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The Phenomenon of Ancestor Cults with Missiological Implications

Introduction

This paper seeks to briefly describe the ongoing interaction between Christianity and ancestor cults. Ancestor cults are found all over the world in nearly every society and continue to form stumbling blocks to the full evangelization and Christian practice of many (Hwang 1977:340). Some Christians may quickly dismiss ancestor cults as heretical, heathen, and “other;” however, the phenomenological diversity of the problem begs a more nuanced response from reflective Christians. This article will illustrate the problem of ancestor cults, describe their general features, and Christian attempts to address them. Finally, some evangelistic reflections and suggestions for further study will be offered.

The Problem

The experience of death is universal to the human condition. In the West, comments reflecting the sentiment that “We all die, the only question is how soon” are common. It is no wonder then that all cultures have created mechanisms for helping people cope with the process of death, memory of loved ones, and questions of ongoing existence after death.

Western cultures have their own traditions that mark death rituals. From caricatures of the undertaker, to crematoriums and caskets, to drunken wakes and funerals, to granite tombstones—people know what the processes of death look like. After the rituals are over, the process of grief of those closest to the deceased is dictated to some degree by culture. This is evidenced in the opprobrium or esteem that follows a remarriage that has taken place “too soon” or “long enough” after the death of a spouse.

What about the deceased after the typical funeral and mourning is over? In the West, the gravesite often becomes a center of memory for the deceased. Families gather to decorate the gravesite with flowers and artifacts, to remember, grieve, and pray, and sometimes to try to speak to the dead one. Careful observers will note the ritual patterns: placing offerings on the grave (flowers, pictures, teddy bears), recounting memories, and some invoking assistance of the deceased—at least as listening ears. It is not uncommon for Christians to “feel closer” to their dead while at the gravesite. Countless movies depict the protagonist feeling the presence of their loved one or asking advice while at grave. This is the cultural air we breathe in the United States.

The experience of the departed is viewed differently in Asian and African cultures, however. Thus, Christians cannot avoid reflecting on this issue (Ela 1988:14). For many Africans, the ancestors continue to exert a strong sense of presence among those left behind. As Jean-Marc Ela explains, “In many African societies, the cult of the dead is perhaps that aspect of culture to which the African is most attached” (14). For Ela, what is essential to the African experience of the ancestors is that they continue to be part of the family and community. Thus, the gravesite is the place where the spirit of the ancestor is most concentrated. Often the family will maintain a mask or statue that serves as a human representation “of the spiritual presence of the ancestor” (15). Ela describes how in one tribe in Cameroon the head of the family carries with him a jar—*baba*—that represents the presence of his father or grandfather. This jar is used as the focal point of rituals that remember the ancestor, maintains the kinship lineage, and helps bring unity among the living. In this belief, death is not annihilation, but a departure. Indeed, most Africans speak of death euphemistically as having “gone,” “gone past,” or “left us behind” (Mosothoane 1973:88). The implication is that the departed have gone to the spirit world where they continue to exist. This departure is only feared if there are no descendants (preferably male) to remember—to be an ancestor one must first have children.

In traditional African societies, life is lived in a chain of remembering. “As I remember my fathers, my children will remember me.” In this chain of remembering, ancestors become the “living dead” who are symbolized with objects, remembered and honored in ritual, and called upon to help in times of need (Triebele 2002:188). In such a worldview, the individual lives a shared life with the past ancestors and the future progeny. They are “part of an endless stream that flows from parent to child and from generation to generation” (Heibert 2008:107). The focus here is not on life after death, but on the “well-being of the human community” in the present (Staples 1981:272).

These examples drawn from an African and America perspective illustrate a central human concern: What is the relationship of the living to the dead? Does this relationship exist only in the memory of the living or is there some spiritual interaction with the dead? These are necessary concerns for the Christian who desires to surrender all aspects of life, culture, and worldview to God.

What Are Ancestor Cults?

The term “ancestor cult” is used to define a wide array of beliefs and practices that deal with one’s ancestors. These beliefs and practices encompass various aspects of social identity and utility as well as spirituality and religion. They are not exclusive to one’s biological forerunners as they can include the clan, tribe, or national ancestors. Finally, ancestor cults are not vestiges of idealized primitive cultures. Rather, they are complex and dynamic systems of belief and practice that are adapting themselves to myriad expressions in the contemporary world.

