

Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to provide a broad analysis of the phenomenon of ancestor worship which encapsulates an analysis of the beliefs and rituals, an anthropological understanding of the socio-cultural significance which these practices play in the cosmologies of these nations, a theological analysis of the underlying tenets of ancestor worship and its inherent religious aspects from a Biblical perspective (in exegetical and hermeneutical terms) to arrive at an appropriate mission principle for missionaries and churches who face this problem.

THE INITIAL UNDERSTANDING OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

It is clear that culture, religion and ancestor worship are inextricably linked. Thus, Mbiti and Bediako's work highlighted the socio-political cortex underpinning and the motivation for continuing with the practices of ancestor worship. It is reasonable to conclude that the ancestors are conceived in terms of the community. Bediako (1990:39-39) mentions that the ancestors are 'made' by the community, 'ancestors being the product of the myth-making imagination of the community'. They are essentially powerful because of the power ascribed to them by their descendants.

As such, Mbiti concedes that "most, if not all, of these attributive deities are the creation of man's imagination" (1990:76). Given the fact that the existence of the ancestors cannot be examined or proven empirically, their existence is very real in the cultural mindset and cosmologies of the people who venerate them in fear and dread.

ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

Given the complexity of African society and clan structures, ancestor worship is an extremely complex construct and the practices are fairly diverse. The analysis of the phenomenon in the African context highlighted the syncretistic approach which African Churches have opted for to deal with the challenges which ancestor worship poses to Christianity. The core of resurgent ATR is ancestor worship as reaction to the needs of African people who attempted to cling to their identity in the face of colonisation and urbanisation. Christian churches have assimilated ancestor rituals in varying degrees. Whereas Roman Catholicism assimilated it readily, Protestant churches rejected it out of hand as unscriptural.

The complexity of the phenomenon in African terms highlighted once again that ancestor worship is inseparable from African cosmology in which the African sense of community is probably the most important cornerstone. This sense of community is markedly absent from the Western mindset and as a result the Gospel as brought to

them by Western missionaries did not resonate fully with the African collective spirit. Consequently, the Church did not meet the socio-cultural needs which were left in the wake of the rejection of ancestor worship and contributed to the African's sense of alienation. This was one of the reasons for the resurgence of ATR because the Church did not meet the needs of the African people in terms of their socio-cultural identity. In an attempt to bridge the gap, some theologians and churches attempted to Christianise some of the ancestor beliefs and rituals and in some cases compromised the Gospel. Most notably is the intermediary role of the ancestors which some African theologians have attempted to liken to the role of Christ. However, if the intermediary role of the ancestors is legitimised it would imply that Christ's intermediary role is not unique and may be redundant.

In addition, the manner in which ancestor worship articulates with contemporary African Ancestral Theology has shown that the most problematic factor in African theology is that the African theologian has to contend with the essentially non-Christian nature of their traditional beliefs. Therefore, this study supports Hastings' view (1976:50) which concludes that African theology constitutes a dialogue between the African scholar and the perennial religions and spiritualities particular to Africa and the African context.

From the exposition on the phenomenon in Africa, the conclusion can be drawn that African religion is inherently non-Christian and therefore poses challenges to African theology. In order to avoid the trap of developing a theology which deviates from the Scriptural truths, one has to strive to pursue a Biblical theology as the primary focus. It is very difficult to equate African traditional religion with Christ's message and transpose it in the African idiom.

ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN THE KOREAN CONTEXT

The study of ancestor worship in the Korean context highlighted the long and illustrious history of the cult and established it to be rooted firmly in Shamanism and Confucianism. Once again, this highlighted the close relationship between the socio-cultural paradigm and identity of the Korean people and the religious practices which are considered to be outward manifestations of this.

The multi-faceted nature of ancestor worship posed significant challenges to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. There is a marked difference in the stances of the Roman Catholic Church and that of the Protestant churches in Korea. Firstly, the Roman Catholic Church initially rejected the practices of ancestor worship on the grounds that it constituted idolatry but later reversed their position to assume a more tolerant perspective. This was based on the analogous nature of the Catholic doctrine of purgatory in which believers pray for the deceased and the belief in ancestors in which prayers are also made for the departed loved ones. The Protestant churches on the other hand, has remained steadfast and consistent in their rejection of ancestor worship as a form of idolatry and therefore an unscriptural practice. It is mainly because of this faithful

devotion to the Gospel's teachings, that the Protestant churches have retained purity in doctrine and their devotion to the Scriptures.

