

Ancestor Worship and the Challenges it poses to the Christian Mission and Ministry

BY

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This thesis is dedicated first and foremost to God who in Christ opened His heart to me and my family, who allowed me to study in South Africa and who sustained me through his Spirit.

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Table of Contents

PREFACE	9
CHAPTER 1	11
INTRODUCTION	11
1.1 The problem	11
1.2 Thesis of this study	13
1.3 Scope of this study	13
1.4 Research methodology	15
CHAPTER 2	18
ANCESTOR WORSHIP AS A MULTI-RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON	18
2.1 Initial description of ancestor worship	18
2.1.1 Ancestor worship is widespread phenomenon	19
2.2 Definition of ancestor worship	21
2.2.1 Ancestor veneration, cult or worship?	22
2.2.2 Who are the ancestors?	23
2.2.2.1 <i>The identity of ancestors</i>	23
2.2.2.2 <i>Ancestors are the dead</i>	23
2.2.2.3 <i>Ancestors are the departed kin</i>	24
2.2.3 The function of ancestors	26
2.2.3.1 <i>The living dead as members of the family and community</i>	27
2.2.3.2 <i>Intermediaries and mediators</i>	28
2.2.3.3 <i>The representatives of law</i>	29
2.2.3.4 <i>Giving the living welfare as well as wrath</i>	30
2.2.3.5 <i>Ancestors as senior elders</i>	30
2.2.4 The relationship between ancestors and others	31
2.2.4.1 <i>The ancestors and the living</i>	31
2.2.4.2 <i>The ancestors and God</i>	32
2.2.4.3 <i>A communicating relationship</i>	32
2.2.5 Their prevalent abodes	32
2.3 Why ancestor worship has not dissipated?	33
2.3.1 Socio-anthropological motivation	33
2.3.2 Religious-phenomenal motivation	35
2.3.3 Socio-political interwoven motivation	36
2.4 Conclusion	37



CHAPTER 3.....39

THE CHALLENGE OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN AFRICA..... 39

3.1 Introduction..... 39

3.2 The current South African scenario..... 39

3.2.1 The current status of ancestor worship in South Africa 39

3.2.1.1 *Similarities in social structures in Black South African ethnic groups..... 40*

3.2.1.2 *The effect of urbanisation on ancestor worship and the tribal structures of Black South Africans 40*

