

The Honor-Shame Conversation in Evangelical Missiology: Past, Present, and Future

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2025

Abstract

The concepts of honor and shame, once peripheral to evangelical missiology, have become pivotal in mission practice, cross-cultural theology, and biblical interpretation. This article traces the evolution of honor-shame as a focal item of study in evangelical missiology, highlighting key moments, figures, and publications that brought these themes to prominence. Despite the growing body of resources, the conversation remains fluid, with challenges such as definitional ambiguity, overgeneralization, and a lack of cohesive frameworks. The article emphasizes the need for continued critical engagement, nuanced understanding, and integration of honor-shame perspectives into missiological training, thus ensuring these insights enrich global ministry without oversimplifying cultural dynamics.

Key Words: evangelical missiology, face, honor, honor-shame, shame

Introduction

There was a time when *honor* and *shame* barely registered on the radar of missiology—cultural notions with little practical weight, acknowledged but not at all connected to the field’s heartbeat. Fast forward to today, and these important concepts have surged to the forefront, increasing in importance for evangelical missiology. This brief survey examines the evolution of the honor-shame conversation within evangelical missiology, tracing its ascent in English-language scholarship from a marginal idea to a critical framework of missional thought and practice.

What some refer to as the honor-shame “model” or “paradigm” is more accurately understood as an ongoing conversation. This dialogue, while rich in insight, is often marked by a lack of coherent structure, overgeneralization, definitional ambiguity, and apriorism that limit its clarity. Rather than crafting a formal, systematic model, the evangelical missiological community has embraced a more fluid dialogue, where contributors explore these themes without consistent boundaries or shared definitions. Despite this absence of a unified framework, there is consensus on two key points: categories such as *honor*, *face*, and *shame*—along with related dynamics like *patronage*—should be critically important in missiological reflection, and Western missiology has largely neglected these categories’ significance.

Over the past several decades, however, there has been a noteworthy increase in interest in honor-shame issues. For example, a search on the research website academia.com for “honor shame culture” yields 6,454 followers of that topic, while an “honor shame missions” search shows 21,370 full text papers. A Google search for “honor shame missions” currently yields 8,090,000 hits; the same search that sets differential time parameters for a search yields the following results:

1980-1989 769 hits
1990-1999 2,820 hits
2000-2009 27,200 hits
2010-2019 218,000 hits
2020-September 23, 2024 2,300,000 hits

A YouTube.com search for “honor-shame missions” yields a similarly impressive number of diverse honor-shame resources (church-based, various organizations, academic, etc.) related explicitly to mission engagement.

The Research

This current flourishing interest, however, can mask the fact that the missiological conversation regarding honor-shame issues has not existed for long. While acknowledging the rich contributions of German and Scandinavian missiological literature, this study focused on resources available in English. This research traced honor-shame references or discussions in several prominent mission journals, including all issues of *Acta Missiologicae*, *Asian Missions Advance* (Asia Mission Association), *Asian Missiology*, *British and Irish Association for Mission Studies-Occasional Newsletter*, *Chinese Theological Review* (English), *Currents in Theology and Mission*, *Dharma Deepika: A South Asian Journal of Missiological Research*, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, *Global Missiology* (English), *International Bulletin of Missionary/Mission Research*, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, *International Review of Mission*, *Journal of Asian Mission*, *Journal of World Christianity*, *Missio Dei Journal*, *Missio Apostolica* (Lutheran Mission Matters), *Missiology*, *Mission Frontiers*, *Mission Studies*, *Practical Anthropology*, and *The South East Asian Journal of Theology*. Also, 45 mission texts dating back to the 1950s and continuing through the early 2000s were reviewed; these texts can be considered major missiological works utilized broadly in Western educational institutions that have taught missions. Finally, this study consulted all mission-related dictionaries and encyclopedias that could be located. Each resource was read closely with an eye toward any discussion of honor, face, and shame. While this study does not here claim comprehensiveness, but the sources consulted represent the major missiological journals and key works for evangelical missiology in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Admittedly, there are likely holes in what was reviewed, hence help in finding more discussions of honor-shame that might have been missed are welcome via a specially created free online database (Flanders n.d.a.).

