

PART 2: CULTURAL OUTWORKING Teaching notes

© Keith E. Small

1. FOUNDATIONS OF ISLAM: Attitudes since its inception

1.1 Islam's Two New Ideas

In the first session we did, it was mentioned that in its beginning period two new teachings were introduced by Islam, and that these two things commonly influence basic Muslim attitudes to this day. These attitudes are evident in the earliest histories of Muhammad, as well as in the Qur'an itself and in the earliest Islamic traditions. Those two new religious ideas that Islam introduced to the world were:¹

-Muhammad is the final prophet bringing the final religion that corrects and supersedes all prior ones; and

-It is Allah's will that this religion should be imposed on the world by force of arms as a religious duty. (It was not until the Crusades that Christians embraced this view for Christianity.)

Though Muslims have developed their views of holy war to include personal struggle against sin and military self-defence, these two basic ideas are still foundational to Islam and to the sense of identity Muslims share. It is not a faith that finds it easy to share power, territory, or ultimate truth claims with other faiths.

These two doctrines are also supported by one other teaching of Islam, that

1.2 The Alleged Superiority of Islam

As a religion and way of life Islam is superior to all others and has as part of its divine mandate to correct and supersede all other religions. Two verses that clearly assert this are:

'You are the best of peoples ever raised up for mankind...'²

'He it is who has sent His Messenger to make it victorious over all (other) religions even though idolaters hate it.'³

We are going to consider some of the cultural dynamics that Islam fosters. There is much variety in world Islam as to cultural practices- the use and non-use of head coverings for women is one example- but I am going to give some general observations of trends that are found in Islamic cultures, whether they be in the Muslim heartlands or in peripheral areas.

2. HONOUR AND SHAME

¹ Stanton, H. U. Weitbrecht, *An Outline of the Religion of Islam*, Westminster: The Missionary Equipment and Literature Supply, Ltd., 1925. p.16.

² Surah 3:110.

³ Surah 61:9.

2.1 Three Approaches to Life

These approaches are on the level of worldview. They are very general ways of looking at one's self in relation to God as well as providing mechanics for regulating family and community relationships.

2.1.1. Guilt/Innocence: personal guilt for breaking a law or command

This is dominant in the West. It is the view behind our legal codes and systems. It is also the view that is behind substitutionary atonement. Some have observed that cultural consciousness of this is weakening in the West with the decline of Christianity and the growth of post-modern worldviews.

2.1.2 Power/Weakness: acquiring and keeping power to influence spirits and supernatural forces

This is the worldview behind animistic worldviews and also ones from traditional religions that emphasize superstitious practices to deal with demons or jinn. There is a high level of this in much popular Islamic practice- the use of charms, concern over the evil eye, the use of prayers, caps, amulets, Qur'an verses in magical ways to protect oneself from the Jinn. There is a certain level of this in traditional Christian practices as well in some Catholic and Orthodox cultures.

2.1.3. Honour/Shame: living so as to uphold and enhance the reputation of oneself, one's family, and one's community.

This is a preoccupation with the group's reputation and honour. The group is more important than the individual and the individual's choices are all made to enhance the group's prestige. You could say this is a very tribal mentality. It operates in Muslim cultures to a very high degree but also in many traditional Christian cultures as well. You will find that Middle Eastern and Pakistani Christians, for instance, have a very high concern for the honour of the family and the Christian community .

“Guilt is a feeling and/or a condition occurring when one has broken or not kept a divine or human law, while shame is a feeling and/or a condition stemming from a shortcoming in one's state of being either before God or peers.”⁴

All cultures are concerned with all three to one degree or another. They will usually be concerned more with one than the other two, though the other emphases will be found as well. For instance, as Western Protestants, our main mindset would be of the Guilt/Innocence paradigm, yet we would also recognize the reality of demons, and we understand shame and humiliation. We have concern for personal and family honour and concern for the honour of Christ as shown by the evangelical Christian community.

⁴ Thomas, Bruce, 'The Gospel For Shame Cultures', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (1994), 288.

-The Michael Jackson trial is a good example. Our culture wanted the truth even if it resulted in huge amounts of shame coming to Michael. Also, sexual mores show the decline of guilt and innocence and shame dynamics in the West concerning most sexual practice. Adultery is still a bit shameful; premarital sex is no longer considered shameful at all. Sexual abuse still does carry a big stigma, both for the abuser and the abused, and our culture still attaches a concern for the guilt or innocence of the abuser.

