

Theological dialogue between shame-based cultures (e.g., Far East) and guilt-based cultures (e.g., West) inevitably reflect different yet overlapping views relating to sin and atonement. “The term “atonement” speaks to the heart of the relationship between God and human beings, signaling the process of “making at one” (i.e., at-one-ment) that restores right relations between parties that have for some reason fallen out.”¹ In this case, the relationship between God and humanity that has been broken because of sin necessitates Christ’s atonement, but this relationship entails the context of a person(s) in particular cultural rivers.²

The honor-shame dynamic flows out of a cultural river with currents that push external pressure on behavior. Shame can be seen as corporate or public, since it generally follows any action perceived by a larger group to reduce one’s standing within said group that represents a loss of face (i.e., sinner).³ Therefore, sin can be seen as the shame in one’s or a group’s public distortion of humanity as an image bearer(s) of God (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:25; 3:7-8). Further, the idea of being God’s people is shaped by a relationship (subjective) that is negatively affected whenever we sin publicly in dishonoring the Lord. For those in honor and shame contexts, “if a person is shamed by someone of a significantly lower status, the offended party has the right to unleash public punishment on those who have offended their honor... this response often involved shedding the blood of the offender.”⁴ The Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 wonderfully portrays Jesus’ atoning work in taking our place as a human being, even a lowly slave, and bearing our shame and

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Atonement” in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 175.

² John Walton describes a ‘cultural river’ as values of a given society, whereby the study of various cultural rivers falls under ‘cognitive environment criticism’ that attempts to understand the worldview of a particular people within a particular space and time.

John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 11.

³ Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2007), 79.

⁴ Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 94.

punishment through his obedience to death on a cross, so that both God the Father and his name are honored among all peoples.⁵ It speaks to God's love in restoring our relationship(s) 'together' with him through Jesus, whose resurrection is a great vindication over the shame of death (Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:9; Revelation 4:9, 11; 5:11-12; 7:12; 21:25).

Guilt-based cultures reveal a more individualistic aspect rather than a communal/social one associated with shame-based cultures. Sin is of course relational but also personal, which flows heavily in the cultural river of the West. There is emphasis on guilt because of transgression to certain commands. A guilt-based (objective) view sees sin as a violation of the covenant God has revealed to his people, representing a loss of innocence due to the reliance on more of an internalized conviction for behavior.⁶ The legal notion or justice within the framework of guilt/innocence shows a need for forgiveness and redemption. Christ's atonement makes our relationship right with God by taking our guilt and punishment at the cross (i.e., God's justice), in order that we might be declared forgiven and righteous. This happens as we receive Christ's work through Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior.

Tennent insightfully describes how we need to recognize both shame and guilt as being attributed to sin by disclosing:

It is true that sin is measured against the objective, revealed will of God. God's justice must be satisfied. It is also true that sin is the fruit of a broken relationship. Sin is both objective and subjective. If we only know about guilt, there is a danger toward legalism and a depersonalization of what it means to be a human in rebellion against God and in discord with our neighbor. If we only know about shame, there is a danger of losing the clear objective basis for God's righteous judgment that transcends the changing vagaries of human culture.⁷

Emphasizing Jesus' atonement ensures that Christians are able to be one with God by both his judgment and grace through Jesus' work on the cross, which is his triumph over all.

⁵ See also Hebrews 12:2 – 'For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.'

⁶ Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 79.

⁷ Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 101.