

FEBRUARY 2023



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HONOR, SHAME, & FAITH IN THE MIDDLE EAST

An Education Initiative

PART I

Honor & Shame: A Culture Bound

BY SILVA SHERMAN

**This article is based on personal views and an understanding of the culture gathered over decades of living, working, and serving in the Middle East.*

Many forget, or find it hard to believe, that the Middle East is the cradle of Christian culture: the apostle Paul's ministry started at the heart of Damascus in Syria, he was saved and trained there, and from there he took the message of God all over. Incredibly, despite the rising cultural tides of Islam, the Middle Eastern Church has stood the test of time in its commitment to Christ. Today, one can see the fruits of that commitment: some of the Church's most admirable traits are its enduring faith, biblical heritage, and communal identity of belonging to a greater call. In many ways, the Middle East can teach us in the West a thing or two about how to live more faithfully.

But the Church has not been without opposition. Waves of hostility and brutal acts of persecution, largely wrought by Muslim governments and customs, have historically crashed against its walls. This spiritual opposition has long existed in the land prior to Islam's arrival but has intensified over time. From this repeated assault, one can now identify leaks of Islamic influence into the mindsets of believers in many countries throughout the Middle East.

While the body of Christ in the Middle East has fought this dilemma for centuries, it has at the same time faithfully shared the good news of Christ with the dark world around it, tirelessly advocating for peace amid persecution. But the constant struggle against the majority Muslim culture and the pressure to conform has steadily weakened the Church's stamina in some profound ways: while the Holy Spirit continues to enable believers to be remarkable evangelists, despite the threat of death, they battle disunity within churches and a common reluctance to model servant leadership.

Over time, this spiritual growth challenge has resulted in the Church taking on attributes that counter Scripture and the freedom Christ has won them. Alongside the incredible faith they demonstrate every day, they struggle against a pervasive honor-

shame culture, tribal mentality, and prejudices between men and women. To die to self, and to forgive others of their mistakes, as is commanded of a Christian, is hard to do in an environment so hostile to humility and grace. This is in part why Jesus is so attractive to former Muslims seeking the truth: He invites people to a new beginning. He invites them to be reborn.

As a Christian from the Middle East, what follows is my address of the Middle Eastern and Western churches on how Islam impacts the culture in that region, hindering pursuit of daily Christlike living. In my address, I share the great many things to be learned from the Middle Eastern Church, such as how to value Christ above all else, even at the threat of death, and the urgent response needed from the Church in the West. Lastly, I emphasize the need, amid our own faults, cultural pressures, and sin struggles, to humbly seek the Lord's wisdom on how we can help nourish His people near and far.

Together, the global body of Christ can work toward equipping our brothers and sisters to study Scripture, deal with cultural situations biblically, and daily, by the Holy Spirit's leading and power, surrender ourselves to God.

To help us in this endeavor, let's take a look back into the history of the Middle East...

"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

Matthew 7:13-14

Long before Islam formulated the social norms of the land, a culture bound by honor and shame was already present in the Middle East. Bedouin tribes, people who originally inhabited the Arabian peninsula before spreading across the Arab world following the rise of Islam, dwelled in the land as tribes. These tribes, despite their divided, nomadic status, upheld certain standards of behavior. Two concepts that drove these behavioral standards were *honor* and *shame*.

The Oxford Dictionary defines honor as “high respect; great esteem; adherence to what is right or to a conventional standard of conduct.” It defines shame as “a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior.” These two concepts – honor and shame – are much like a balance scale: the more honor, the higher on the scale the status of an individual or a community goes. The more shame, the lower on the scale they fall. In an honor-shame culture, every action is measured and placed on the scale.

Unlike the West, where much of the cultural messaging centers around the individual, in the Middle East, social formation is all about community. One sees this in the way societal expectations are placed on a person at an early age so that they act in ways that best represent family and community. Should they go against those expectations to pursue their own desires, it could bring shame upon them and all those associated with them.

Bedouin cultures in the Middle East carried this cultural lens with them on their nomadic journeys. When Islam took shape, extracting and distorting principles from the Judeo-Christian God and the teachings of the Old Testament, it helped spread these taught fears, which then allowed for more control over people in the region. Religious leaders had the threat of shame as well as the sword to steadily build their Muslim empire.



