycles of being women. It was controversially highlighted by Germaine Greer in her comment, “If you don’t find your pants full of blood at age 13 then you don’t understand what it is to be a woman.”¹¹⁴ Most women have either experienced, or fear, the intense shame associated with menstrual blood leaking and becoming evident to those around us. Used sanitary objects evoke far more visceral disgust than something like a bloodstained bandage. Menstrual blood is one of the few substances around which there is widespread, almost universal taboo, with different meanings, around the world.¹¹⁵

Beyond the personal dimension of associated shame, in most major religions, menstruation is linked with ritual uncleanness, and women being unable to participate fully in communal piety.

For example, within Islam, Muslim women cannot perform the daily salah prayers, join in fasting, or hold or recite the Qur’an when they are menstruating. In many Muslim communities, they are not allowed to enter the mosque during this period.¹¹⁶ Some suggest that it is God’s mercy that women are not allowed to join these religious duties during their menstruation. One female mosque teacher told me: “Now fasting and salah are tiring and exhausting and the woman during her monthly period loses a lot of her blood and her time, and fasting and even salah become extra

¹¹⁶ However there is also a Hadith in support of menstruating women attending the mosque: ‘A’ishah said: The Messenger of Allah once told me to get his mat from the masjid and I said, “I am menstruating!” He replied, “Your menses is not on your hands.” (Sunan Abu Dawud vol.1, no. 261 and Sahih Muslim vol.1, no. 587). www.searchtruth.com.
exhausting. And so she isn’t ready to pray and the blood which issues from her is unclean: but this matter is to do with worshipping God, so during her menstruation she doesn’t pray.” A website agrees: “Many women suffer from extreme cramps, heavy bleeding, nausea, headaches, and other maladies during their cycle. It is truly a sign of the mercy of Allah Almighty that we are excused from prayer during this time. I know more than one sister who would be unable to perform the physical duties of the prayer during her cycle.”

While some may feel this taboo as a mercy, others are more sceptical! One woman notes: “I have little interest in what an all-male body of scholars has to say about my monthly cycle and what invalidates my prayer. That the scholars were all men and issued rulings from a deeply male experience (that, too, a very specific sort of male experience – based on class, region, age, etc.) needs to stop being ignored in the mainstream.”

And one of the most well-known and authoritative hadith concerning women ties menstruation directly with women’s deficiency:

**NARRATED ABU SAID AL-KHUWRI:**

*Once Allah’s Apostle went out to the Musalla (to offer the prayer) of ‘Id-al-Adha or Al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by the women and said, “O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of*  


Hell-fire were you (women)." They asked, "Why is it so, O Allah’s Apostle?"
He replied, "You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I
have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you.
A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you."
The women asked, "O Allah’s Apostle! What is deficient in our intelligence
and religion?" He said, "Is not the evidence of two women equal to the
witness of one man?" They replied in the affirmative. He said, "This is the
deficiency in her intelligence. Isn’t it true that a woman can neither pray
nor fast during her menses?" The women replied in the affirmative. He
said, "This is the deficiency in her religion."

(SAHIH BUKHARI BOOK #6, HADITH #301)\textsuperscript{119}

While the categories of minor impurity in Islam are not gender specific, most of
the categories of major impurity concern women: menstrual flow, emission of sexual
fluid or sexual intercourse, and childbirth (for about six weeks). Marjo Buitelaar notes
that although “this only means that women are more often impure but certainly not
inherently more impure than men, in practice women tend to be more strongly
associated with impurity than men.”\textsuperscript{120}

Anthropologist Mary Douglas’s famous definition of dirt as ‘matter out of place’
explains the widespread fear of bodily fluids (that enable women’s God-given
reproductive capacity), when they are outside the woman’s body. The same definition

\textsuperscript{119} \url{www.searchtruth.com}. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{120} Marjo Buitelaar, “Space: Hammam—Overview” in Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures, ed. Suad Joseph, 4:541–543
(Leiden: Brill, 2007), 542.
helps us see how, when women’s sexuality is understood as the property of men, then control or removal of the female body can be justified in order to prevent it being ‘out of place’ or shameful or ‘dirty’. Female genital mutilation\textsuperscript{121} is a form of violent control cut into the bodies of women, to remove any possibility of sexual enjoyment for women. Its practice is justified by the need to control women’s chaotic sexuality. In the most extreme form of FGM, both menstruation and sexual intercourse are painful, and childbirth is only possible by cutting the woman open and re-sewing her afterwards.