According to Bernard Hwang, ancestor cults are built on a few basic assumptions. These are that “the departed ancestors live on [in some way] after death, man has a soul or souls, ancestors can help or harm their living descendants, they [ancestors] need support in their new mode of existence” (1977:361). Added to these is the African assumption that ancestors continue to play roles as members of the community (Triebel 2002:188). It should be noted that not all these assumptions are true for all ancestor cults nor do many practitioners clearly understand or articulate them. The next sections will examine the social aspects of ancestor cults followed by their spiritual aspects.

Social Aspects of Ancestor Cults

One of the key functions of ancestor cults is in the realm of social relationships. There are a variety of ways that ancestors impact social relationships. In some cultures, the keeping of the object of remembering (i.e., mask, jar, or altar) grants hierarchal status to the keeper as the leader of the family or clan. These objects can also contribute to a sense of solidarity and unity among the family or clan (Ela 1988:15). In Confucianism, the concept of filial piety is the central virtue of the society. Proper respect and care for parents, mourning them at death, and continued honoring of them after death helps maintain social order and harmony (Hwang 1977:349, 350). This generational projection of honor toward progenitors aids in building up ethical and moral behaviors that pattern everyday life (Hua 2016:92). In some places, national heroes are venerated as proto-

ancestors worthy of the respect and emulation of all. Among many tribes in Africa, childbearing fills a crucial role in the society as the primary link to becoming an ancestor. For example, to the Shona, true adulthood means one is on his or her way to becoming an ancestor and this can only be achieved by producing offspring (Makwasha 2009:49).

These social functions of ancestor cults help shape the behaviors and attitudes of those who operate within such a worldview without the direct need of interaction with the dead. They are not necessarily spiritual practices seeking to communicate or interact directly with the ancestors and it is in this sense that they are more social in function than religious. As Hwang asserts, “Explicit belief in an afterlife is not essential to [the] practice of ancestor cult” (1977:344). For many practitioners of ancestor cults, the practice is rooted in memory, social harmony, and ethical behavior, not in fear and interaction with the afterlife (Hua 2016:93).

Spiritual Aspects of Ancestor Cults

Nevertheless, many ancestor cults are practiced with the assumption that the dead continue to exist and interact with the living. This interaction is sometimes demanded when a malevolent ancestor needs appeasement or when the descendants seek some sort of blessing or benefit from the ancestor (Makwasha 2009:38). It can be a reciprocal exchange whereby the cult is practiced in order to gain some help or desire. Sometimes the troubled spirit of the deceased is disrupting harmony because they need help finding their resting place (see the story of Mbuya Ndoro in Makwasha 2009:44ff). Other times the descendants have not adequately served the ancestor through some ritual process or memory and thus they bring down the wrath of the ancestors.

For many Chinese, the choice of a good burial site is essential to the appeasement of the ancestors. This choice of the ideal location is made with the help of *Feng-shui*—geomancy, the Chinese pseudoscience of choosing ideal locations based on innate energies. Appropriate care and concern with the burial and ongoing practices of veneration help ensure the prosperity of the descendants (Heibert 1982:35-47). This reciprocity is a key factor in many ancestor cults (Hwang 1977:349). Hwang notes that more educated Chinese will emphasize the social aspects of the ancestor cults but in the practice of common people, the cults take on a decidedly spiritual nature (348).

In many African societies, the ancestors have powers that are feared. They can bring or prevent misfortune and therefore induce fear. Johannes Triebel sees in this fear clear spiritual implications that make it difficult for the sympathetic Christian to abandon the ancestor cults wholly to the

social sphere (2002:188). For many Africans, at least, the ancestors cannot be dismissed as merely social constructs of the memory of the dead. Ancestors are beneficent or malevolent beings that continue to exist and must be appeased, venerated, and cared for in a reciprocal exchange.

Ancestor cults can fulfill both social and spiritual functions. Christians wanting to resolve the issue may be tempted to accept the social functions of ancestors while rejecting their spiritual presence and functions. This solution fails because many who participate in ancestor cults are held hostage by fear of the spirits or in need of the ministrations of the spirits. The next section briefly surveys how Christians approach ancestor cults.

Christian Approaches to Ancestor Cults

Christians have generally taken three different approaches to dealing with ancestor cults: they have ignored or rejected them, they have sought some way to accommodate them within Christian theology, and they have sought to contextualize Christian theology as the fulfillment or replacement of the ancestor cults.