Knowing this is not only helpful to understanding the cultural standards of the Middle East today, but to understanding those of Jesus' time. Jewish culture stemming from the Law of Moses developed its own rules, or standards, separate from the Law, primarily dictated by the Law's teachers. These cultural standards bound society by honor and shame, too, and it was these standards with which Jesus grew up.

As the eldest son, Jesus was supposed to bring honor to His family, disciples, and community. But instead, He seemingly disgraced them all by challenging the teachers of the Law, breaking Jewish cultural rules, and dying a criminal's death.

What Christ did, to many of His day, looked like the ultimate shameful act. Yet the nakedness of the cross is the most powerful historical illustration of undeserved, bestowed honor: through His suffering, death, and resurrection, the Son of God gave the honor of forgiveness and reconciliation with God to everyone who believes in Him.

Though Christians keep on sinning, which produces sorrow and shamefulness for falling short of God's standard, we can take heart that Jesus met God's standard perfectly on our behalf so that now, our shame is covered by Him – forever.

Reputational honor, on the other hand, is easily lost at anything society deems a misstep. Shaming communities expect the shame-producing individual to carry guilt until death “saves” them from it. Daily, society reminds them of the sullied person

they are, and one can only redeem themselves from this by taking extreme measures to rebuild honor, such as shunning one's family, seeking retribution for wrongdoing, or even committing murder. It is little wonder that in a culture so centered around community – where admitting sin is admitting failure, and failure, weakness, and weakness, a lowered status – that repentance feels like a kind of death.

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Ephesians 6:12

In the Middle East, these battles against honor-shame culture and Islamic influence are sadly common, deeply ingrained in society. Christianity is deeply ingrained in Middle Eastern society, too. But history and experience prove the message of honor-shame seeks to choke the gospel message, which sets people free from shame's power. We must pray the Good News prevails.

To be continued...

Islam's Legacy: Disunity & Tribal Mentality

BY SILVA SHERMAN

There is an old idiom in Arabic that says, *“Me and my brother are against my cousin, and me and my cousin are against a foreigner.”*

This encapsulates the mindset of many Muslims in the Arab region. While their loyalty and fidelity to one another can be a beautiful thing and is in part what makes Muslim-background Christians so inspiring as they live out their faith, often, within families, communities, and tribes, disunity is rampant. People are fiercely loyal to their own but are also fiercely divisive.

The most prominent example of this divisiveness is the infamous opposition of the two major sects of Islam: Sunni and Shiite. Minor sects of Islam also oppose each other in their differing schools of thought. And yet many Islamic sects agree about opposing “infidels,” or anyone who does not accept the Islamic faith, such as Christians and Jews.



This tribal mindset was especially present among Islam's founders and helped Islam to spread over time. For example, Muhammad's *Sihab* was made up of the leader's nearest allies, his “tribe.” After his death, they retained power and authority, albeit fracturing into hostile groups vying for the role of caliph, the Muslim religious and political ruler.

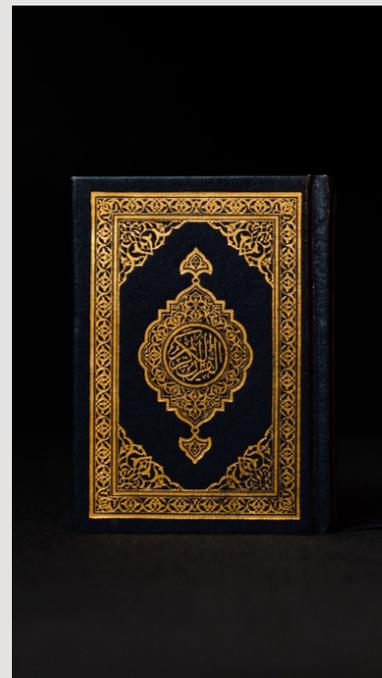
As a quick summary: after Muhammad's passing in the year 632, his father-in-law, closest companion, and *Sihab* member, Abu Bakr, became the new caliph of Islam. A few caliphs later, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali Bin Abi Talib, who was also a member of the *Sihab*, accepted the title. But he was not to be in power for long, as dissidents objecting to his reign assassinated him in 661. This assassination would have historic impact on the political-religious empire of Islam: it led to the division of Islam into Sunnis, who uphold the caliphate established as a result of the fall of Ali, and Shiites, who believe Muhammad's descendants through Ali should've retained power.

