

# The God who gives generously: honour, praise and the agony of celebrity

Mark B. Stephens and Georgiane Deal

Excelsia College, 69–71 Waterloo Rd, Macquarie Park, New South Wales 2113

[mark.stephens@excelsia.edu.au](mailto:mark.stephens@excelsia.edu.au)

## Abstract

The need for honour, meaning publicly acknowledged worth, has been a feature of social life across the ages. From the ancient world of Greece and Rome, through to the honour codes of contemporary celebrity culture, the quest for honour is often framed in agonistic terms, in that honour is a limited good that demands competitive behaviour. This article examines the way early Christianity responded to ancient honour codes, with a view to its potential relevance in contemporary culture. It demonstrates the way early Christianity retained something of the language of honour in its ecclesial communities, but redefined honour in light of its conception of grace.

**Keywords:** grace, honour, humility, pride, spiritual gifts

In her recent work on the vice of vainglory, the philosopher Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung asks the question: ‘Can glory ever be good for humans?’<sup>1</sup> DeYoung’s own answer draws largely upon the resources of patristic and medieval Christian thought, but such questions have persisted for the entirety of Christian history. If we think of the beginnings of that history, it is now a commonplace insight that early Christianity was birthed into a Mediterranean culture where public honour was a pivotal value and a treasured good.<sup>2</sup> And if we think of our contemporary situation, the question of honour and human praise remains constant, no more so than in the domain of contemporary celebrity, where the earnest desire for publicly acknowledged worth continues unabated.<sup>3</sup> This article proposes to bring the past and present together into conversation, by comparing the

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Vainglory: The Forgotten Vice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, ‘Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World’, in Jerome H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Although not her main focus, DeYoung includes numerous examples of how contemporary celebrity exemplifies the vice of vainglory. See *Vainglory*, pp. 3–4, 93–4, 123.

contemporary phenomena of ‘honour-seeking’ in popular celebrity with the practical instruction provided within the New Testament. How might one appropriate the New Testament’s stance toward honour as a resource for navigating the contemporary quest for public recognition? Our discussion will proceed through four broad sections. To begin with, we establish the broader milieu of first century Mediterranean society, as the ‘honour culture’ in which early Christian thinking was developed. Second, we will briefly explore some of the ways early Christians engaged the question of honour, both through redefining its basis, and appropriating it within their community praxis. Third, we will then briefly explicate the contemporary quest for recognition, as evidenced in specific examples of contemporary celebrity. Finally, we will offer some proposals as to how the New Testament might speak to our modern world, both to encourage and critique.

### Public honour in ancient context

Our investigation must begin in the ancient world, with a brief summary of how Mediterranean culture configured honour as a social value. In its simplest definition, honour in the ancient world involved publicly acknowledged worth, ‘a combination of the worth that you have in your own eyes *together with* the worth that you have in the eyes of whomever is important to you’.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, within such a milieu, what other people said about you mattered.<sup>5</sup> It was into this social world that the early Christians had to hammer out their own construal of the place and value of honour, and how it should appropriately function both within their community, and in their dealings with the wider culture. Of the many detailed points which could be made about the honour codes of the first century, we will limit ourselves to two.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Romans: Notes on the Epistle in its Literary and Cultural Setting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 72. Cf. Alisha Paddock, ‘First Corinthians in a Post-Honor Culture’, *Stone-Campbell Journal* 16 (2013), p. 86; Peter Gosnell, ‘Honour and Shame Rhetoric as a Unifying Motif in Ephesians’, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16 (2006), p. 106; Malina and Neyrey, ‘Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts’, pp. 25–6. On the opposite end of the scale, shame is not simply an internal matter, but rather disgrace that is publicly known and socially reinforced; see Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> In *Vainglory*, pp. 17–18, DeYoung draws a conceptual distinction between honour and glory, which focuses more on the idea of honour in terms of intrinsic worth, whether people recognise it or not. Whilst this is fair enough in modern terms, it doesn’t quite capture the way honour could be inextricably bound together with public recognition in the ancient world.

First, honour in Graeco-Roman antiquity was framed in agonistic terms, in the sense that honour was understood to be a limited good, such that if one person was honoured, then another must inevitably miss out.<sup>6</sup> This agonism in social relations legitimated a pattern of social conflict in the form of honour ‘challenges’, in which every encounter outside one’s kinship group contained the potential for one to lose or gain honour.<sup>7</sup> Second, codes of honour and shame in antiquity involved a complex interplay between ancestry and achievement. On the one hand, being born to the right family automatically conferred honour upon the fortunate descendant. But one could also earn and maintain honour through actions which brought public praise, in particular the winning of honour challenges, the gaining of wealth and the practice of benefaction.<sup>8</sup>

What is vital to note is that the quest for honour had a material effect on social attitudes and individual behaviour in antiquity. In such a setting boasting was to be somewhat expected,<sup>9</sup> and loving honour (*philotimia*) could be regarded as a virtue.<sup>10</sup> More fundamentally, an individual’s sense of worth depended substantially upon the affirmation they received from the court(s) of reputation that mattered most to them.