Ancestor Cults Ignored and/or Rejected

During the great missionary expansion, Western missionaries sometimes did not perceive or believe in ancestor cults (Staples 1981:275). This was due to the Enlightenment philosophy and materialistic worldview they came with. The missionaries from Europe and America often dichotomized the universe into the unseen God of heaven and the seen material world. While most believed God could and did intervene on Earth, the Earth was essentially the mechanical operation of scientific laws. Thus, when the missionaries came into contact with people from different worldviews, they were often unable to recognize the experiential reality of things like spirits and ancestors that inhabited the spiritual middle ground between the natural world and God. This fallacy of the “excluded middle,” as Paul Hiebert called it, is what often resulted with the missionaries ignoring the spiritual realities and/or rejecting them as contrary to Christianity (1982:35-47).

Where missionaries did perceive ancestor cults, they often simply confronted them using Western theological categories and rejected them as a superstitious vestiges of pre-Christian heathen religion (Thom 1973:75). This dismissal and rejection was often the position of “evangelical ministers with fundamentalist backgrounds” (Hwang 1977:351). Missionaries tended to see the cults as the worship of the superstitious and magical and therefore in direct contradiction to the first and second commandments (Makwasha 1085:153).

Whether a group confronts, rejects, or ignores ancestor cults, the end results are often the same, since missionaries mostly failed to develop or encourage appropriate Christian theologies useful to the needs of the newly evangelized peoples with regard to the ancestors. Without an adequate Christian theology to replace the old needs and desires, newly converted people would often carry on dual allegiances with their new Christian faith and the ancestor cults. The ongoing persistence of ancestor cults often perpetuated the “conspiracy of silence”—if you cannot beat them, ignore them (Staples 1981:275). In southern Africa by 1981, up to “90% of members [continued to] believe that the ancestors can powerfully intervene in their lives” (276). Consequently, in vast parts of Africa and Asia, converts to Christianity have few resources to address some of their deepest religious needs (Hwang 1977:352; Triebel 2002:193). Additionally, while many early missionaries did not address ancestral cults adequately, some indigenous leaders who replaced them in the post-colonial period often simply absorbed Western theological categories and failed to adequately theologize an adequate response to the ancestor cults.

Ancestor Cults Accommodated

The problem of what to do with ancestor cults is more obvious to Christians who entertain a robust understanding of saints and intermediate states (i.e., the period between life on earth and the final resurrection of the body). Often Roman Catholics have been at the forefront in working out how to accommodate ancestor cults and fit them within Catholic doctrine. Catholic doctrine teaches that “the communion of saints is the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of the same mystical body under Christ its head” (Sollier 1908). Even to the casual observer, similarities between ancestors, the souls in purgatory, and saints in heaven is obvious. Unsurprisingly, for Catholics in Africa and Asia, the traditional ancestors have been accorded the status of souls in purgatory and sometimes of saints in heaven (Staples 1981:280; Daneel 1973:62, 63). As saints, they can join in a ministry of mediation between humans and God with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, at their head (Catechism of the Catholic Church).

Roman Catholics did not arrive at accommodation of ancestors without a struggle, however. This position was first worked out over centuries in China. In the 16th century, accommodation was practiced beginning with the early Jesuit missionaries led by Matteo Ricci. This position was reversed in the 17th century when opposition to the ancestor cult was mandated by the Pope. It was not until the declaration of Pope Pius XII

in 1839 that the ancestor cult was accepted as orthodoxy by the church. In Pius XII's view, the cult was accepted because it represented respect and honor for the dead, not worship (Chi-Ping 1985:150, 151).

It should be noted, however, that it is not only Catholics who have accommodated ancestor cults in their beliefs and practices. The practice has been especially common among some African Initiated/Indigenous/Independent Churches (AICs) as well (Makwasha 2009:175). AICs are often more sensitive to the spiritual needs of the culture and some found ways of incorporating traditional practices into their new Christian practices (168). Others simply turned a "blind-eye" toward ancestor cults (295). So accommodation, the acceptance and reinterpretation of ancestor cults has continued by many different Christian groups around the world.

Ancestor Cults Addressed through Theological Contextualization

One significant way Christians have sought to address ancestor cults is through what some have called "fulfillment through transformation" or "elimination by substitution" (Makwasha 2009:194). The objective is to replace the cultural concepts of ancestors with a scriptural theology that answers the felt needs of each culture. The missiological assumption undergirding contextualization is that Christian theology is broad enough to answer the questions and felt needs of every person in every culture. For those who place great importance on *filial piety*, the mediatory roll of the ancestors in the afterlife, or the need to appease the ancestors, the Scripture should provide a source book of fulfillment, correction, and healing. For example, much has been written about how Jesus's sacrifice on the cross does not only remove our *guilt*, but also expiates our *shame* by restoring our *honor*, and removes our *fear* by granting us *power* over Satan and his dark forces. It is well understood that different cultures place salvific inflections differently, some emphasizing honor while others emphasize innocence, or power (Muller 2000). In a similar way, the immense cultural influence exerted by the ancestors should find a culturally appropriate and scripturally sound solution.