Today, Sunnis are the majority-Muslims in most Muslim communities around the world, while Shiites are only the majority-Muslims in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan. Over time, more splits occurred between the Sunnis and Shiites, so that there now exist about 72 major and minor sub-sects of Islam with around 50 different schools of Islamic thought.

The fact that Muhammad and his closest friends formed a tribe of power like this was likely an inherited social behavior from the Bedouins. In Bedouin culture, it was common for the heads of Bedouin tribe families to come to the tent of the leader, who was reverently esteemed, for gatherings. It was a coveted experience, as to be near this man was to gain influence and power yourself. After the leader passed, typically, the leader's son or the man of most prominence took leadership. Rarely would tribes succeed in placing someone else in leadership, as it was passed on by bloodline.

This is the case in Saudi Arabia. The present-day ruling family has held power for 300 years. Called Al Saud, or “House of Saud,” they adhere to Wahhabism, a strict form of Islam that demands a literal interpretation of the Qur'an.

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Wahhabism came about in the 18th century, when Al Saud struck a deal with religious scholar and activist Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who was working to unite all Islamic sects under the perceived original teachings of Muhammad, considering anything else apostasy. To this day, Al Saud strictly adheres to Wahhabism teachings and carries its values as part of their identity.

In this way, a dictatorial style of leadership, spread by Muhammad and his followers, is part of the Muslim world and has infiltrated all components of its existence. People in positions of power, whether that is in government, companies, mosques, schools, or homes, often see their role as an inherited dictatorship. They then set out to rule whatever “tribe” is under their influence, as well as gain control over other tribes.

The god of Islam reflects a tribal mentality, too: Allah is an authoritative figure that cannot be queried, ruling with an iron fist. There is no intimate and trusting relationship between him and his subjects. Allah is to be worshiped, not out of love, but out of duty and command.

Emphasizing this are his 99 names and the descriptions of his character found in the Quran: “al kahir,” the agitator, “almuthil,” the disgracer, “al mumeet,” the killer, “almut3ali,”

the supreme, “albaar,” the harmer, and “aljabbar,” the powerful, to name a few.

In keeping with Allah’s characteristics, the teachings of the Qur’an are also not to be challenged. Islamic schools of thought may differ on matters of interpretation and application, but orders from Allah in the Qur’an or those of Islamic leaders are to be held as the highest authority. Any fatwa, or “new command,” given by high religious leaders are to be followed as if they are coming directly from God. Conflict between “Al Hadith,” the conversations recorded between Muhammad and the *Sihab* in their gatherings, and the Qur’an, the spoken word from Allah to Muhammad, are not to be disputed.

In a culture saturated in this dictatorial mentality, you see individuals deflecting the truth and using shame as a tool to maintain status and power. Believers, too, are prone to this, putting on façades of perfection to earn and keep respect when they are secretly losing a grave spiritual battle. One sees this in the West through the sad headlines of megachurch pastors who are exposed for adultery or abuse of leadership. They would rather maintain their façade of honor than risk the shame of exposure, even though telling the truth leads to healing.

We must choose a better way.

To be continued...

The Threat of *3aib*

BY SILVA SHERMAN



The word “3aib” in Arabic, or “عيب,” means shame, or disgrace. It is often used in Middle Eastern culture to warn children not to behave badly and to insinuate consequences – “it is *3aib* if you do, or do not, do this.”

When I was growing up, there was a moment in which I lied to my dad, and he caught me in the lie. I felt such shame that I was caught, such *3aib*. I anticipated his use of that word to warn me, or punish me, for lying. I tried to give excuses. But to my surprise, my dad’s reaction was not to bring shame upon me or lecture me about my sin. He knew I knew the Lord and that I had a relationship with Him. So, he looked at me and calmly said:

“Don’t give me excuses. You did not lie against me. You lied against God. Go spend time with God and talk to Him about what’s in your heart.”

