

Honor and Shame

An Open Letter to Evangelical Leaders

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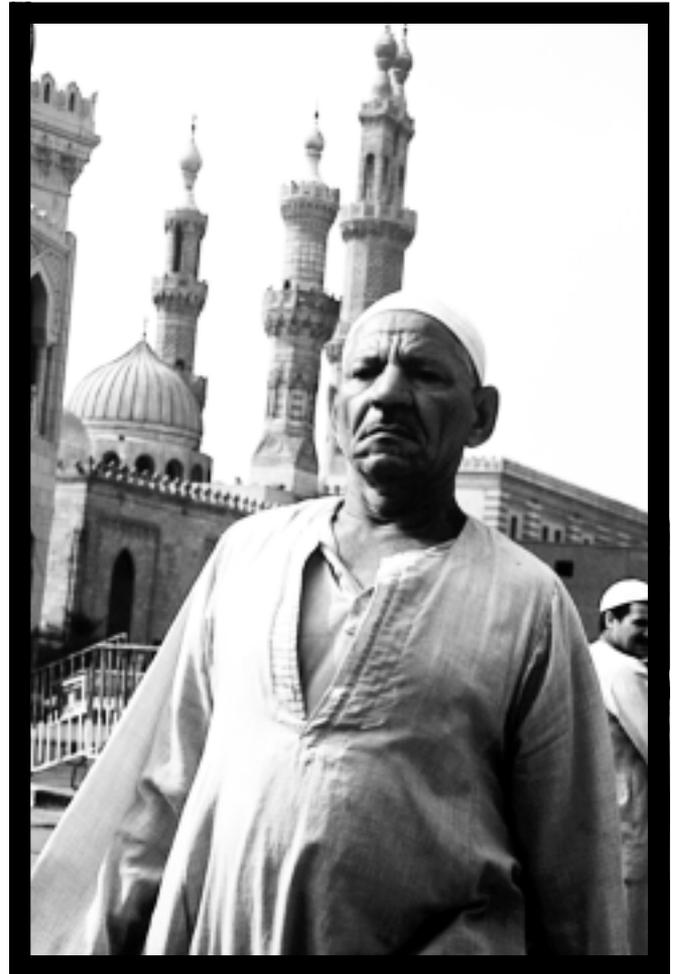
The following response to America's recent terrorist attack has been edited from a message Bob Blincoe delivered to local pastors in the Phoenix area, September 14, 2001.

Pastors of this city, fellow Christians and teachers of the Bible. To you falls the heavy burden of providing your congregations a biblical interpretation of what is nearly incomprehensible. Newscasters are giving political and humanitarian perspectives; this morning's newspaper offers the (misguided) perspective of well-known Christian leaders; I want to provide a biblical interpretation of what seems utter madness. Yet it is not madness; millions of Muslims understand what is going on and so can we. I lived in the Middle East for seven years and am part of a movement that calls Muslim men and women to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I will restrict my remarks this morning to the compelling forces which have motivated these events.

Highest Values: Honor and Shame

What is behind the September 11 attacks? What drives clear-minded Muslims to such extreme, calculated acts? The answer derives from two all-important values in Muslim culture: honor and shame. When these values are twisted by sin, people can become selfish, remorseless and sometimes desperate in their actions. In the Middle East, gaining and maintaining honor is more to be valued than life. Avoiding shame, and as a result, shifting the blame to others is the only response when one's honor is threatened. We had best fix this in our minds if we would understand what Muslims, even moderate Muslims, know drives some Eastern people to violence. As David Pryce-Jones says in his classic book, *The Closed Circle*:

Honor is what makes life worthwhile; shame a living death, not to be endured, requiring that it be avenged. What otherwise seems self-destructive in Arab society is explained by the anxiety to be honored and respected at all costs, and by whatever means (p. 35).



The Bible is an eastern book. Read it with the eyes of a Palestinian or Pakistani, and you are transported back to Bible times:

Then Leah said, "God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons."
— Genesis 30:20

"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." — Luke 1:25

"Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen."
— Genesis 45:13

“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”— Luke 9:26

He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap. — 1 Timothy 3:7

Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.
— Revelation 21:27

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These are not isolated verses; I have counted 600 scriptures mentioning honor, shame or disgrace.

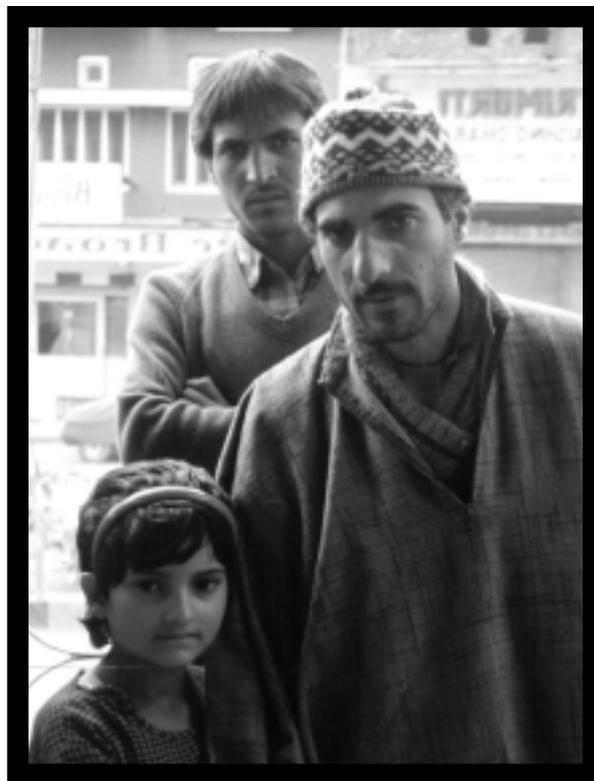
Muslims live in this biblical world of a shame/honor dialectic. The word *sharif* (honor) is a common name for males throughout the Muslim world. The word for shame (*ayb*) is a dirty garment to be cast off by every effort. Women must acquire and maintain honor for the whole family; otherwise, they bring disgrace, which only their deaths may erase. In Japanese society, someone who is shamed must sometimes kill himself. But in a Muslim society, one who is disgraced must sometimes kill someone else.