Several scriptural theologies have been developed as possible substitutions or fulfillments of ancestor cults. These overlapping theologies place emphasis on the centrality of Jesus Christ as Ancestor Par Excellence, victor, mediator, or reconciler. They seek to replace improper reliance on ancestors with Jesus as the ultimate ancestor. Following these theologies, Christians dealing with ancestor cults do not simply replace and exclude the old beliefs and practices, they celebrate them as fulfilled in Jesus Christ and therefore necessarily transformed as Christ fully replaces their role

and function. As Samuel Kunhiyop argues, “It is thus possible to understand ancestral belief and practices as predicting or foreshadowing the mediatorial role of Christ described in the book of Hebrews” (2012:138). Rather than seeing the ancestor cults as simply vestiges of pagan religion, they are reinterpreted as pre-evangelistic, opening up and sensitizing hearts to the work of Christ as the fulfillment of their desires (Makwasha 2009:301).

When seeking theological solutions to the question of the ancestors, African theologians often turn to the Book of Hebrews for inspiration, some even calling it “our book.” In Hebrews, the mediatorial role of Jesus Christ is clearly seen. As the “Great Ancestor” of Hebrews, “Jesus bridges the gulf between the Holy God and sinful humanity, achieving for humanity the harmonious fellowship with God that all human priestly mediations only approximate” (300, 302). This role of mediator is of central importance in many African cultures that rely on mediation to help resolve conflicts. This reliance on mediation extended to the conception of the spirit world as a place where human conflicts are often worked out with the help or hindrance of ancestral spirits. Thus, theologically Jesus Christ is to be granted primacy as the “ultimate mediator” “between us and the spirit world,” and he is fully capable of helping Christians solve all their conflicts (Kunhiyop 2012:137).

Another central role for Jesus Christ as fulfillment and substitute of ancestor cults has to do with the concern for the final destination of dead ancestors. In Africa where the ancestors are experienced as the “living dead” who are thought to continue as part of the family and society, the Christian demand to abandon the ancestors often felt like a deep betrayal. As Mbuvi states, “This was a vexing concern for most early African converts to Christianity” (2014:159). For Mbuvi, the book of 1 Peter portrays Jesus as the victorious Christ who “went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison” (3:19). “This passage provides the possibility of comfort in knowing that the ancestors, who died before the advent of the modern missionary endeavor in Africa, still have the chance to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ” (159). In this way, Christians can rest confident in the Victorious Jesus Christ’s care and concern for the ancestors.

In Asian cultures that deeply value *filial piety* and the social and ethical order it sustains, God should be viewed “as the oldest (thus, according to many East Asian cultures, the most respectable) and ultimate ancestor” (Hong 2017:17). From this viewpoint, parents can be best honored by honoring God. Asian scholars sympathetic to the issue of filial piety argue, based on the commandment to honor parents, “that those who revere God must practice filial piety” (24) and even exceed non-Christians in doing so (Ro 1985:10).

Missiological Implications

Bernard Hwang proposed addressing ancestor cults through a process of confrontation with dialogue, accommodation with study, and transformation through grace (1977:354-357). In addition this process must be boldly evangelistic, presenting the gospel in a way that powerfully addresses the needs of the people. Samuel Kunhiyop lamented that Christians turn to traditional practices, such as ancestor cults, for help in their difficult lives on earth (2012:137). It is a tragedy that they have not been taught the gospel that releases its transformative power in their lives. To those in bondage, fear, or need, “the gospel can [and must] proclaim a message of hope and freedom” (Hua 2016:92). The following suggestions are made with the goal of releasing the evangelistic hope and freedom of the gospel:

Most Protestant Theologians Agree That the Living Cannot and/or Should Not Communicate with the Dead

The issues surrounding the intermediate state—the destination or condition of the spirits/ souls of the dead—are of little help in dealing with the ancestor cult because of widely accepted and orthodox Christian teaching.

Nowhere in the Old or New Testaments are the dead represented as themselves taking the initiative to make contact with their living descendants, neither to communicate, nor to harm, nor to bless. A number of passages condemn, implicitly or explicitly, attempts by the living to contact the dead . . . and while this may be taken to imply of establishing such contacts, nowhere is it positively affirmed that communication between the living and the dead can be initiated. (Ferdinando 1996:122, 123)

Thus, whether the soul continues to exist after death (as some Christians believe) or falls into some sort of soul sleep while waiting for the resurrection, the Scriptures are clear that there is no interaction between the living and the dead (Ro 1985:8). The presence of the dead continues only in the memory of those left behind or in the deceptive activities of evil spirits. This message of freedom from fear of the dead should be couched in the context of God’s goodness and hope of the resurrection.