Shocked, I went into a different room and spent time crying and talking to God about the status of my heart. Then, after clearing my conscience before God, I felt the freedom to go to my dad and confess that I was wrong. His loving acceptance gave me the confidence to not hide my sin and shame. And God released me from it.

During the growth of Islam, the Church in the Middle East resisted giving in to anything that contradicted biblical truth, like shaming someone for a sin from which they have repented or pursuing revenge.

Today, the Church continues to stand for what the Word of God teaches. It continues to celebrate when a man or woman turns from sin into the loving hands of Christ. Yet, for believers, sin has grown to be defined as more of an outward behavior than an inward, fallen nature. This is largely due to the prevailing honor-shame culture.

The Middle East’s honor-shame culture encourages Christians to believe, falsely, that if they act perfect on the outside toward others, they are in right standing with God and with men. But no matter how “perfect” one’s reputation is, that cannot save or redeem their soul.

What believers in the Middle East struggle to understand is that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23). We are all unchangeably bad, in dire need of God’s grace. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves, and saving face before others to avoid shame does not change this; our need for God’s grace remains.

It is only by Jesus’ sacrifice that we are washed clean, and only by God’s loving

grace that we are made to believe in the One who saves and calls people to true repentance, repentance from the heart.

A misunderstanding, or ignorance, about our need for God and His grace toward us has damaging effects: it leads to the distortion of other truths, such as the value each human being has as a creation of God and how He has commanded us in Scripture to treat those around us.

For example, when I was growing up in the Middle East, my country had women in high governmental seats of power, such as prime minister and parliament. This gave the appearance of cultural advancement and unity so that men and women seemed to live respectfully with one another, at least outwardly. But in different pockets of society, hostility and mistreatment of women still took place.

This is not unusual. The teachings of Islam, such as the *Hadith*, are fanatic when it comes to women and their place in society. Women are believed to be of less value than men, not simply as weaker vessels in terms of their body’s strength or need for protection, but of less human value.

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The *Hadith*, which translates to the “Conversations,” is a collection of the supposed conversations Muhammad had with others. In the *Hadith*, Muhammad says that women are lacking in intelligence and faith. He also says that because of women’s menstrual cycles, they cannot fast like men, and therefore their faith is not complete. Muhammad himself modeled how he perceived women were to be treated: as objects for man’s pleasure, as child bearers, and as servants of their families; he boasted 12 wives, one of which was a 9-year-old child when he married her.

Historically in Islam and the surrounding honor-shame culture, Middle Eastern women carry the burden of making or breaking the family’s name by their conduct. Whether a wife, daughter, or sister, if they do anything considered to be shameful, the entire family, but especially the man, is under threat of being ridiculed and shamed by the community. Men deal with these blights on their honor in sometimes violent ways: hoping to restore their status, they kill the offending party. These infamous acts are known as “honor killings,” perhaps one of the vilest displays of unforgiveness in existence today. Surprisingly, they are not always carried out by Muslims.

I once knew an Orthodox Christian family who had many kids. They were nominal, or in name only, when it came to their Christian faith. One day, one of their older daughters fell in love with a Muslim bus driver. She eloped with him, but had to become Muslim in order to marry him in a court of law. So, she converted to Islam and started wearing a *bijab*, a customary head covering worn in public by Muslim women after they have reached puberty.

Her family, who were irate about her actions, began looking for her everywhere in order to kill her. She brought shame to their

family’s name and jeopardized the marital eligibility of her younger sisters. The men in the family, her dad and brothers, sought information about her whereabouts for two months. Thankfully, they were not successful in finding her.

Legally, if they had found her and killed her, their criminal sentence would have been minimal. A court of law would likely have deemed their honor-restoration killing understandable. In fact, the men’s attempts to kill their daughter and sister succeeded in restoring some aspect of their honor socially, but successfully killing her would have fully restored it. Sadly, it is by these evil codes of honor-shame culture that many men and women continue to live.