The results of the just-described research were surprising. Some key resources did indeed mention honor and shame issues. For example, Hwa Yung, the Chinese Malaysian church leader and theologian, in his exceptional book, *Mangos or Bananas: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, discusses guilt and shame briefly (Yung 1997, 70-71). Later, he poses the provocative question, “How are we to teach the idea of sin and guilt in Asian cultures where often the primary concern with wrong-doing is shame?” (Yung 1997, 198). Even so, Yung does not engage the issue in an extensive fashion. David Hesselgrave’s magisterial *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* mentions shame in particular (Hesselgrave 1991, 591-592, 603, 610-612.). Also, in *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*, Hesselgrave includes a very brief discussion of the guilt-shame distinction (Hesselgrave 2000, 273). Finally, in Harvey Conn’s edited volume *The Urban Face of Mission*, there appears an entire chapter, “African Theology from the Perspective of Honor and Shame,” by Andrew Mbuvi (Mbuvi 2002, 279-339). These appearances of honor and shame themes, however, were the exceptions.

More typically, major missiological works did not mention honor, face, or shame. In missions journal articles, major missiological texts, mission-related dictionaries and encyclopedias, anthropology texts written for missionaries, and those texts that surveyed contemporary missiological issues, most of twentieth-century evangelical missiology did not grant issues of honor and shame a primary seat of importance at the missiological table.

The Emergence of Honor-Shame in Missiology

When did evangelical missiology begin to pay attention to honor-shame issues? Arthur H. Smith, an ABCFM missionary to China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, authored an important book, *Chinese Characteristics* (Smith 1894). This work was not a mission text but was intended for broader public consumption. Even so, Smith's book represented perhaps the very first English language cross-cultural discussion of shame and face. As it came from the pen of an experienced missionary, the book deserves mention here. Also, some Catholic mission discussions engaged honor-shame issues. For example, in 1929 Joseph Rutten wrote an article, "Christian Conversion in China: Source of Shame of Pride," on how missionary communication often created unnecessary shame for new Chinese believers (Rutten 1965). Rutten advocated a contextualized theology that elevated honor as a basic component of reaching the Chinese heart and mind.

It was not until the work of Eugene Nida, however, that the honor-shame conversation in evangelical missiology formally began. Most today are quite familiar with Nida's tripartite schema of fear, guilt, and shame he proposes in his influential book *Customs and Cultures*: "We have to reckon with three different types of reactions to transgressions of religiously sanctioned codes: fear, shame, and guilt. (Nida 1975, 150). In mentioning these three codes, Nida does not argue that they represent different *types of cultures* (merely noting them as three responses to transgression). With this configuration, Nida's influential voice formally introduced shame into the missiological conversation, with many subsequent early authors referring specifically to Nida and this tripartite notion as basic to their understanding of honor and shame. Unfortunately, despite Nida's anthropological acumen, he misunderstands shame in his discussions and incorrectly defines guilt and shame, defining guilt as an "inner feeling of failure for not having lived up to what the society or the deity expects" (150), which is ironically a definition of shame. Interestingly, Nida's mistake remains common in much Western literature, where authors frequently conflate or confuse guilt with shame. He also insinuates that guilt is morally superior to shame, noting incorrectly, in this author's opinion, that it is rarer to find people who experience guilt because "irrespective of whether one is caught or not... fear and shame are much more convenient attitudes for self-centered people" (150). Though responsible for introducing the honor-shame related terms into missiology, Nida still represents several misunderstandings of shame.