<sup>6</sup> Steven C. Skultety, ‘Competition in the Best of Cities: Agonism and Aristotle’s “Politics”’ *Political Theory* 37 (2009), p. 46; Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), pp. 17–18. However, J. E. Lendon argues this was not a feature of Roman conceptions of honour in ‘Roman Honor’, in Michael Peachin (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 392.

<sup>7</sup> John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 433–4. Joseph H. Hellerman lists a range of possible honour challenges such as insults, gift-giving, invitations to dinner, debates over legal issues and arranging marriages in ‘Challenging the Authority of Jesus: Mark 11:27–33 and Mediterranean Notions of Honor and Shame’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000), p. 219.

<sup>8</sup> Paddock, ‘First Corinthians’, p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> See Tacitus, *Annales* 4.38; Sallust, *Bellum Iugurthinum* 85.26. See Gosnell, ‘Honor and Shame Rhetoric’, p. 107. Note also E. A. Judge’s assertion that ‘self-magnification ... became a feature of Hellenic higher education’ in ‘The Conflict of Educational Aims in the New Testament’, in J. R. Harrison (ed.), *E. A. Judge: The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), p. 701. Nevertheless, such boasting and self-praise needed to be deployed with ‘great delicacy’ according to Chris Forbes, ‘Comparison, Self-Praise, and Irony: Paul’s Boasting and the Conventions of Hellenistic Rhetoric’, *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 17. *Philotimia* could be regarded as both a virtue and a vice. See the varied evidence in Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.3.13; Demosthenes, *On the crown* 18.257; Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics* 4.4; Dio Chrysostom *Fourth discourse on kingship* 84. Cf. Skultety, ‘Competition in the Best of Cities’, pp. 47–8.

## The early Christian response

Operating within this social world, the early Christian response to these ancient honour codes was complex. At one level, early Christian communities were frequently dishonoured by their neighbours, partly because they followed a Messiah who had been publicly shamed through crucifixion.<sup>11</sup> This social experience of shame necessitated a response that could demonstrate why Christian believers were, despite surface appearances, the ones who were honoured and favoured by God. Given the social basis of honour, this necessitated identifying an alternative 'court of reputation' (namely, God), whilst correspondingly discrediting the opinions of outsiders.<sup>12</sup> Crucial to this whole enterprise was a deep reflection upon the storyline of Christ, who himself was ultimately vindicated by God through resurrection.<sup>13</sup>

But this was only one dimension of the early Christian response. At another level, we also see within the New Testament a nuanced appropriation of honour discourse as a language to be deployed in encouraging and praising other human beings. So whilst there are texts that seek to relativise the value of receiving praise from other human beings, there are other instances which appropriate the language of honour, and see a legitimate place for it within the Christian community.<sup>14</sup> Parents, widows, wives and church leaders are all specifically identified as being worthy of honour.<sup>15</sup> In terms of the wider society, early Christian authors commend appropriate honouring towards political leaders (1 Pet 2:17),<sup>16</sup> and even towards slave masters (1 Tim 6:1–2).

But what of the question of directing praise and honour towards those we might term 'high achievers' or 'gifted' in some way? In the letters of Paul, we find occasions where the apostle will draw attention to the successful results and righteous integrity of his work (e.g. Rom 15:17–20; 1 Cor 15:10; 1 Thess 2:5–10).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in his self-conception as a 'master

<sup>11</sup> David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp. 44–5, 51. Cf. Heb 10:32–4; 1 Pet 2:12; 3:16; 4:12–16.

<sup>12</sup> DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage*, pp. 61–5; Paddock, 'First Corinthians', p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage*, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> Matt 5:11; 6:2; Acts 24:13; Rom 2:29; John 7:24; 2 Cor 5:12; 1 Pet 2:12; 3:16.

<sup>15</sup> Matt 15:4//Mark 7:10; Mark 10:19//Luke 18:20; Eph 6:2; 1 Tim 3:8, 11; 5:3–6, 17; Tit 2:2; 1 Pet 3:7.

<sup>16</sup> Precisely what this entailed is debated. See Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1996), p. 188.