3.2.2 The current status of Christianity in SA..... 41

3.2.2.1 *Christianity as interloping missionary religion 41*

3.2.2.2 *Revival of ancestor worship 42*

3.3 AIC's and African Traditional Religion 43

3.3.1 Three types of African Indigenous Churches 43

3.3.2 Rapid growing..... 44

3.3.3 African Indigenous Churches and the ancestors..... 45

3.4 African Traditional Religions and ancestor worship 47

3.4.1 The nature of African cosmology: power and force 48

3.4.2 God as a Supreme Being..... 50

3.4.2.1 *Humanity and involvement in communal life 50*

3.4.2.2 *The African concept of cyclic time 51*

3.5 Veneration or worship 52

3.5.1 Antithetical interpretations of the ancestor cult..... 53

3.5.2 Ancestor worship as a social function 53

3.5.3 Ancestor worship as religious phenomenon..... 55

3.6 Ancestor rituals in South Africa..... 57

3.6.1 Case study: Xhosa ancestral ritual..... 58

3.6.2 The symbolic significance of ancestral rituals 60

3.7 The assimilation of ancestor worship into African Christianity 61

3.7.1 The assimilation of ancestor worship: Roman Catholic and Protestant perspectives 61

3.7.2 Ancestral beliefs within ecclesiology 62

3.7.3 Ancestral beliefs within eschatology 63

3.7.4 Ancestor beliefs within Christology 64

3.7.4.1 *Akrong's notion of African Ancestor Christology 65*

3.7.4.2 *Bujo's notion of the proto-ancestor..... 65*

3.7.4.3 *Nyamiti's paradigm of African Christology and Ancestor Kinship..... 66*

3.8 Conclusion 67

CHAPTER 4..... 69

THE CHALLENGE OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN KOREA 69

4.1 Introduction 69



4.2	The present situation in Korean Christianity	69
4.2.1	Principles of growth in Korean Christianity	69
4.2.2	Ancestor worship in Modern Korea	70
4.3	Religious background of ancestor worship	71
4.3.1	The origin of Korean ancestor worship	71
4.3.2	Influence of other religions on the development and establishment of Korean ancestor worship	72
4.3.2.1	<i>Animism</i>	72
4.3.2.2	<i>Shamanism</i>	73
4.3.2.3	<i>Buddhism</i>	75
4.3.2.4	<i>Confucianism</i>	76
4.4	Two factors in ancestor worship	77
4.4.1	Moral and social aspects of ancestor worship	77
4.4.2	Religious elements in ancestor worship	79
4.5	Ancestral ritual	81
4.5.1	Worshippers.....	81
4.5.2	Ancestors.....	83
4.5.3	The procedure of ancestral ritual.....	84
4.6	Early Korean Christianity and ancestor worship	85
4.6.1	Roman Catholic Christianity	86
4.6.1.1	<i>Conflicting ideologies and the first Christian martyrs in Korea</i>	87
4.6.1.2	<i>Roman Catholic Church's assumes a different approach</i>	88
4.6.2	Protestant Christianity	88
4.7	Memorial service, <i>Chudohoe</i>	91
4.8	Conclusion	93
CHAPTER 5		95
THE CHALLENGE OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN JAPAN		95
5.1	Introduction	95
5.2	The cornerstone of Japanese culture	95
5.2.1	Ancestor worship and Japanese Christians.....	98
5.2.2	Theories on the origins of Japanese ancestor worship.....	98
5.3	The religious phases of ancestor worship	99
5.3.1	Ancestor worship affected by indigenous folk beliefs.....	100
5.3.2	Ancestor worship in Japanese Shintoism	101
5.3.3	The process of Japanised Buddhism.....	102
5.3.3.1	<i>The Taika reform</i>	102
5.3.3.2	<i>The Kamakura era (1185-1333)</i>	103
5.3.3.3	<i>The Tokugawa shogunate</i>	104
5.3.4	Influence of Confucianism	105
5.3.5	Influence of new religious sects.....	106
5.4	Japanese ancestral rites	107



5.4.1	The concept of ancestors.....	108
5.4.2	Ancestral rites.....	109
5.4.3	Ancestral rites and festivals	110
5.5	<i>Ie</i> system	112
5.5.1	<i>Ie</i> system as the incessant entity	112
5.5.2	Ethic characteristic of <i>Ie</i>	113
5.5.3	Religious constitution of <i>Ie</i>	114
5.5.4	The relevance of <i>Ie</i> in modern Japan.....	114
5.6	Ancestral rites: religious implications.....	116
5.6.1	The living and the dead	116
5.6.2	Human beings and divinities	117
5.7	Ancestor worship and Japanese Christianity	118
5.7.1	The response of early Protestant missionaries	118
5.7.2	Japanese Indigenous Churches' memorialism.....	119
5.7.2.1	<i>Christianity and the existential crisis it held for Japanese Christians</i>	<i>119</i>
5.7.2.2	<i>Memorial services within Japanese churches.....</i>	<i>119</i>
5.7.3	Indigenous churches' concern for the dead	120
5.8	Conclusion	121

CHAPTER 6.....123

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE AND GUIDELINES.....	123
6.1 Introduction	123
6.2 The living and the dead	124
6.2.1 Communicating with the dead (spiritism)	124
6.2.1.1 <i>Leviticus</i>	124
6.2.1.2 <i>Isaiah 8:19</i>	126
6.2.1.3 <i>Job 7:7-10</i>	127
6.2.1.4 <i>Deuteronomy 18:10-14</i>	128
6.2.1.5 <i>Luke 16:19-31</i>	130
6.2.2 What is the Biblical view of powers and spirits?	130
6.2.2.1 <i>Magic powers</i>	130
6.2.2.2 <i>Ancestral spirits</i>	131
6.2.2.3 <i>King Saul at Endor (1 Samuel 28:3-19)</i>	131
6.3 Death and afterlife.....	136
6.3.1 Predestined death	137
6.3.1.1 <i>Physical death as the first death</i>	137
6.3.1.2 <i>Eternal death as the second death</i>	137
6.3.1.3 <i>Death as a thorough severance</i>	138
6.3.2 Where are the dead?	139
6.3.2.1 <i>Two beliefs about the dead</i>	139
6.3.2.2 <i>The abode of the dead</i>	139
6.3.2.3 <i>Afterlife: what happened to Christians who die?</i>	141
6.4 Passages of dogmatic controversy	147

6.4.1	Praying for the dead.....	148
6.4.1.1	<i>2 Timothy 1:16, 18</i>	148
6.4.1.2	<i>Maccabees 12:39-45</i>	149
6.4.2	Vicarious baptism for the dead?.....	150
6.5	Conclusion	157