In the 1960's, the earliest missiological conversations of honor-shame issues began to appear in the *Journal of Practical Anthropology* (later the journal *Missiology*). Though sporadic and typically not extensive, these missiological discussions in the journal represented the earliest extended attempts to address these issues. The first of these was from Walter Trobisch, who engaged in a very brief discussion of shame in his 1961 article on church discipline in Africa:

Finally, we must not forget that African culture is not concerned with guilt but with shame. The practical conduct of the African is not the result of inner deliberation but is conditioned by external control. A deed only becomes a wrong when it is discovered, branded as such, and punished by the surrounding society-be it the tribe or the congregation. One's guilt before God is not feared, but the shame in the eyes of men surely is. Thus, conduct can only be influenced by means of this fear (Trobisch 1961, 201).

Trobisch suggested that defective discipline, due to shame considerations, which allowed members to continue in sin yet remain in fellowship and continue to take the Lord's Supper might result in the "first really significant heresy which African churches" might produce (206).

The first article that dealt focally with issues of honor-shame was that of missionary to Thailand David Filbeck. In “Concepts of Sin and Atonement among the Thin,” Filbeck argued for a contextualized soteriology and hamartiology, as he noted how the Thin (often termed T’in or Lua, a minority indigenous tribe in northern Thailand and parts of Laos) did not experience guilt in strong forms like many Westerners. Filbeck suggested that missionaries should reframe sin as “offending God” (shame-based) rather than simply the breaking of God’s law (guilt-based) (Filbeck 1964, 182). In his estimation, such a reframing would make better sense of the T’in common experience of shame in response to moral failure.

Another early engagement was that from F. B. Welbourn, an ardent Christian and noted Africanist who spent nearly 20 years as chaplain and lecturer at Makerere College in Uganda. In the published proceedings from a conference held at the University of Ghana in 1965, Welbourn contributed a chapter entitled, “Some Problems of African Christianity: Guilt and Shame” (Welbourn 1968). In that study, Welbourn investigated “whether Protestant Christianity—preached largely in terms of salvation from guilt—could be understood by members of traditional African societies: or whether they had first to undergo an Anglo-Saxon type of education before they could appreciate the fundamental assumptions either of the missionaries or of colonial administrators” (192). The chapter, as well as other parts of the scholarly dialog published in the book, offered a sophisticated investigation of “whether men must pass through a ‘natural’ transition from shame to guilt before they can be open to grace” (130-131).

Lowell Noble: Naked and Not Ashamed

It would not be until 1975 that a major work on honor-shame would finally emerge. Anthropologist and sociologist Lowell Noble self-published the very first extensive treatise that discussed honor, shame, and face as significant missiological and theological issues (Noble 1975a). Noble’s work follows his MA thesis from the University of Western Michigan, “Preparing Christian Missionaries to Work in Shame Oriented Cultures” (Noble 1975b). He queries, “How does a person preach a guilt oriented gospel to a shame oriented culture? Is the gospel of Jesus Christ as guilt oriented as we Westerners tend to think it is? ...I had assumed that guilt was a universal phenomenon. After all, the Bible declares that all men are sinners. Are not sin and guilt inseparable?” (viii). Noble acknowledges that it was the writing of Nida that sparked his curiosity in this important area.

Profoundly biblical, Noble’s work devotes a significant portion to discussing honor and shame in the biblical text. Noble’s was the first missiological voice that made the claim (novel at the time, though now routinely expressed) that there existed more in scripture about the experiences of shame and honor than that of guilt and innocence. He argued that the experience of shame tends to be deeper and more personal than that of guilt and noted how shame is not univocal but could be quite varied in differing cultural contexts. The book gained a positive *Christianity Today* review from Dr. Kenneth Pike, the eminent bible translator and missiologist, alerting the public of the growing conversation about honor and shame (Pike 1976). Noble's work was truly significant precisely for how many early voices (e.g., Pike, Wayne Dye, Robert Priest, and Rolland Muller) referenced *Naked and Not Ashamed* as an inspiration for their discussions about sin, guilt, conscience, honor, and shame. Though often forgotten in the honor-shame conversation, there is likely no more seminal early work in this area than that of Noble.