2.2 Honour and Shame Defined

Let's look at Honour and Shame in a bit more detail as it pertains Muslim cultures. It is crucial to understand this because daily interactions are full of significance in this regard. Every conversation you have with a Muslim will have undertones of this dynamic that will be very clear to him, but perhaps not to you.

“Honour (sharaf) refers to uprightness of character, integrity, glory even. It evolves from and announces the stainlessness of one's way of living. Honour may be derived from a variety of sources. It might come from one's lineage... piety...hard work, wealth, success, generosity...age...white hair...hospitality...and purity.”⁵

“Shame is a social phenomenon. It is equivalent to disgrace or humiliation. It operates as a form of control on behaviour. ‘What people say’ or ‘What people might say’ is a strong constraint on actions. Shame comes from being a ‘bad’ person. One may lose esteem through cowardice, having no money, being menial, remaining unmarried, letting down one's family or religion...sexuality is a great cornerstone of honour and the likeliest cause of shame.”⁶

2.3 Shame as Defilement

In addition to the causes of honour and shame mentioned are the ideas of ‘cleanness’ and ‘defilement’. In Islam, great emphasis is put on things that keep you clean or make you unclean. Eating pork, being licked by a dog, the way one does toilet habits, menstruation and sexual relations, washing before mosque worship and reading the Qur'an all have a direct effect on a Muslim's view of his cleanness before Allah. The easiest way for us to think about this is to compare it with the ritual purity laws in the Old Testament. They had food laws, washing laws, toilet practice laws, and laws relating to sex and menstruation that kept the Jews in a ritually pure condition related to their worship at the Tabernacle or Temple. In Islam, ‘more attention is given to ceremonial purity than to moral purity.’⁷ Being in an unclean state is shameful to a Muslim, and can bring shame on his family and community. If a Muslim is careful about Islam's purity laws, then he can be considered an honourable person, even if he has some known moral problems, like lying, greed or anger.

2.4 Applied to the Person, Family, Tribe, Nation

Every level of a Muslim's life is geared to pay attention to shame and honour issues.

⁵ Musk, Bill, *Touching the Soul of Islam*, Crowborough, UK: MARC, 1995.70-76.

⁶ Musk, *Touching the Soul of Islam*, 77.

⁷ Thomas, ‘The Gospel For Shame Cultures’, 285.

“In order for shame-based cultures to work, shame and honor are usually attached to something greater than the individual. Honor is almost always placed on the group.”⁸

In Muslim cultures, shame and honour are used to regulate family and community behaviour and keep stability and peace in the community. It is also the dominant dynamic in operation when Muslims are engaging non-Muslims. The men who killed themselves in the 9/11 attacks are seen by many Muslims as restoring the honour of Islam. It is also one reason why the Palestinians view suicide bombings as so important- they maintain the honour of the community and Muslims against the Jews. It is why Muslims often first take a combative attitude to non-Muslims and try to start debates, rather than discuss and listen to others as equals. By debating and defending the superiority of Islam they are upholding its honour.

2.5 Honour, Shame, and Evangelism

Here are some quotes and questions to get you thinking:

“Perhaps the greatest need felt by these Muslim people is not the assurance of salvation from sin but for deliverance from the tyranny of being in a near constant state of defilement.”⁹

Does the Gospel cover shame as well as sin?

“The atonement is not just the simple matter of someone taking our punishment, a concept which Muslims find extremely distasteful. There seems to have been an assumption of our defiled state resulting in the destruction of our contamination which was the foundation of our depravity.”¹⁰

Many of Jesus’ miracles were to people whose condition kept them bound in shame- the adulterous woman, the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, the woman with the discharge, the lepers, the paralytic who was let down through the roof, the people who were possessed by unclean spirits. Jesus pointed out that shame has its root in the sin in our hearts:

“The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean’. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man unclean.”¹¹

Lying to Defend Islam

“In our culture, telling the truth is right and telling lies is wrong. In the Middle East, people don’t think of lies as being right or wrong. The question is, ‘Is

⁸ Muller, Roland, *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the Door*, Xlibris Corporation, 2000.50.

⁹ Thomas, ‘The Gospel For Shame Cultures’, 285.

¹⁰ Thomas, ‘The Gospel For Shame Cultures’, 290.

¹¹ Matthew 15:18-20.

what is being said, honourable.’ If a lie protects the honour of a tribe or nation, then it is fine. If a lie is told for purely selfish reasons, then it is shameful.”¹²

In a debate, a Muslim speaker is permitted to use lies or false reasoning to gain an advantage over his opponent. However, if he is caught out doing it, he is dishonoured and brings shame on Islam. If he is caught out graciously, he retains a measure of his honour, but the one who caught him out gains a great measure of honour for his courtesy.