<sup>17</sup> David Kuck, 'Paul and Pastoral Ambition: A Reflection on 1 Corinthians 3–4', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 19 (1992), p. 174.

builder' (σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων; 1 Cor 3:10–15), Paul shows a concern that the quality of his work matters, and will be subject to an eschatological examination by God (1 Cor 3:13).<sup>18</sup> But such achievements and success do not lead to unrestrained boasting and self-advertisement. Rather, Paul's accomplishments are always situated within a wider theological context of grace and gift.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, on the occasion when Paul does adopt a mode of 'boastful confidence' (τῆ ὑποστάσει τῆς καυχήσεως), he actually deploys it as an ironic parody of the arrogance of his opponents, by deliberately speaking 'foolishness' (ἐν ἀφροσύνῃ) and not 'as the Lord would' (οὐ κατὰ κύριον).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, what Paul ends up boasting are his weaknesses, in order that the grace of God might be magnified (2 Cor 12:5, 9–10). His overall perspective on the priority of grace might well be summed up best in 1 Corinthians 4:7: 'For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?'<sup>21</sup>

It is also useful for us to investigate two instances where Paul uses the language of honour in close proximity to a discussion of gifts. In Romans 12:10 we find a brief exhortation to: 'Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo [προηγούμενοι] one another in showing honor'.<sup>22</sup> This encouragement (along with many others given in vv. 9–21) is grounded in a prior experience of grace. Within Romans as a whole, grace has been shown to be a levelling factor, in which the common plight of humanity (both Jew and Gentile), establishes all Christians as equally 'graced' in their experience of salvation. But within the immediate context of Romans 12,

<sup>18</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> Rom 15:17; 2 Cor 10:13, 17–18.

<sup>20</sup> See, in particular, Forbes, 'Comparison', pp. 16–22.

<sup>21</sup> ESV, hereafter all English translations will come from the ESV; Cf. James K. A. Smith's comments on how Augustine used 1 Cor 4:7 as a favourite text in *Letters to a Young Calvinist: An Invitation to the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> There is some conjecture over precisely how to translate the verb προηγέομαι used here. It can be taken to mean to prefer or esteem another more highly, or it could be taken to mean that one should lead the way in offering honour to others. Liddell-Scott generally defines it in terms of taking the lead or going before, whilst Bauer/Arndt/Gingrich/Danker suggests a closer tie to ἡγεῖσθαι (consider); and Blass/Debrunner/Funk is adamant in its preference for the translation 'esteem more highly' (cf. Phil 2:3). Modern translations are evenly divided: 'Outdo one another' (HCSB; ESV; NRSV); 'be the best at showing honor' (CEB); 'give preference to one another' (NASB); 'honour one another above yourselves' (NIV). With Moo, we prefer the idea of 'leading' or 'outdoing', because the meaning 'consider/esteem' is otherwise unattested. See Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 777.

the evidence of grace is not simply limited to the way people are initially included within the people of God, but extends on into a discussion of *χαρίσματα* (lit. gifts, or grace-gifts),<sup>23</sup> where people's ministry abilities differ 'according to the grace given to us' (*κατὰ τὴν χάριν τὴν δοθεῖσαν ἡμῖν*).<sup>24</sup> Because giftedness is ultimately a consequence of being graced, it is little surprise that Paul can then go on to speak of a community in which people 'outdo' one another in giving honour. What is being depicted is a counter-cultural vision, in which the agonism of honour-challenges, and the hierarchies of Graeco-Roman society, have been replaced with an environment of mutuality, where honour can be given away, *without fear of diminishing the giver in the process*.<sup>25</sup> Here the competition, if one may call it that, is to see who can honour the other first, because here there is no fear that honour is a limited good which must be strenuously grasped and jealously guarded.

In another discussion of *χαρίσματα* in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul attributes giftedness back to the sovereign apportionment of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4–6, 11). Seen in this light, gifting cannot be a reason for either ranking or division, because all gifts ultimately derive from the one God, rather than the worthiness of the individual.<sup>26</sup> This portrayal of a ministry context suffused with grace is then combined with Paul's metaphor of a mutually interdependent body, both of which then materially impact on the question of honour. Precisely because *χαρίσματα* are universal, undeserved and intentionally diverse,<sup>27</sup> they enable the overturning of surface judgements and appearances,<sup>28</sup> so that people who *seem* less honourable (*ἀτιμότερα*) are, through the gracious discretion of the Spirit, given greater honour (*τιμὴν περισσοτέραν*). Crucially, the intended goal is not the elimination of honour, but rather its multiplication, such that when one part of the body is honoured, everyone rejoices (v. 26). It is, in other words, an environment where honour no longer functions to divide, to rank or to compete, but

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the word *χάρισμα* and its meaning, see James R. Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace in its Graeco-Roman Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 279–80.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. also Paul's introduction in terms of speaking to them 'by the grace given to me' (*διὰ τῆς χάριτος τῆς δοθείσης μοι*, Rom 12:3).