Norman Kraus

In 1987, C. Norman Kraus, a Mennonite missionary in Japan, wrote another significant evangelical work addressing issues of honor-shame. Kraus argued that the Japanese mind simply did not track with his Western theological and communication approaches. His book *Jesus Christ Our Lord* grapples with issues of honor, shame, sin, and soteriology (Kraus 1987). As one of the first to do contextual theology with honor and shame as a primary focus, Kraus labors to show how the cross of Jesus deals with both guilt and shame, discussing Jesus' vicarious solidarity and identification with humanity to remove the shame that sin brings and the new honor that Jesus' death and resurrection grant. Along with Noble's book, the volume by Kraus represented a watershed resource in the emerging development of the honor-shame conversation.

Roland Muller

In 2000, Roland Muller wrote his now well-known *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (Muller 2001). Perhaps the most referenced honor-shame work during the first decade of the 2000s, Muller's book gained popularity due to its accessibility (it is just over 100 pages in length), his memorable designation of "The Eden Effect" (that the sin of Adam brings fear, guilt, and shame), and his generalizing of honor-shame issues broadly. Though written for a Muslim context, his emphasis on how most of the 10/40 window world lived in "shame cultures" made the book eminently usable by missionaries outside Islamic contexts. Muller drew explicitly on Noble's earlier work and highlighted the need to make honor and shame salient to cross-cultural attempts to communicate atonement and models of salvation. This 2000 publication refocused and injected new energy into the global honor-shame conversation.

Dictionaries

Besides the publication of Muller's work, another major event occurred in 2000. The actual publication itself was modest but symbolically important. Early dictionaries of mission did not have entries on honor or shame (e.g., Neill et al. 1971, Müller et al. 1999). However, in 2000 the Baker *Evangelical Dictionary for Missions* became the first missions dictionary or encyclopedia to contain an entry on shame (Priest 2000). Then, in 2008, the *Global Dictionary of Theology* included entries for both face and shame, though it did not include an entry for honor (Flanders 2008a; 2008b). The symbolic importance of these inclusions signaled how honor-shame issues had "arrived" in an even more official way.

Conferences

Another way to mark the growth of the honor-shame conversation is to look at conferences. On September 19-22, 2013, nearly 100 participants gathered at Andrews University for a conference dealing with the challenge of presenting biblical themes in honor-shame contexts (Andrews University 2024). This was the first conference to focus exclusively on honor-shame issues. Though denominationally based, with mostly those from the Adventist Church participating, it represented a truly watershed moment, i.e., a conference focused on honor-shame issues. A book of conference proceedings was published the following year (Bauer 2014). A year later, at Houston Baptist University, the International Orality Network (ION) brought 65 leaders together during July 7-10, 2014 for a conference, "Beyond Literate Western Contexts: Honor and Shame and Assessment of Orality Preference." Several attendees had begun writing and blogging about honor-shame. This serendipitous meeting of various leaders resulted in a new structure, the Honor-Shame

Network, which hosted the first-ever global conference on honor-shame, held at Wheaton College in June of 2017. Nearly 300 participants gathered to hear lectures, attend workshops, and network around issues of honor-shame. The focus on the various topics was multi-dimensional, i.e., presenters discussed honor-shame issues from pastoral, strategic, theological, hermeneutical, and biblical perspectives. Many of the presentations from the conference were subsequently published as *Honor, Shame, and the Gospel: Reframing Our Message and Ministry* (Flanders & Mischke 2020). This 2017 conference, a direct result of connections and conversation from the 2014 ION consultation, indicated a critical mass and established momentum for the global honor-shame conversation within evangelical missiology. Sadly, the 2020 Global Conference on Honor and Shame was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic (though the planned schedule on the website testifies to the extremely broad array of topics, workshops, and lectures (HonorShame 2024). Additionally, another first of its kind was the global symposium organized and led by leaders outside North America. In conjunction with the School of Theology at Singapore Bible College, Dr. Samuel Law organized a three-day symposium, “Contextual Issues of Honor & Shame in Spiritual Formation: Helix-SOTE Conference 2023,” (Singapore Bible College 2024). This event, in particular, testifies to the emergence of honor-shame conversations as a critical issue that Evangelicals worldwide are taking seriously.