Since Shame is a consequence of sin, what are some ways we can use it as a bridge to help Muslims understand the Gospel?

One man’s approach:

“Since all the fluids your own body produces make you unclean, how can washing and prayers really make you clean before God?”¹³

Coming back with an apologetics oriented challenge to an apologetics challenge is a way of working with this dynamic. Being passionate about Christ and Christian doctrine in debates and public settings is a way to work with this dynamic. It upholds and strengthens a man’s honour to be a visible champion for his faith.

3. LEGALISM

Islam fosters a legalistic attitude to life because of its emphasis on the Qur’an and the Shariah containing divine laws from Allah. The assertion, ‘Islam provides a complete way of life’, expresses this outlook. There is a law for everything in Islam, from how to brush your teeth, to how you dress, to how you conduct business and politics. Here are some major ways it gets expressed:

3.1 Outward cleanness/uncleanness

Muslims are preoccupied with their state of ritual cleanness before Allah. They have to be clean in order to be able to do their prayers. They have to wash before them. Sex makes a person unclean. This has to do with both hygiene and ritual cleanness. Touching a dog or being licked by one does it. Touching body fluids does it. A woman’s period makes her unclean. Pietistic Muslims will put great emphasis on this. (Ismail’s comment about if Muslims did their washings, they would not have so much disunity and be humiliated by the West; Anger of one Muslim in video shop about how English men wiped their bottoms after using the toilet.)

3.2 Personal conduct

Ways to address elders- use of titles like ‘Haji’, greeting the oldest man when you come into a room, not showing bottoms of feet. Not laughing too freely- Imtiyaz’ book of traditions about Muhammad’s appearance and deportment.

¹² Muller, *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the Door*, 51.

¹³ Thomas, ‘The Gospel For Shame Cultures’, .

3.3 Ritual conduct

Prayers, how one reads/recites the Qur'an- both are highly ritualized.

4. OUTWARD RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

There is also a big emphasis on being able to clearly identify what group people belong to by their outward appearance.

4.1 Dress

In the West, headscarves for women are a big issue (especially France). Islamic law actually just says their heads should be covered, but many Muslims are making more of an issue of it as an identity issue. Imtiyaz's questions, How do I tell who is a Christian?

4.2 Separate space

Muslims can be very territorial and they think in terms of establishing Muslim 'space' as part of the Dar ul-Islam/Dar al-Harb thinking. This space would have more protection from the evil Jinn than others. It would be more under Islamic law than others. Keep peoples distinct is the thinking.

4.3 "Ummah" of Islam- group identity and consciousness

Muslims link themselves with other Muslims around the world- similar to our concept of the universal church. This is why Muslims in Europe or the Far East will feel a connection with Muslims in Palestine or Bosnia, or Chechnya. Also, the fundamentalists are emphasising this in their rhetoric and making Muslims more sensitive to it. The Ummah is to transcend national, tribal, and even family ties.

5. MUSLIM MISCONCEPTIONS CONCERNING CHRISTIANITY

The Qur'an teaches repeatedly that Christians believe and teach false doctrine. The Qur'an sets them up to view the Trinity and the Deity of Christ as examples of polytheism. The charge that the Bible has been corrupted is used to justify the authority of the Qur'an and to provide the main reason why Christians believe what they do about Jesus. The Qur'an denies the crucifixion happened (S. 4:157). All of these are taken to demonstrate to Muslims how Christians have shamed themselves, and how Muslims, in correcting them have more honour. Muslims feel they are doing us a favour to correct our wrong views, and they view themselves as being more honoured by Allah in having the final religion.

The two most dishonourable things in Islamic cultures, the two things that bring so much shame that only a death can restore honour, are apostasy from Islam and immorality by one of the women in the family.

-Law of Apostacy

-CA's experience with the two young Muslim girls asking for help getting an abortion.

6. CONCLUSION

Shame and honour dynamics in Islam make it imperative that you view **how** you talk about Christ as important as **what** you say. No matter how good your arguments are, if you are not aware of these forces and you consciously work to use them, you will not communicate the Gospel in a relevant way. Used properly, they can add tremendous force to your presentation of the truth.

Muller, Roland, *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the Door*, Xlibris Corporation, 2000.

Musk, Bill, *Touching the Soul of Islam*, Crowborough, UK: MARC, 1995.

Stanton, H. U. Weitbrecht, *An Outline of the Religion of Islam*, Westminster: The Missionary Equipment and Literature Supply, Ltd., 1925.

Thomas, Bruce, 'The Gospel For Shame Cultures', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (1994),