<sup>25</sup> For an account how the practice of honouring all was counter-cultural, see Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), pp. 110–11; cf. Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace*, pp. 281–2.

<sup>26</sup> τὸ...αὐτὸ πνεῦμα (v. 4); ὁ αὐτὸς κύριος (v. 5); ὁ...αὐτὸς θεὸς (v. 6), τὸ ἓν καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ πνεῦμα (v. 11).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 12:24b: 'But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it ...'.

<sup>28</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 605–7.

rather honour functions to enable the common good, and to celebrate God's goodness to all.

### The wider theological horizon of human giftedness

As the above discussion demonstrates, within the particular domain of Christian ministry we find New Testament texts which encourage people to deploy their God-given abilities, and receive some kind of honour, but in a way that brings mutual encouragement, communal rejoicing and a constant recognition of the goodness of God. The fear is not of human contribution, or achievement, but rather that such achievement will be seen as disconnected from the Giver.<sup>29</sup> To be sure, these insights pertain to the specific topic of ministry gifts within the Christian community. But we would suggest that such insights can be meaningfully transposed to the larger theological context of humanity in general, insofar as the broader theology of the Christian scriptures sees human capacity as inextricably related to divine gift. All of creation, including the specific capacities with which we are empowered, is a gracious gift, and, as Paul Griffiths has made clear, this transforms our understanding of how we appropriate them. Grace-gifts cannot be possessively expropriated, as if they were something generated by the human person alone. They must be seen and known as 'free gift'.<sup>30</sup> This leads Griffiths to make a distinction between seeing something 'iconically' and seeing something 'idolatrously'. To see something iconically means that we see it as 'translucent to the weight of ... glory', whereas an idol is 'closed to that glory'.<sup>31</sup> Such language calls to mind the biblical language of 'image-bearing', in which, from the very beginning, human beings are constituted as creatures who reflect and represent the Creator who has given them breath.<sup>32</sup> If this is true, then to idolise the *εἰκόν* is not to honour it, but to lose it.<sup>33</sup> Image-bearers are truly honoured when one sees through them to the one whose image they bear. In this respect,

<sup>29</sup> At other points in the New Testament, we see calls to steward a gift (*οἰκονόμοι*; 1 Pet 4:10), to fan it into flame (*ἀναζωπυρέω*; 2 Tim 1:6), and to avoid neglecting it (*μὴ ἀμέλει*, 1 Tim 4:14). To develop in these abilities is not regarded as a means of self-advertisement, instead it naturally morphs into praise towards a gracious God (cf. 1 Pet 4:11).

<sup>30</sup> Paul Griffiths, *The Vice of Curiosity: An Essay on Intellectual Appetite* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2006), p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73–5.

<sup>32</sup> Gen 1:26–7; 5:3; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9 (although in this last case the language of 'likeness' is used). See also DeYoung, *Vainglory*, pp. 19–20, 30, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Griffiths, *Vice of Curiosity*, p. 76. *εἰκόν* is the Greek translation of the Heb. *דָּבָר*. The language of human beings as 'eikons' plays a pivotal role in Scot McKnight's work, *Embracing Grace: A Gospel for All of Us* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2005).

Andrew Wilson notes the strange phenomenon in contemporary discourse whereby to claim one is 'gifted' is seen as more arrogant than to claim one has worked hard.<sup>34</sup> This is exactly the opposite of the economy of grace out of which the scriptures work, where 'I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me' (1 Cor 15:10).