A New Surge of Honor-Shame Resources

Since 2014, honor-shame resources have steadily increased. Four books have especially fueled this recent uptick: Jackson Wu’s *Saving God’s Face* (Wu 2012), Jayson Georges’s *The 3D Gospel* (Georges 2013), Werner Mischke’s *The Global Gospel* (Mischke 2015), and Georges and Baker’s *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures* (Georges & Baker 2016). Many other helpful resources have emerged as well. CRU (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ) has developed an evangelistic tool that focuses on honor-shame: *Honor Restored*, a part of their auto-translatable *GodTools* app, reconfigures the classic *4 Spiritual Laws* with honor-shame in mind (Cru 2024). Many high-quality evangelistic resources are available on YouTube, such as “Back to God’s Village” (HonorShame n.d.). *The Father’s Love*, available online in multiple languages, is an evangelistic tract explaining the father and two sons parable from Luke 15 with special attention to honor-shame dimensions (Mischke 2012). Honorshame.com has become the de facto clearinghouse for global honor-shame resources, housing an exceptional amount of missiologically significant resources. Dr. Timothy Tennant, former president of Asbury Seminary and leading Western missiological voice, devoted an entire chapter in his *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* to honor-shame issues (Tennant 2007, 77-104). Jackson Wu’s book, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*, which received *Christianity Today’s* 2020 Book of the Year Award of Merit for Biblical Studies, examines prevalent honor-shame themes in Paul (Wu 2019).

Another important development has been the emergence of voices engaging the often overlooked yet key area of face and facework studies. A recent volume by Dr. Jolene Kinser takes narratives of Chinese Christians and carefully engages issues of face, honor, and reconciliation (Kinser 2023). Missiological engagement with the issue of face has come exclusively from Western authors, but Dr. Mano Emmanuel, a Sri Lankan seminary professor, in her groundbreaking work on reconciliation, shame, and face, marks the first Majority World scholar to publish a significant volume in the area of face. Emmanuel’s volume presents a model for culturally specific, missiological engagement in face and facework (Emmanuel 2020).

Academic Resources

An additional gauge to assess the importance of an issue in missiology is academic research from institutions of higher learning. In the mid-1980s, researchers began to focus theses and dissertations on honor-shame issues. The first of these (not counting Noble's earlier MA thesis) was the 1985 Fuller dissertation by Dr. Evertt Huffard, a contextualized theology of honor for the Muslim-Christian context (Huffard 1985). Paul Matsumoto, also at Fuller, quickly followed Huffard with a Th.M. thesis on "The Missiological Implications of Shame in the Japanese World" (Matsumoto 1985). As of 2024, this study counts 42 missiological theses and dissertations focusing on honor-shame issues (details are available in a specially created free online bibliography of academic theses and dissertations on honor-shame issues (Flanders n.d.b.).

Honor-shame perspectives have also begun to work their way into missiological training in higher education. Missiological anthropologist Dr. Robert Priest has, starting in the early 1990s, taught a course (first at Columbia Biblical Seminary and Graduate School of Missions and subsequently at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) titled "Sin, Shame, and Guilt," using both Noble's *Naked and Not Ashamed* and Muller's *Honor and Shame* as texts. Dr. Tom Steffen has taught graduate courses at the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University and in differing contexts around the world titled "Honor and Shame in Scripture & Service" and "Honor & Shame Themes in Scripture & Ministry." These courses focus on honor-shame issues as they relate to global ministry and theology. More recently, at the East Asia School of Theology, Dr. Raymond Song has taught a course entitled "Honor, Shame, Guilt, and Sin." It remains to be seen which visionary institution will be the first to create a certificate, or full degree, in honor-shame studies for missions and ministry.