Jesus came to take the shame of humanity in his shameful death on the cross, that we might be reconciled to God, restored and exalted to the status of being his children. But how does the gospel speak specifically to shame ascribed to or embodied in women.

\textbf{Ascribed shame - public vindication}

Shame causes us to want to hide, to omit facts, lie or keep secrets, thinking that we will be rejected if people know the truth about us. However Travis Stewart suggests that: “When we allow ourselves to be known, especially at our worst, we experience true acceptance and intimacy. Shame is grounded on the belief that if we are fully known we will not be accepted. Only by being fully known and accepted will we defeat shame.”\textsuperscript{122} In western behaviour, shame may be felt more internally within the individual, rather than publicly constructed. So we may seek someone safe to whom we

are able to reveal ourselves, in order to find freedom from shame. Our instinct, in dealing with people carrying shame, can be to talk with them secretly, wanting to protect them. In contrast, in collectivist cultures, shame is about the public perception of people.\(^\text{123}\) In this context we see how openly Jesus deals with women who are carrying ascribed shame. In a stunning reversal of ascribed honour and shame, he affirms the love and forgiveness of the sinful woman at Simon the Pharisee’s house in front of everyone present. In the synagogue he calls the crippled woman over to where he is teaching everyone, and heals her. And the woman who is healed of the flow of blood, he again calls out in front of everyone to name her affliction – and healing.\(^\text{124}\) Rather than colluding with shame’s hiddenness, he exposes the situation for public vindication.

Women may tend to take in and hold what has happened to them, but in that holding of it is the crippling misery of shame. A public telling of the story may be how the trauma of shame is dealt with. The Bible tells the tales of people who have been ascribed communal shame: but then continues with their stories and how God went on to use them in His purposes! Their stories include that of Rahab (a prostitute), Bathsheba (a victim of rape),\(^\text{125}\) and also Peter (denying his Lord).

\(^\text{123}\) The concept of shame embodied in women finds more communal form in some Muslim societies. Bennett and Davies describe how if a couple in Bugis South Sulawesi are involved in extramarital sexual relations, while both extended families are shamed, it is the woman and her extended family who are ascribed shame and must defend their honour. The link between sexuality and shame is linguistic, with the word for genitals (kemaluan) coming from the root word for shame (malu). Sharyn Graham Davies, “Surveilling sexuality in Indonesia” in Sex and Sexualities in Contemporary Indonesia: Sexual Politics, Health, Diversity and Representations, eds. Linda Rae Bennett and Sharyn Graham Davies, 29-50 (London: Routledge, 2016), 33.


Shame (and blame) is often ascribed more to women, including in situations of crisis or violence. Rather than avoidance or even private counselling, thus colluding in the hiddenness and trauma of shame, Jesus openly encountered women who were carrying ascribed social shame, thus exposing the shame and at the same time publicly restoring their status. When we see how Jesus dealt with people ascribed shame by the community, we see the harmful hiddenness of shame unmasked in a public statement of acceptance, forgiveness (when needed) and vindication, allowing the communal restoration of relationships and status.

And these narratives point us towards how Jesus Messiah took our shame and that of all the world, enduring the public dishonour of the cross, and how he is publicly vindicated, seated now at the right hand of the throne of God. Hence we also are now reconciled with God and exalted, seated with him in the heavenly places in Jesus Messiah.

**Shame embodied – God incarnate, and crucified**

Jesus’ interaction with women who carried socially ascribed shame enabled their public vindication. What is the Good News for those who experience shame embedded in their own bodies?