The Role of the Church as an Alternative Imagination of Community on Earth Must be Emphasized

Wise and sincere Christians in every culture are aware of the effects of sin on their own culture. Lamentations over materialism, tribalism, or corruption exist in many places. Much of the time, Christians are well aware of where they fall short and how they can improve. There may be a tendency on the part of some, especially in the West, to sensationalize ancestor cults due to their spiritualistic overtones. However, as mentioned, ancestor cults occupy wide functions in cultures that are often as social as they are spiritual or religious.

Ultimately, one of primary goals of evangelism is to alter the sinful reality of human experience and worldview (Ro 1985:9). Christians are called to allow the gospel to intentionally alter the way they imagine the world. Bryan Stone articulates a vision of Christianity that refuses to simply live within worldviews that are dependent to empire, civil religion, or militarism (2018). Though Stone writes to the west, we should also join him in calling on the church not to “play chaplain” to any culture, but, rather, to be a “Spirit-empowered and Christ-shaped performance of an alternative social imagination” in which comfort is not found in the arms of dead ancestors but in the presence of the risen Lord, faithful mediator, and ancestor par excellence (48). Figuring out what this “alternative social imagination” will look like must become the ongoing task of all Christians in one’s church community. In order to address ancestor cults, Christian communities around the world will need to design practical solutions that will help their adherents place the fear or guilt that they feel from their ancestors at the feet of Jesus.

Ancestor Cults Persist, in Part, Because of Faulty Understanding of Evangelism and Conversion

Far too often, Christians have too narrowly defined evangelism as a momentary decision having to do with “mental assent” to a set of beliefs. When evangelism is done simplistically as a ritual process (baptism) following acceptance of narrow set of beliefs (sin/salvation) and when the emphasis is placed on numeric growth, then the gospel loses much of its power to render change within a culture.

Dealing with ancestor cults will require a broader theology of evangelism that reframes the evangelistic objective in terms of transferred allegiance rather than professed belief in a narrow set of doctrinal statements. Matthew Bates argues convincingly that the ultimate goal of evangelism is the transfer of allegiance to Jesus Christ as king. Bates identifies three

dimensions of allegiance as mental affirmation, professed fealty, and enacted loyalty (2017:92). Within Bates' paradigm of allegiance, ancestor cults should be dealt with head on as a process of accepting a nuanced and scriptural fulfillment/replacement theology that addresses the needs and concerns of the people in question, appropriate support in the decision to live by that truth, and welcoming into a community that is fully able to act on that truth. If counting members must be taken for organizational reasons, it should not be taken until mental affirmation, professed fealty, and enacted loyalty are demonstrated.

More Needs to be Done to Relate the Theology of the Holy Spirit to the Issue of Ancestor Cults

The role of the Holy Spirit in addressing ancestor cults has yet to be fully explored. Wey Hua has worked to relate the "the power of the Holy Spirit, who moves and works through all believers" to the issue of ancestor cults in China (2016:98). Additionally, Russell Staples sees the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a "fundamental part of the theological approach to the ancestors" for the Shona people of southern Africa (1981). Therefore, while some work has been directed toward developing a theological response to ancestor cults through the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, there is much more to be done to relate pneumatology to ancestor cults. Great opportunities exist in Trinitarian theology that teaches that Jesus Christ himself relied on the Holy Spirit during his earthly ministry and sent the Holy Spirit with power and authority as the comforter, sustainer, and energizer of the church (Wimber and Springer 2009:38).

Conclusion

This paper has described the ongoing interaction between Christianity and ancestor cults. It has described the diversity of ancestor cults, their roles and functions, and Christian responses to them. Much work has been done to develop theological approaches to ancestor cults in specific cultural contexts, but there is still more to be done. Bernard Hwang noted almost half a century ago that it seemed likely that "ancestor cults will last for some time" (1977:359). As long as such beliefs continue to impact people, faithful theologians with localized knowledge must continue to develop biblical responses to address those beliefs and practices in each cultural context. In this theologizing process, it is imperative that theologians neither forget the power and hope present within the gospel nor ignore the heartfelt needs of common believers. If the power and hope of the gospel does not meet the needs of believer, it will soon be discarded as pearls are discarded by swine.

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