The research also highlighted the need for sensitivity and cultural awareness. The study highlighted that because of the close relationship that exists between religion and culture, when newly converted Christians adopted the Gospel and rejected their traditional beliefs, they found themselves in an existential crisis and essentially socio-culturally ostracised from the collective identity of their people. The Protestant churches in Korea rejected the traditional funeral service because of its inherent religious connotations but became increasingly aware of the duality which hamstrung the development of Christianity in Korea. As a result, many churches sought an alternative and transformed the traditional funeral service or replaced it with a Christian memorial service which does not contain ritualistic elements which may compromise the faith of those who adhere to it. By doing this, the Church was able to address the needs of the people and therefore acknowledged their cultural and socio-ethical needs based on their cosmology. The Korean cosmology in socio-ethical terms is still governed by the tenets espoused in Confucianism and therefore needed to be acknowledged and accepted. The notion of filial piety and respect for the elders had to be transformed and placed in the appropriate context to ensure that it articulates with the principles of the Gospel.

ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN JAPAN

The Japanese notion of ancestor worship does not differ vastly from that of Korea. It too is an integral part of Japanese consciousness and cosmology. Just as in Korea, ancestor worship is not a distinct religion but rather a manifestation of the principles of Confucianism which is the foundation of the Japanese socio-cultural mindset. This is similar to the way in which it has permeated the Korean and African cosmology and how the traditions manifest themselves in organised religion.

From the analysis of the rituals practised in Japan it is undeniable that ancestor worship in Japan is inherently religious. Especially because it implies a form of worship and appellation for protection and guidance. As such, ancestor worship has represented a significant dilemma for the Christian Church. As in Korea, the Protestant Church has shown itself to have an intolerant disposition towards the practices whereas the Roman Catholic Church has assumed a much more tolerant stance on the matter. Therefore, the Roman Catholic Church has readily assimilated the traditions associated with ancestor worship and Christianised them in an attempt to make the religion more accessible to the Japanese people. The important point which one cannot lose sight of though is that it remains contrary to the Scriptures and that as such it should not be accommodated. Once again, it became evident that one cannot simply reject the notions out of hand without taking cognisance of the needs of the people. As a result, the study has suggested the use of pastoral support to address their needs and help them realign their cosmology with the theology of the Gospel.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The practices associated with ancestor ritual are heavily reliant on the premise that the dead are able to return to the living and have an influence on the lives of the living; that it is acceptable for the living to communicate with the dead and lastly that the living are able to exert an influence on the destiny of the deceased ancestor.

However, the exegetical and hermeneutical analyses of key passages in the Bible make it evident that the Bible strongly condemns necromancy and associated practices. Secondly, the research has pointed out that although some individuals do see what they perceive to be the spirit of a deceased ancestor, the Biblical evidence which has been presented here makes it clear that these apparitions are no more than manifestations of Satan's minions who intend to control mankind and lead them astray.

Furthermore, the Bible is clear in its position that once a person has died it is impossible for him or her to return to communicate with the living for whatever reason. In this regard Romans 6:23 which states that all men die and that death is the wages of sin implies that death is finite and an inevitable consequence of the fallen nature of mankind. The only incident in the Scriptures which has been the source of dogmatic controversy, is the incident in which Samuel's spirit appears to Saul as recorded in 1 Samuel 28. The explanations which have been put forward have made it clear that the apparition, whom Saul perceived, was only as a result of the special working of God's power, and by His permission for His purposes. As the Bible clearly admonishes, those who dabble in necromancy or spiritism commit what is considered to be spiritual prostitution.

Furthermore, the analysis of the Bible's perspective on ancestor worship, necessitated a closer look at the abode of the dead. As a result, the scriptural references to Hades and Sheol were explored at length and conclusively shown that Hades and Sheol are references to the common grave of mankind where all souls are destined to go once they have died a physical death. The Bible outlines the final destination of the righteous souls to be heaven. Therefore, the analogy of Lazarus and the rich man does not constitute proof that the living are able to communicate with the dead or exert an influence on the destiny of the dead. Therefore, the Bible makes it very clear that the rich man was not granted permission to communicate with his living family members to warn them to mend their ways and ultimately avoid a similar fate.