CHAPTER 7..... 159

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON ANCESTOR WORSHIP159

7.1 Introduction 159

7.2 Ancestor worship: A critical evaluation..... 160

7.2.1 The first two commandments: A clear prohibition of idolatry..... 160

7.2.2 Towards a narrow definition of idolatry 161

7.2.2.1 *Idolatry in the Old Testament*..... 161

7.2.2.2 *Idolatry in the New Testament* 162

7.2.3 Worship or veneration? 163

7.2.3.1 *Exegesis of terms for worship*..... 164

7.2.3.2 *Critique of the ancestor veneration theory* 165

7.3 Parallel drawn between traditional beliefs and the Old Testament..... 166

7.3.1 The case for integration of ancestor worship and Christianity..... 166

7.3.2 Sacrificing to the ancestors: is it Biblical?..... 167

7.3.2.1 *The significance of sacrifices in the Old Testament* 167

7.3.2.2 *The significance of sacrifice in the New Testament* 168

7.3.3 The uniqueness of Jesus Christ 169

7.3.3.1 *African and Biblical concepts of sin and salvation*..... 170

7.3.3.2 *The dilemma of religious pluralism in African theology* 172

7.3.3.3 *African ancestors: Are they real mediators?* 173

7.3.3.4 *The differences between Jesus Christ and ancestors*..... 174

7.3.3.5 *The significance of Jesus' resurrection*..... 176

7.4 Critique of contextualised Christologies 178

7.4.1 The hermeneutical crisis in African theology 178

7.4.1.1 *African theology as a religious heritage*..... 178

7.4.1.2 *Hermeneutical crisis of adaptationism* 179

7.4.2 Ancestral Christology: A critical evaluation..... 179

7.4.2.1 *Nyamiti and Bujo: a critical theological analysis*..... 180

7.5 Critique of Roman Catholic doctrine..... 182

7.5.1 The communion of saints 182

7.5.1.1 *The development of the Roman Catholic doctrine of saints* 183

7.5.1.2 *The New Testament view on saints*..... 185

7.5.1.3 *The Roman Catholic saints and the ancestors: a comparison* 186

7.5.2 The eucharist and Catholic spirituality 188

7.5.2.1 *The term*..... 189

7.5.2.2 *The real presence of Christ in the eucharist*..... 189

7.5.2.3 *Roman Catholic spirituality* 190

7.5.3 Roman Catholicism and Protestantism..... 191

7.6 Missiological approach to ancestor worship..... 192



7.6.1	Niebuhr's five models	192
7.6.2	Culture and worldview	193
7.6.2.1	<i>Culture: an anthropological definition</i>	194
7.6.2.2	<i>The centrality of worldview in culture</i>	194
7.6.2.3	<i>The clash of worldviews between East and West</i>	194
7.6.3	Inculturation	195
7.6.3.2	<i>Critique of Catholic mission principle</i>	198
7.6.4	Contextualisation	200
7.6.4.1	<i>Contextualisation as mission approach</i>	201
7.6.4.2	<i>The necessity of contextualisation</i>	202
7.6.4.3	<i>Hiebert's methodological suggestion for traditional rituals</i>	204
7.6.4.4	<i>Contextualisation and syncretism</i>	205
7.7	Conclusion	206
CHAPTER 8		208
CONCLUSION		208
BIBLIOGRAPHY		214
KEY TERMS		240
SUMMARY		241

Preface

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ABBREVIATIONS

There are numerous abbreviations used in this study, most notably the following:

ATR: African Traditional Religion



AIC: African Independent Churches

JEM: Japan Evangelical Mission

JIC: Japanese Independent Churches

RCC: Roman Catholic Church



KEY TERMS

Accommodation

Afterlife

Ancestor

Ancestor Christology

Animism

Confucianism

Contextualisation

Cult

Dead, The

Death

Idolatry

Inculturation

Mediator

Rituals

Sacrifice

Saints

Shamanism

Shintoism

Spiritism

Syncretism

Veneration

Worship

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SUMMARY

Ancestor Worship and the Challenges it poses to the Christian Mission and Ministry

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DEGREE: PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR (PhD)

Ancestor worship is conceived by some to be an outdated primitive custom with no relevance to modern society. However, this study shows that ancestor worship is still alive and well in numerous cultures and countries around the globe and that it is still practised in different forms today.

This study focuses on the phenomenon of ancestor worship in Africa, Japan and Korea and specifically deals with the challenges it has posed to Christian missionaries in these contexts. Furthermore, this study examines the strategies which the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Church and Independent Churches have adopted to deal with this problem and the apparent mismatch with Christian theology. Therefore, the analysis of the phenomenon of ancestor worship is situated in the socio-cultural and religious paradigms of each of these countries and is examined in theological, missiological and Biblical terms.

Most notably, the thesis attempts to determine whether or not ancestor worship can be considered to be a purely social and cultural phenomenon which carries certain ethical responsibilities in these cultures and whether or not it is congruent with Christian theology. This study has attempted to prove that in spite of the socio-cultural dimensions of ancestor worship and its rituals (with their ensuing ethical responsibilities in the cosmologies of these nations) it is still essentially worship. It is contended that ancestor worship is fundamentally a form of idolatry and contrary to the teachings of the Bible and is therefore does not articulate with Christian theology. The fundamental premise underlying the study is the ultimate authority of the Bible as the inspired word of God.

This is a qualitative study which attempts to explore the phenomenon and rituals of ancestor worship on numerous levels. In each case the theological contributions of scholars in the field are evaluated and explored and ultimately benchmarked against the Biblical evidence. In the African context it is necessary therefore to look at African Christology and the attempts of scholars to contextualise the gospel in African terms.

As such the continuity and discontinuity between traditional religion and the Bible is explored and the dangers of syncretism are addressed. The ultimate goal was to suggest a suitable approach for the Church to deal with the challenges which ancestor worship poses in these specific contexts. The study will motivate and argue for contextualisation as an appropriate mission principle in this regard. This takes into consideration the social responsibility which missionaries have towards the people to whom they introduce the gospel. The reason is that the close bond which exists between identity, culture and religion is acknowledged. If the religion or cultural practises are rejected because it does not comply with the Gospel's requirements, then missionaries need to be sensitive to the void which they may create in the identity of the people and take appropriate steps to ameliorate the problem and avoid syncretism.