

Guilt Society

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A guilt society is one in which the primary method of social control is the inculcation of feelings of guilt for behaviors that the individual believes to be undesirable. As such it is opposed to a shame society.

A prominent feature of guilt societies is the provision of sanctioned releases from guilt for certain behaviors either before the fact, as when one condemns sexuality but permits it conditionally in the context of marriage, or after the fact. There is a clear opportunity in such cases for authority figures to derive power, monetary and/or other advantages, etc. by manipulating the conditions of guilt and the forgiveness of guilt.

Paul Hiebert characterizes the guilt society as follows:

Guilt is a feeling that arises when we violate the absolute standards of morality within us, when we violate our conscience. A person may suffer from guilt although no one else knows of his or her misdeed; this feeling of guilt is relieved by confessing the misdeed and making restitution. True guilt cultures rely on an internalized conviction of sin as the enforcer of good behavior, not, as shame cultures do, on external sanctions. Guilt cultures emphasize punishment and forgiveness as ways of restoring the moral order; shame cultures stress self-denial and humility as ways of restoring the social order. (Hiebert 1985, 213)