### 'And the honour goes to ...': artistry, accolade and idolatry in contemporary celebrity culture

We now move rapidly from the ancient world to an example of honour systems within contemporary culture. Though they have taken on new forms and been ascribed new consequence, honour/shame interactions are arguably just as prominent in the present day as in the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>35</sup> Publicly ascribed value is evident in various facets of contemporary existence, including sport, business and politics. But nowhere is it more pronounced than in the arts and entertainment sectors, and particularly in the sphere of celebrity culture.<sup>36</sup>

In his book *Gods Behaving Badly*, Pete Ward labels celebrity culture as para-religion, a 'sort of' religion in which contemporary celebrities can be likened to the pantheon of mythological deities that presided over the social worlds of antiquity.<sup>37</sup> But as Deena and Michael Weinstein point out, within this 'new polytheism' adherents exalt 'self-consciously human contrivances' rather than a higher power.<sup>38</sup> Within this rarefied world, honour and validation are contingent upon the perception of the audience, who are constantly promoting and demoting celebrity 'gods' according to their visibility.<sup>39</sup> This is not to say that artistic merit or moral distinction is not a source of celebrity, but simply that they 'are not the necessary conditions for it'.<sup>40</sup>

In this insular and secular world, without a divine image to bear, iconography easily becomes idolatry. Similar to ancient Graeco-Roman

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Wilson, 'It's All Gift', *Christianity Today* 58 (2014), p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Andy Crouch, 'The Return of Shame', *Christianity Today* 59 (2015), pp. 32–41.

<sup>36</sup> According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, the word 'celebrity,' from the Latin *celebritas*, draws from a root meaning 'frequented or honored'. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Pete Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), pp. 6, 57; cf. p. 19: 'It is not so much that celebrity culture is actually religion; neither is it a substitute for religion.'

<sup>38</sup> Deena Weinstein and Michael Weinstein, 'Celebrity Worship as Weak Religion', *Word and World* 23 (2000), p. 297. Ward suggests that we 'worship versions of our sacred selves reflected through the lens of media-generated images' (*Gods Behaving Badly*, 7).

<sup>39</sup> Weinstein and Weinstein, 'Celebrity Worship', p. 297.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.



models, honour is often construed as a limited good, which is distributed based on achievement and public display – with the two often being conflated. To be sure, the allocation of honour in the artistic sphere can appear haphazard.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, there are some behaviours that warrant sure legitimation. As in antiquity, there is honour in benefaction. Ward extends his religious metaphor to suggest a sort of present-day sainthood in merging political or social activism with a career in the arts.<sup>42</sup> The advantages for the celebrity and their brand are twofold: demonstrations of benevolence are both a reiteration of reputation and rank and a grab for them. Benefaction is afforded immediate honour with the promise of enduring eminence.

Yet another overlap between the cultures of the present and the past is that honour is rarely deployed without the promise of tangible return. This is the condition of reciprocity that the early Christians were so explicitly warned against (Luke 6:30; 14:12). This notion of just rewards has, in turn, contributed to the disposition of celebrity circles to formally affirm the worth of a cultural product by way of prize giving. Honour is thereby conferred through structures of ritual and ceremony, distinctions between high versus low art, but at the same time this is often counteracted by the temptation to play to the whims of an audience, rather than promote authenticity or innovation.<sup>43</sup> This particular paradox, between the posture of awarding good art and the potential distortions that arise out of an earnestness to do so, will be later scrutinised in more detail. But here we can initially note that this cultural trend implicitly deviates from the early Christian instruction to ‘honour all’, for this becomes impossible in an agonistic, tournament-infused and highly commodified industry. Perhaps it is somewhat ironic, then, that honour is often afforded to the winner who displays humility and gratitude upon reception of a cultural prize.<sup>44</sup> This could, of course, be attributed to a certain residue of Christian morality in contemporary culture.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, sociologist Joel Best well articulates this tension, asserting that ‘the cultural ideal seems to fall between these two extremes: one should ... show respect for the award and treat the honor as

<sup>41</sup> Gabriel Rossman, Nicole Esparza and Phillip Bonacich, ‘I’d Like to Thank the Academy, Team Spillovers, and Network Centrality’, *American Sociological Review* 75 (2010), p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly*, p. 98.

<sup>43</sup> Rossman, Esparza and Bonacich, ‘I’d Like to Thank the Academy’, p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> DeYoung, *Vainglory*, p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> See John Dickson, *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), pp. 97–112.

honorable ... but one should avoid being openly covetous and not reveal too much ambition for receiving the prize'.<sup>46</sup>

In general, therefore, we can suggest that whilst good cultural capital is suitably celebrated in our accolade-seeking society,<sup>47</sup> the compulsion to vainglory remains thoroughly magnetic.<sup>48</sup> After all, in the current condition, it is the estimation of the crowd that is the litmus test of achievement. Honour simply does not exist without public demonstration and affirmation, however fraught and fleeting that might be.<sup>49</sup> The profound complexities of this are perhaps best exemplified in the praxis of that most contentious of performers, Kanye West. If there is an artist so unmistakably gripped by this modern imagining of honour, it is surely 'Yeezus'.