What was behind this latest carnage? It’s always best to let people speak for themselves. *Time* magazine interviewed Osama bin Laden, following the bombing of

two U.S. embassies in Africa. *Time*: Do you know the men who have been arrested for these attacks? Osama bin Laden: What I know is that those who risked their lives to earn the pleasure of God are real men. They managed to rid the Islamic nation of disgrace. We hold them in the highest esteem.¹

In a 1998 conversation with *ABC News*, Osama Bin Laden had this to say:

“The call to wage war against America was made because America has spear-headed the crusade against the Islamic nation, sending tens of thousands of its troops to the land of the two Holy Mosques (Saudi Arabia). And then there is Israel. For over half a century, Muslims in Palestine have been slaughtered and assaulted and robbed of their honor and of their property. They kill and murder our brothers. They compromise our honor and our dignity and dare we utter a single word of protest against the injustice, we are called terrorists.”²



Bin Laden says that America compromised Muslim honor. This is the point Bin Ladin wants to make, and we had better hear him if we’re to understand him and many other extreme Muslims. Honor is more to be sought, and disgrace more to be avoided, than all the jewels in a king’s crown. If there were no Israel and no America, the honor/shame axis would still control the thoughts and actions of Easterners, just as gaining wealth largely controls thoughts and actions of people in the West.

For Muslims, the main defense against personal shame is, unfortunately, blaming others. Instead of examining themselves, my Muslim friends have learned to point outside themselves for the source of their problems. I do not mean that Christians do any better. Christ calls everyone to take the first step to him by confessing, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.” This way is particularly difficult for people who fear God’s wrath for every sin or blemish. Christ’s good news for Muslims and all people is that, “Everyone who puts their trust in Him will not be ashamed” (Rom. 10:11).

The Bible says that Jesus suffered shame and rejection; however, for this very reason Muslims reject His crucifixion, because Allah would not cause a prophet to undergo such humiliation. “But we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because He suffered death” (Hebrews 2:7). The writer of Hebrews calls us to go to Christ. But look, where is He? “Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore” (Hebrews 13:13).

The good news for all people, East and West, is this encouraging word to go with many others to Him. I say to our Muslim friends, who admire him as a prophet, “He is ‘outside the camp,’ despised and rejected.” To follow him there will cost you and me our so-called reputations. With him we will suffer rejection, for “everyone who lives a godly life will suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:10).

Muslim belief has twisted honor into the vanity of reputation. And everyone who does so will be and should be ashamed. The Kurds have a proverb, “No man admits his yogurt is sour.” The Turks have this saying: “Even if guilt were made of silk, no one would wear it.” No confession of sins is possible in a system where every man and woman work full-time to avoid taking responsibility for the bad things in their lives. The only solution, then, is to blame others for your problems. The very way to salvation, of repentance and pardon, is closed to them. For this reason Ernst Renan, the father of comparative religious studies, called Islam “the heaviest chains which have ever shackled humanity.”

Just last week a dear Muslim friend asked me to help him. But he wanted me to tell things that were not true, in order for him to get him out of one lie and into a bigger one. I said I could not, would not, and warned him to come back to God. He called me once more to say that I had “broken our relationship, and good-bye.”

What moderates can do

In closing, I would like to remind my fellow believing Christians of what you already know. Be not afraid. Calm your hearts and minister peace to Muslim-Americans. Guard your hearts against fear and promote peace and good will to Muslims. You will hear it often that most Muslims are peace-loving and moderate, and I know this

to be true. We vocally denounce prejudice and where it leads. I would like to speak to the Muslim community as well. It is time for Muslims to speak against these evil



atrocities. This week serious, clear-eyed men—with Mohammed as their prophet and the Qur’an as their guide—disgraced themselves and heaped shame upon your religion. The time has come for all Muslims to answer, “Is this Islam?” I hope the answer is “no.” But I have to hear it from you. America needs to hear it not only in the National Cathedral, but in the mosque on Friday. Qur’anic references to jihad between the house of Islam and the house of Christianity, the Qur’anic command to kill converts from Islam, to plunder the property of unbelievers, the cultural permission given Muslims to lie to unbelievers: is this Islam? Will you renounce these things with me? I will renounce them, too. Please tell me this is not Islam. Do not be afraid of what others think; they may throw you “outside the camp.” If they do, I will find you there and we will break bread together. That is a disgrace I will gladly share with you. 🌐

1. *Time*, Jan. 11, 1999

2. *ABC News*’ John Miller in May, 1998