Redemption begins at the point of incarnation, where God All-powerful emptied himself of divinity to take on human form in Jesus Messiah. As the eternal Word took shape in human flesh, all flesh receives dignity and meaning. Dualisms of good and evil described in terms of flesh and spirit, or female and male, are disrupted. The very
objections that some have to God Incarnate as One who had to sleep, eat, go to the toilet – these are precisely the point of incarnation in bodily form, as the divine Word lived among us, taking on our flesh, gloriously entering into and so transforming what is perceived as shameful within human systems.

But Jesus Messiah went beyond incarnation, even to the point of shameful death on a cross. Brittany Wilson examines how Jesus’ life and death, in particular his crucifixion, challenge masculine norms of his time. She describes how “Crucifixion was a form of execution that particularly ‘unmanned’ its victims because it involved a series of bodily invasions that disfigured and disempowered the one being crucified. ... victims could be beaten, flogged, tortured, and then stripped naked.... Death itself was protracted and painful, with the powerless victim suffering bodily distortions and experiencing a loss of bodily control. ... In the ancient world, crucifixion equated to bodily violation in its most gruesome form.” Cicero described it as a ‘cruel and disgusting penalty,’ and claimed that “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears.”126 Jesus Messiah broke the ‘manly’ norms of his time, particularly through his publicly exposed, bodily-penetrated, most shameful death. It is then through that shame, suffering and death that he is now publicly vindicated in his resurrection, and highly exalted in his ascension, given the name above all names. And now he continues to undergo suffering and physical abuse through his followers who are his Body on earth. 127

In Jesus’ incarnation in flesh and his suffering and shameful death, those who follow him experience their own shame and violation taken by him, as they are redeemed to share his exalted life above.

**Body fluids – Born of a woman**

Jesus took on the shame of human bodies in his incarnation and particularly in his shameful crucifixion and death. But what to do with the incorporated shame, and religious ascription of ritual uncleanness, to women during menstruation or after childbirth? In a previous webzine we have discussed purity as contagious through Jesus Messiah. Here we have another aspect to explore.

Much has been made of Jesus’ incarnation as a man in time and space (including around issues of women’s capacity or power to vote). But God’s good news in Jesus brings a further dimension to impurity and shame as it is embodied in women, and in their reproductive fluids. In the gospel of Luke we hear that the first public announcement to the cosmos of God Omnipotent becoming present in human form occurs - through a conversation between two pregnant women.

A Middle Eastern BMB colleague of mine, in his deeply felt cultural understanding of the ritual uncleanness and shame of women’s bodily fluids, could not

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128 Isaiah 53
130 Sojourner Truth, in her memorable speech on women’s suffrage, commented: “Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.” Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I A Woman?” delivered in December 1851, Women’s Convention, Akron, Ohio. Fordham University, [https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp](https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp).
131 Luke 1:39-55. In the same way the news that God incarnate had defeated death forever and was raised to new life, was given first to and through women (Luke 24:1-11).
accept that God had taken human form and been born in the messy uncleanness of a woman's womb and birth canal. For him, it was impossible that God could become incarnate in that dimension of impurity and shame. His reaction helps us appreciate how startling is the news of Divine Incarnation that we read in the Gospels.

**Conclusion**

The enforced hiddenness of women's bodies reflects hierarchies of gender and power, which embed shame in women as bodies. This hiddenness allows the perpetration of abuse and violence on them. The embodiment of shame in women makes rape an effective weapon of warfare, which is used to demonstrate the shame and weakness of the enemy, and their failure to preserve or defend their honour in their women. And family or national weakness, with shame, is made female in form.

We find that Jesus Messiah meets women in each dimension of shame. He invites us into public restoration and participation in the story of Good News. He redeems us by taking our place at the cross in his own body, stripped naked and exposed, broken and deformed, bodily pierced / invaded (nails and spear), uncontrolled (thirst, hunger, loss of bodily functions). Through the very pollution of his spilt blood and death he brings cleansing and wholeness.

The Bible tells us that in Jesus Messiah, God took human flesh and was born – of a woman. This means that women's bodies, with all the ritual uncleanness of menstrual fertility and birth, are made the vehicle of God’s incarnation. So then, through God’s own inhabiting, women’s bodies are made holy and honoured forever.