### 'Number one living and breathing rock star': Kanye West, agonism and the search for worth

Kanye West is a god.<sup>50</sup> You might not like him to be, you mightn't endorse the proclamation, but this won't alter the assertion. For the person to whom it really matters, this claim is as near to gospel as the gospel itself. West's notoriety as a public figure is indisputable. He has leverage enough to both scrutinise and embody the excesses of modern honour codes. On the one hand, West's honour is legitimated by his achievements as a lyricist, producer and performer, so that his commentary on the distribution of merit in contemporary celebrity culture is weighty and poignant, despite (or perhaps in conjunction with) the erratic behaviour he has become best known for.<sup>51</sup> Yet it is his acts of self-deification and irreverence that

<sup>46</sup> Joel Best, 'Prize Proliferation', *Sociological Forum* 23 (2008), p. 10. See also James F. English, 'Winning the Culture Game: Prizes, Awards, and the Rules of Art', *New Literary History* 33 (2002), p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> Using 'good' here in the sense of artistic quality, rather than in an ethical or moral sense.

<sup>48</sup> 'Our culture forms us to crave recognition ... The more opportunities for publicity we have, the more problems with vainglory we potentially face.' DeYoung, *Vainglory*, p. 117.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Quotation in heading is from Kanye West as cited in R. J. Cubarrubia, 'Kanye West: 'I'm the Number One Living and Breathing Rock Star'', <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/kanye-west-im-the-number-one-living-and-breathing-rock-star-20130624>.

<sup>51</sup> From his six albums, West has won a total of twenty-one Grammy awards. As David Samuels of *The Atlantic* affirms: 'West is at least some kind of a musical genius ...' 'American Mozart', *Atlantic Monthly* 309 (2012), p. 74. Before going out as a rapper, West achieved considerable critical success as a producer of hip-hop albums. See James Braxton Peterson, 'The Revenge of Emmett Till: Impudent Aesthetics and the Swagger Narratives of Hip Hop Culture', *African American Review* 45 (2012), p. 627.

have become a recurring rhetoric in both his cultural product and public appearances. He is flashy and indulgent, and sometimes so excessive that one is pressed to question his authenticity. Amidst sharp criticism, the rapper has never faltered from this position of self-proclamation, or reneged on his usually incriminating statements.<sup>52</sup> If West possesses a genuine conviction of his infallibility, then this is telling of the way honour is cultivated in the present day.<sup>53</sup> If it is all an elaborate and sustained act, then this is also telling – and perhaps more so. For the purposes of this study, we will assume that West is something like the apotheosis of a contemporary artist, seized by postmodern self-consciousness and seeking recognition for their work. Two particular manifestations of the contemporary honour culture will be examined, using Kanye as a case study. They are the modern-day model of agonism, and the trend towards self-promotion and public affirmation. Both issues are exemplified in the intricacies of the formal awards ceremony.

Having testified to West's position, it is helpful to discern his perception of honour in the artistic sphere. For someone so preoccupied with status, it follows that West has demonstrated his subscription to an agonistic code of affirmation. This tendency has been most apparent in the framework of the formal awards ceremony. Sociologist Joel Best asserts: 'Establishing, awarding and publicizing prizes are important legitimation processes ... This [practice] helps ratify and display esteem rankings both within the [social] group and for others.'<sup>54</sup> Far from an occasion of Durkheimian communion, however, the Grammy Awards 'generate inequality' and are a public platform for conflict.<sup>55</sup> It is entirely plausible, therefore, that West's infamous Grammy goofs are simply the vocalisation of a vicious competition that underlies the formalities of the cultural event in question. His conduct in this context is the most candid depiction of agonism in art that we are currently afforded.

It has taken just over a decade for Kanye West to earn the title of Most Erratic Attendee at awards ceremonies around the world.<sup>56</sup> In the high-water mark of Kanye Controversies, West interrupted Taylor Swift during

<sup>52</sup> Cf. President Barack Obama's comment that Kanye can act like a 'jackass' (Samuels, 'American Mozart', p. 83).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly*, pp. 91–2, on celebrity narcissism.

<sup>54</sup> Best, 'Prize Proliferation', p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> Rossman, Esparza and Bonacich, 'I'd Like to Thank the Academy', p. 33. See also N. Anand and Mary R. Watson, 'Tournament Rituals in the Evolution of Fields: The Case of the Grammy Awards', *Academy of Management Journal* 47 (2004), pp. 61–2, 68.