Also, the analysis found that the Scriptures seem to indicate that the righteous who die are immediately reunited with Christ (cf. Luke 23:43, Philippians 1:23). At the resurrection those who have died will be changed and resurrected with a spiritual body to allow them to enter into a fuller state of fellowship with God. The notion of the immortality of the soul is a major precept of the ancestor cult. However, the New Testament's promise of a resurrection refers to the resurrection of the whole body. The notion of the soul existing in an intermediate state or a deep sleep which is fundamental to the ancestral rites is contradictory to the teachings of the New Testament.

The living are not able to effect a change for the salvation of the dead. The salvation of mankind is based on Christ's ransom sacrifice on the cross and therefore sacrifices which are made for the dead are meaningless. The notion of vicarious baptism which

has been suggested by some scholars does not have sufficient evidence in exegetical or hermeneutical terms to render it credible or viable.

Thus, from the analysis of the Bible's perspective it became clear that the penultimate destination of each individual after death is determined by his or her actions during this lifetime. Consequently, each person is accountable to God for his own actions which means that the notion that the actions of a deceased person can be minimised by the actions of the living does not hold water. In other words, the central premise which underpins the theology of ancestor rituals is fundamentally flawed and not supported by the Bible.

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The analysis of the phenomenon of ancestor worship and its articulation with the Bible has proven conclusively that ancestor worship is essentially a form of idolatry in spite of the justifications employed by the traditional religions. African theologians who have attempted to justify the practices associated with ancestor veneration have attempted to use the Catholic doctrine of communion of saints as a touchstone. However, this reasoning is flawed because the Catholic doctrine of communion of saints itself has been shown to be unscriptural.

Furthermore, the research has shown that the differences in the worldviews of traditional religions and Christianity particularly in terms of their stance on sin and salvation have proven conclusively that the traditional religions are not aligned with the Bible. The reason for this comparative analysis was to point out that if the underlying premises of ancestor worship are unfounded and not supported by the Bible, then the practices themselves are not acceptable to God. As discussed, this is of crucial importance when interpreting ancestor rituals from a Christian perspective because it is directly related to the salvation and redemption embodied in Christ. The study has shown that the mediatory role which African theologians have ascribed to the ancestors relegates the redemption of Christ to insignificance and appears to make his role redundant. This in itself puts traditional religion in direct opposition to Christianity in which the redemptive salvation of Christ is pivotal.

Some churches have attempted to follow a process of inculturation in an attempt to integrate the traditional religious practices (of ancestor worship) with the church. The research has shown that inculturation in itself is inappropriate. The problem with inculturation as mentioned here is that it generally leads to syncretism and ultimate religious pluralism. Furthermore, uncritical rejection of the traditional practices outright is one element of dealing with the problem, but as Hiebert points out, one needs to understand the cultural needs of the people as entrenched in their worldview. Therefore when one removes a traditional ritual one must take cognisance of the void it leaves in its wake. This was particularly evident in Korea where the traditional funeral service was replaced with the Christian memorial service to fill the void and not compromise their allegiance to God. We have therefore shown that the only appropriate model to address these issues is contextualization which penultimately leads to transformation.



Finally, the research has shown why contextualization is the most appropriate mission principle to be used in these contexts. This is because ancestor worship serves both a religious and social function. Therefore, the Gospel must be contextualised and inappropriate elements must be transformed while taking cognisance of the socio-cultural needs of the people involved. A Westernised colonialist approach which has little regard for the socio-cultural ramifications of conversion to Christianity for an individual in a traditionally animistic society would be inappropriate and would not best serve the ministry or protect the ministry from religious pluralism.

If we reject it on religious grounds and remove it from the religious experience of the people we still need to be sensitive to the cultural needs which must also be addressed. This makes contextualization the preferred model to address this dilemma because it takes cognisance of both elements. However, it is vital to keep in mind that although the rituals play a significant social role in the socio-ethical dimension of these communities, it is indisputable that the religious undertones in these rituals make the social element inseparable from the religious elements. The essential contention of this thesis is that the rituals are inherently religious irrespective of the functions they serve in the cultural life of the community. Although the Gospel must address the socio-cultural needs of communities, an alternative must be sought to address these needs as in the Korean Protestant Church's response to the traditional funeral services.