Future Directions for the Honor-Shame Conversation

As important as this growing global conversation is, it is imperative to remember that understanding the issues of honor, face, and shame is not a missiological "silver bullet." It is common for those committed to an emerging set of new lenses to overstate the value of the particular approach they advocate. Critical for helping this conversation move forward is the commitment that, though an increased understanding of honor, face, and shame is a powerful addition to the missiological "toolkit," it must never be viewed as a missiological panacea. Moreover, voices that remind us of this important truth and bring a critical eye to this missiological conversation (Dunaetz 2021, Merz 2020, Ochs & Cozen 2019, Whiteman 2018) are welcomed, pushing the missiological community to greater precision and depth.

Those who teach or occupy positions of organizational leadership in the English-speaking missiological world must continue encouraging this conversation, extending and mainstreaming honor-shame ideas and frameworks. Professors and teachers should include in their course syllabi sections on these issues and include in their bibliographies and recommended reading important sources that deal with issues of honor, face, and shame. Similarly, those who work in organizational leadership should sponsor seminars that tackle these issues and include in training materials biblical and cultural perspectives on honor-face-shame issues.

Researchers and writers in this area should labor to bring about greater clarity in missiology's theoretical understandings and definitions. Scholars often speak past one another, using similar terms with different meanings. Greater definitional agreement about these topics is needed. Another critical issue is that of essentializing and generalizing concepts. That is, univocal or

essentialized understandings need to shift to more nuanced and multivalent definitions and approaches. Even the convenient shorthand labeling of cultures as “honor cultures,” “shame cultures,” “face cultures,” “guilt cultures,” etc., conceals and misleads as much as it reveals. It is certainly true that all human cultures “do honor,” “do shame,” and “do face,” and all function with notions of “guilt” and “guiltiness.” However, key cultural differences exist in areas of valence, motivation, and the weighting of diverse forms of these dynamics for individuals and communities. The habit of categorizing large cultural units in terms of these over-generalized labels should give way to investigating each unique cultural configuration of honor, face, and shame dynamics.

In addition, missiologists must update their working notions of anthropology. Theories from earlier anthropologists (e.g., Mead, Benedict, and the categorization schema from the anthropology of honor and shame in the 1960s and 1970s) are now rejected by contemporary anthropology (Flanders 2019, Merz 2020). Members of the missions community, who desire above all things to understand the world and people truthfully, must become conversant with contemporary changes in anthropological and social scientific theories.

Finally, this growing honor-shame conversation, which in the understanding of this study has progressed primarily in the English-speaking Western world, must continue to globalize. It must extend more deeply into the cultural frameworks and local languages of churches worldwide. Those invested in this conversation should use existing resources to cultivate the developing perspectives on honor, face, and shame, especially among emerging Majority World voices. Current participants in the conversation need to intentionally recruit and assist local leaders and scholars to extend related insights into their own linguistic and cultural contexts.

The honor-shame conversation has evolved from a neglected to a pivotal dimension of evangelical missiology. The potential of this conversation lies in a global collaboration across cultures and languages. By fostering networks of thinkers, leaders, and practitioners who engage deeply with culturally specific expressions of honor and shame, churches around the world can articulate their identities in Christ with authenticity and integrity, using the lenses of honor, face, and shame. Advancing the conversation will require humility, advocacy, and a commitment to empowering local leaders to exert their theological voices. The challenge ahead is great, but so is the opportunity to transform honor, face, and shame in evangelical missiology into a truly global conversation. The future awaits all relevant parties’ faithful participation.

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