<sup>56</sup> It began early. In 2004, at the advent of his career, the rapper stalked out of the auditorium after being trumped by a little-known country singer in the category of Best New Artist at the American Music Awards, later claiming 'I felt like I was

her acceptance speech at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards to try and deny her the title: ‘Yo, Taylor, I’m really happy for you, I’m a let you finish,’ he interjected, ‘But Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time’. In the tempest of defamation that followed, West maintained his innocence. He was simply acting as a defender of artistic authenticity, stating, ‘it wasn’t a matter of being selfish ... It’s more like I was being selfless – that I would risk everything to express what I felt was the truth.’<sup>57</sup> In 2015, West gave a post-Grammy interview in which he shot down the institution as a whole. Alt-rockers Beck got caught in the crossfire, with West proclaiming that he ‘needs to respect artistry, and he should have given his award to Beyoncé’.<sup>58</sup> In each of these instances, the rapper often depicted as only self-absorbed and impetuous displayed an undeniable degree of rationality and righteousness, or so he claims. But the rationality is the rationality of agonism, and zero-sum games. Simply put, if Beck wins, everybody else must lose. The thought that someone else could triumph, without the necessary diminishing of Beyoncé, and indeed the entire artform, simply does not seem possible.

The question that arises out of West’s actions is whether he is genuinely pursuing the recognition of great art, or is the entire exercise a somewhat poorly disguised grab for self-promotion? It can be difficult to tell. Drawing upon examples from the world of literature and visual art, English has explored the ways artists have historically ‘played’ with the phenomena of awards ceremonies, strategically moving from stances of refusal towards the adoption of more nuanced positions which attempt to ‘redeem’ awards ceremonies for the sake of political and cultural leverage.<sup>59</sup> So what is West playing at? If he is motivated by a desire to protect artistry, then he has often been unfairly characterised, both by the media, and the public at large. On the most charitable reading, West is at his core a champion of organisation, not a destroyer of it. He simply wants the excellent and gifted to be recognised for all they are worth, and believes that the institution of music-making is irreparably harmed by a misdirected award. If he occasionally goes too far in the pursuit of ranking artistic merit (both his own and others’),

definitely robbed ... I was the best new artist this year.’ Cf. Jake Brown, *Kanye West in the Studio: Beats Down! Money Up! [2000–2006]* (Phoenix, AZ: Colossus, 2006), p. 47.

<sup>57</sup> Samuels, ‘American Mozart’, p. 75.

<sup>58</sup> His argument advanced, and his scope broadened to incriminate the ceremony itself: ‘what happens is, when you keep on diminishing art and not respecting the craft and smacking people in the face after they deliver monumental feats of music, you’re disrespectful to inspiration’. Rachel Brodsky, ‘Kanye West Says Beck Should’ve “Given His Award to Beyoncé” at the Grammys’, <http://www.spin.com/2015/02/kanye-west-beck-interruption-grammys>.

<sup>59</sup> English, ‘Winning the Culture Game’, pp. 124–5.

then this is only a regrettable byproduct of having to correct an elitist honour structure that dictates a particular recognition of 'high' or 'acclaimed' art.<sup>60</sup>

However, the problem is that West's definition of estimable cultural capital seems to be the aesthetic he himself has stipulated, and his ultimate idea of success is the recognition of peers, something which he feels compelled to demand. This self-fulfilling standard is, upon reflection, both impotent and nonsensical. Accordingly, on a less charitable reading, West's intentions might be far less noble and far more in keeping with the ancient impulse to self-glorification through public honour. Surely the zenith of this is the act of self-deification, to which West in particular is prone. His authorised moniker (and the title of his sixth album), 'Yeezus', is an obvious grab at power usually reserved for the divine. West's lyrical content, beyond being rife with religious imagery, is unapologetically idolatrous. In *I Am a God*, he raps: 'I know He [sic] the most high, but I am a close high.'<sup>61</sup> Here West isn't invoking acclaim for talent or prowess, rather he is mandating worship. This modern manifestation of idolatry, achieved through insistent self-promotion, is indicative of a contemporary culture plagued by 'knowing and being known'.<sup>62</sup>

### An early Christian perspective on celebrity honour

The audience of the New Testament can seem a considerable distance from the modern world. These writings are addressed to small, relatively marginal communities, whose social and cultural experience differs from the spectacle of marketing, performance and ceremony that dominates the mass culture of our times.<sup>63</sup> Yet the perspectives of early Christian community, situated within the honour/shame culture of antiquity, prove more revelatory than we might first imagine. For example, early Christians did not abandon the desire to be known and honoured. Instead, they reconfigured the location of their identity to a different court of reputation.

<sup>60</sup> Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin, *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2001), pp. 67–71; English, 'Winning the Culture Game', p. 120.