As for the runaway, the woman’s Muslim husband ended up leaving her and the kids they had together. But she could never return to her family, as what she did was too shameful and considered unforgivable. I remember her sisters would go to see her in secret because they missed her so much, but she herself was uninvited from their weddings and other family milestones, such as meeting her nieces and nephews, due to her shame. She lived a life of poverty, barely making enough money to raise her children.

Though this woman’s story is one of great sadness, there is hope for women in the Middle East. I have found from my experience living there that the level of hostility toward women in society is often determined by the education level of the surrounding culture. The more educated a country is, the more likely they are to reject practices like honor killings. So, with higher education comes a slow chipping away of Islam’s influence over society, and women are, in my experience, treated better.

This is also true on the other side of the world, though the Western mindset of female empowerment is often volatile.

I unfortunately find that in their felt sense of freedom from cultural bondage, Middle Eastern women can be volatile, too. They begin acting like their oppressors, viciously belittling others and using their newfound voices to promote resentment, control outcomes, or fight for power. Others weaponize their sexuality, or use their education to improve their personal status, not to help their families or communities.

Women in the Church who earnestly seek to follow Jesus Christ and obey Him are less likely to fall prey to this societal pressure. They are valued in their communities, which sets the Church apart from the culture around it, though there still exists in the Church a larger magnifying glass on women’s behavior than men’s.

Men in the Church have not fully surrendered this double standard because they also fight against society’s way of thinking. They may encourage, support, and uplift women, but they struggle with their roles as servant leaders in the Church and at home, a struggle which, because of the culture, breeds more shame.

As a woman born into this culture, I have enjoyed the unique experience of witnessing the Gospel in the way my family loved me. My dad’s love and acceptance in the story I shared above is a picture of God’s unconditional, redemptive love for me that no sin can separate or take away from me. This grace is one of the many gifts and privileges of being a Christian, yet, as I have shared, it is often very difficult for Middle Easterners to comprehend.

My prayer for all followers of Jesus in the Middle East is that they hold fast to the hope of Jesus Christ and what His sacrifice on the cross has done for them. I pray this hope would be their freedom from shame.

To be continued...

The Christian Response

BY SILVA SHERMAN

The apostle Paul, quoting from the Old Testament, wrote in his letter to the Romans, “For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’” (Romans 3:10-11). This is the problem with the honor-shame scale: it perpetuates something God says is finished for those who believe in Jesus.

Paul’s letter to the Romans also teaches that the Law of Moses convicts, but the righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus. Contrary to the lie of the honor-shame scale, we cannot earn our own righteousness or “go up” on the scale of God’s favor. Grace is a free gift of God’s favor—meaning we did not and cannot earn it—and should humble every Christian in their response to God and man. As I have shared throughout this article, one of the greatest problems facing new believers in the Middle East is that as they grow, they let the culture dictate what their

growth looks like. One continues to be balanced on the honor-shame scale.

Islamic influence on the laws of the land also poses great challenges. Many Christians in the Middle East work for or alongside Muslim people, live next door to them, and submit to the authority of Muslim governments and institutions. Though this reality can be a trial, it is a blessing, too: the Church has many opportunities to share the Gospel through loving their neighbors.

Knowing all these things about the Middle East should lead each of us to ask what our role could be in helping to build up the Body of Christ in faraway places. But this question should not be approached from a place of condescension or pride. It need not be said that Westerners are not holier than the Middle Eastern Church, we merely have different experiences of faith and the sins and spiritual forces that would impede it. Yet I believe our experiences of cultural and spiritual warfare can aid us in praying for our brothers and sisters in the Middle East.

I also believe the Western Church takes for granted the freedom individuals have in making decisions based on conviction rather than fear of what society expects. The Middle East can pray for the West to lead lives of holiness that glorify the Lord.

Ultimately, our global response as Christians should be to pray for and with each other that God’s Word would be our guide, His love for us our motivation to walk in obedience, and our spiritual communities the encouragement and accountability we need, as the Lord enables us by His Spirit, to persevere in faith. Regardless of what the culture says, we should not live and make decisions under the threat of shame, and we should not live and make decisions shamelessly, but we should do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.

We must pray that our God casts out the influence of Islam and honor-shame culture in the hearts and minds of Middle Eastern believers to the praise of His name.

May He be glorified, forever.

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:36

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