

THE SHAME CULTURES

AND

THE GUILT CULTURES

By Pablo Javier DAVOLI (04/28/2013).

BY MEANS OF INTRODUCTION:

In 1937, the American anthropologist Margaret MEAD published her famous book "*Cooperation and Competition among Primitive Peoples*" ("*Cooperación y competición entre los pueblos primitivos*"). The work was written based on the experiences gathered by the author herself during her coexistence with native peoples from New Guinea and Bali.

It was in that book that MEAD set out, for the first time, the important distinction between the "shame cultures" (culturas de la vergüenza) and the "guilt cultures" (culturas de la culpa). Decades later, this classification would be restarted –among others– by Donald WARD. In fact, his book entitled "*On the Poets and Poetry of Indo-Europeans*" ("*Sobre los poetas y la poesía de los indoeuropeos*"), published in 1973,

WARD evoked the aforementioned categorization, from which he made substantial analysis. (1)

THE “SHAME CULTURES”:

In the *shame cultures*, honour is the fundamental moral principle. The person and the community's ethical structure is based on such ideal and organized around it. In the context of these cultures, people's self-esteem and the respect they have for each other, are determined by their honourableness.



ARMIN, THE CHERUSCI.

That is why, within the frame of the well-established *shame cultures*, interpersonal relationships -as a general rule- are covered in frankness and the social spirit -under normal circumstances- tends to

¹ According to: DE BENOIST, Alain, article "*Les Indo-Européens*", published on the Web site "*Alternativa Europea. Asociación Cultural*", on 12/11/12, at: <http://alternativaeuropeaasociacioncultural.wordpress.com/2012/12/11/el-mundo-de-los-indoeuropeos/> (consulted on 04/28/13).

be relaxed and cheerful. As well, it is possible to notice certain innocence within such cultures, completely unconnected with the reciprocal suspicion in which the members of other societies are involved.

According to this peculiar ethical conception, the fundamental moral principle (honour) does not come from an external commandment (for example, from GOD). On the contrary, it lives in the person itself, as a quality given by GOD himself, as HEAVENLY FATHER. In other words, honour is -in principle- intrinsic: it is an attribute of the person itself and, in depth, of its particular family lineage. From this point of view, the moral principle is "ontic" at the same time.



"EL CID CAMPEADOR".

For this reason, in the *shame cultures*, the moral rule is not lived or understood as a dictate unconnected to the person itself. On the contrary, it is perceived and considered as a requirement derived from the personal dignity itself; as a vocation and therefore, as a perfectly natural imperative.

In the light of the above remarks, we can easily understand why, within the context of these cultures, a voluntary human behaviour although deviated, constitutes -in itself- an authentic tragedy, both at a personal level and at a family level. The suitable "punishment" is in the pernicious act itself, due to the loss of honourableness that it implies, for the "offender" and even for his loved ones. That is, because of the harm that this offence implies for the own dignity; because of the shame that it entails.

The *shame culture* is typically Indo-European. That is why it defined so much the Ancient Greeks and the original Latinos, as well as the Celts and the Germans; among other Indo-European people. Besides, it was adopted -throughout the millenniums- by other communities which, despite they were not Indo-European- received some cultural influence from those people.

THE "GUILT CULTURES":

In the *guilt cultures*, ethical rules are lived and understood as pure external mandates, originally attributed to GOD. The man who belongs to the *guilt culture* does not find in himself the moral rule. He needs a commandment promulgated by GOD, arbitrary and dogmatically. And, when does not believe in GOD anymore, he is forced to elaborate an axiological code according to the instinct of conservation of his own life and to the need (first and foremost, biological) of living in society. And this is why, when he loses the sense of transcendence, his ethical system is reduced to a mere "*coexistence code*", grossly practical.

Of course, it is within the *guilt cultures* that the notion of "*sin*" is born, it multiplies and spreads. As well as the idea of GOD as "*punisher*". A "god" that penalizes and punishes, according to his will. Many times, atrociously; with a terrifying cruelty.



RABBIS PRAYING AS USUAL AGAINST THE "WAILING WALL" IN JERUSALEM.

Behind this singular "guilty generating" ethic, which is based on a perception and a conception of GOD so strange compared to the typically Indo-European ones, seems to hide a profound and atavistic sense of smallness, weakness and even, unworthiness. There have been several and many authors dedicated to puzzle out this matter, both difficult and interesting. (2)

To conclude: According to WARD, just like the idea of “*shame*” has its origin in the Indo-European people, the notions of “*sin*” and “*guilt*” come from the “*great universalists and metaphysical systems of Abrahamic and Semitic origin*”. (3)

² We leave the analysis and the review of the different conclusions to which those authors came to for another moment.

³ According to: DE BENOIST, Alain; mentioned article.