<sup>61</sup> For a consideration on the changing meaning and significance of religious language in hip-hop, see Josef Sorett, "'Believe me, this pimp game is very religious": Toward a Religious History of Hip Hop', *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10 (2009), pp. 11–22.

<sup>62</sup> Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly*, p. 35; see also pp. 91–2.

<sup>63</sup> To be fair, the ancient world contains its own peculiar examples of fame and stardom, be it from the worlds of politics (Themistocles, Augustus), art (Quintus Roscius Gallus) or even gladiatorial combat. But the ease of access to celebrity, particularly outside of elite circles, is a marked difference between the two eras. For more see Robert Garland, 'Celebrity in the Ancient World', *History Today* (2005), pp. 24–30.

Through the grand story of creation and redemption in Christ, believers found that the ‘[the] good words that we really need – “You are known, and you are loved” – have already been spoken from the beginning’.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the human desire for recognition, worth and identity was ultimately seen to be resolved in the *eschaton*, through the hope of glory (John 11:40; Rom 2:7; 5:2; 8:17–18; 9:23; 1 Cor 2:7; 15:43; 2 Cor 3:18; 4:17; Col 1:27; Heb 2:10; 1 Pet 5:1, 10).<sup>65</sup> As C. S. Lewis so beautifully encapsulated it in *The Weight of Glory*: ‘glory meant good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last’.<sup>66</sup> Such a stable identity speaks prophetically to the fragility of contemporary celebrity, and the seeming arbitrariness of reward structures. Contemporary celebrity worship is notable for the disposability of its idols. There simply is no guarantee that one’s recognition will endure, only the requirement for endless reperformance. For it is ultimately the audience, disparate and fickle, that determines the worth and worthiness of the superstar.<sup>67</sup> In the absence of stability, envy, boasting and competition seem logical, and perhaps even mandatory.

Second, early Christian community did not reduce or flatten human capacity into a carnival of self-abasement. Rather, talent and ability were understood within the broader framework of grace and gift, and identity was not located in the quantity of achievement but rather the faithful deployment of what one had been graced with. There are some calls within the sphere of education to remove all forms of honouring achievement, on the basis that it inevitably nurtures a culture of competition.<sup>68</sup> Yet what is decried here presupposes an agonistic frame. If one person wins, then everybody loses. The danger here is that it fails to celebrate the glory and honour that humans (in general) have been given. There is something right and good about celebrating the gifts of others, and even our own gifts. Is Kanye wrong to believe that an injustice can be perpetrated against an artist or the artform in general? Nobody is under the illusion that the Grammys, or any other forum, is infallible in its judgements.<sup>69</sup> But the presupposition that

<sup>64</sup> DeYoung, *Vainglory*, p. 130.

<sup>65</sup> Note in 1 Cor 15:43 how Paul uses the pairing of dishonour (*ἀτιμίᾳ*)/glory (*δόξα*) to describe the eschatological transformation of the believer’s resurrected body.

<sup>66</sup> C. S. Lewis, ‘The Weight of Glory’, in *Transposition and Other Addresses* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), p. 12.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Weinstein and Weinstein, ‘Celebrity Worship’, p. 298.

<sup>68</sup> Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Chait, ‘The Case Against Awards’, *New Republic* 240 (2009), p. 4.

rewarding artistry must be a tournament, that honour is always a limited good, is what ultimately necessitates a combative posture.

### Conclusion: honour without agonism

The shared life of early Christian communities posits an alternative cultural vision, one in which honour can be multiplied, rather than jealously guarded. Indeed, the community life of early Christianity posits a vision in which the honouring and recognition of others becomes a celebration of how all may contribute to the common good, as God enables people to participate in cultivating and redeeming his world. Consequently, the delight the human person finds in being honoured need not be construed as pride. Pride occurs within the framework of the self-made person. But within a framework of grace, everything is gift, and within the context of the gospel, the Christian God demonstrates himself to be a lavish giver (Rom 5:20). The competitive practices of ancient and modern honour are predicated on the fear that honour is limited and many must miss out. But if grace abounds then we have nothing to fear, for there is more than enough to share. Such an idea presents an explicit challenge to contemporary ecclesial communities, in terms of their own practices of honour. Within such groups, it should be commonplace to find opportunities for honour where none were expected (1 Cor 12:22–6). Indeed, the competition is not *for* honour, but *to* honour, because there is always more to be seen, and always more to be acknowledged. The command remains to ‘outdo’ one another in showing honour (Rom 12:10), and in so doing, to celebrate the abundance of gifted people and the generosity of the Giver.