Linking Missiology

Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration:
A Theological Survey and Practical Steps for Implementation

by David S. Lim

David Lim (PhD Fuller Seminary) is from the Philippines, and serves as President of the Asian School for Development and Cross-Cultural Studies. He previously served as Professor of Biblical Theology & Transformation Theology and as Academic Dean at both the Asian Theological Seminary (Philippines) and the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (UK). He also serves as President of China Ministries Int'l – Philippines, and is a key facilitator of the Philippine Missions Mobilization Movement which seeks to mobilize a million Filipino tentmakers to reach the unreached.

Editor's Note: In the previous issue of the IJFM *(32:3 Fall 2015) the author contributed his first installment on the theme of ancestor veneration with a historical survey of this missiological controversy.*

In the most recent issue of this journal, I introduced the theme of contextualizing the gospel for cultures that practice ancestor veneration. That first installment was a necessary review of the history of this missiological controversy and how it has embroiled venerable mission orders, agencies and denominations. Although we are in a changing global context today, it is crucial we understand the insights and insufficiencies of previous efforts to confront the deeply embedded values and rituals of ancestor veneration.

Part II: A Theological Survey

In this next section, I would like to move from history to a biblical study. To do so, I surveyed Scripture to find out what it teaches about ancestral practices. The main theological framework that developed is best expressed in a dual emphasis of the Apostle Paul: for expatriates it is "to become all things to all men" (1 Cor. 9:19–23) and for local converts to remain in their socio-religious identities (7:18–19). The overall intention is that we may not only be able to win some (especially heads of households, clans and communities) and thereby disciple them to win the rest, but also to be true to the essence of a faith that is both biblical and multi-cultural. My study has yielded several correctives to commonly understood theological assumptions about ancestor veneration. These are based on a deeper understanding of Chinese worldview and culture. I go on to formulate some missiological principles based on the theological implications of these correctives. I outline these as three theological tenets and three missiological principles.

Theological Basis

First, there are three tenets that underpin a contextualized biblical understanding of ancestor veneration. My conviction is that theologically they are not idolatrous, in practice they are not religious, and culturally they fit a communitarian worldview.

1. Filiality, not Idolatry

The Bible clearly condemns the worship of gods and the making of idols (Ex. 20:4–5). Numerous passages such as 1 Cor. 10:4–21; 5:11, Rev. 21: 8; 21:18–19, and Deut. 4:2 teach that God abhors idolatry, and those who practice it have no part in him. The object of any worship, ceremony, and ritual must be God alone.

I have yet to know, however, of even one Chinese who considers ancestors as gods to be worshiped. Most, if not all, will find the idea of their ancestors actually being gods both ludicrous and abhorrent. Chinese Filipinos believe in only one universal spirit whose manifestations *(hua shen)* include all the religious figures on earth (Buddha, Jesus Christ, etc.). They believe this spirit is the source of existence, is benevolent and effective, performs miracles, and brings good fortune. So the Chinese lean towards monotheism, although for many the "supreme spirit," *tien* (heaven) or *tao* (way or word), may not be at all personal as in the Judeo-Christian and other theistic faiths.

Hiebert (1999) has helped us understand the primal worldview as one with three levels of reality. The bottom level is the empirical world as experienced through the human senses. The top level includes cosmic realms beyond human experience. In between, we find a middle level that includes the unseen or trans-empirical realities of this world. These three levels emerge out of the intersection of this world (earth, universe) with other worlds (heaven, hell), of the seen (empirical) with the unseen (trans-empirical).

In the Chinese belief system the three main worldview concerns are the cosmos, the pantheon of invisible living beings, and humans. Chinese believe the universe is permeated with the cosmic breath or life force called *Qi*, usually described in a bipolar manner as *Yin* and *Yang*. Everything that exists results from the interplay of these two forces. Humans are but a feeble part of this cosmos and as such must live in harmony with these cosmic realities.

Infinite numbers of gods, deities, spirits, and ancestors make up the vast pantheon of Chinese religion. Tan (1996) identifies many of the non-human beings who are part of the belief system of Chinese Filipinos. She also diagrams how Chinese Filipinos accommodate the Filipino belief system within their own. (Compare Figure 1 below with Figure 2 [Uayan 2005] on p. 3.)

Tan has applied Hiebert's division of organic (beings) and mechanical (forces or techniques) in charting folk Chinese belief systems. Lest we become too

Figure 1. Folk Chinese Belief Systems

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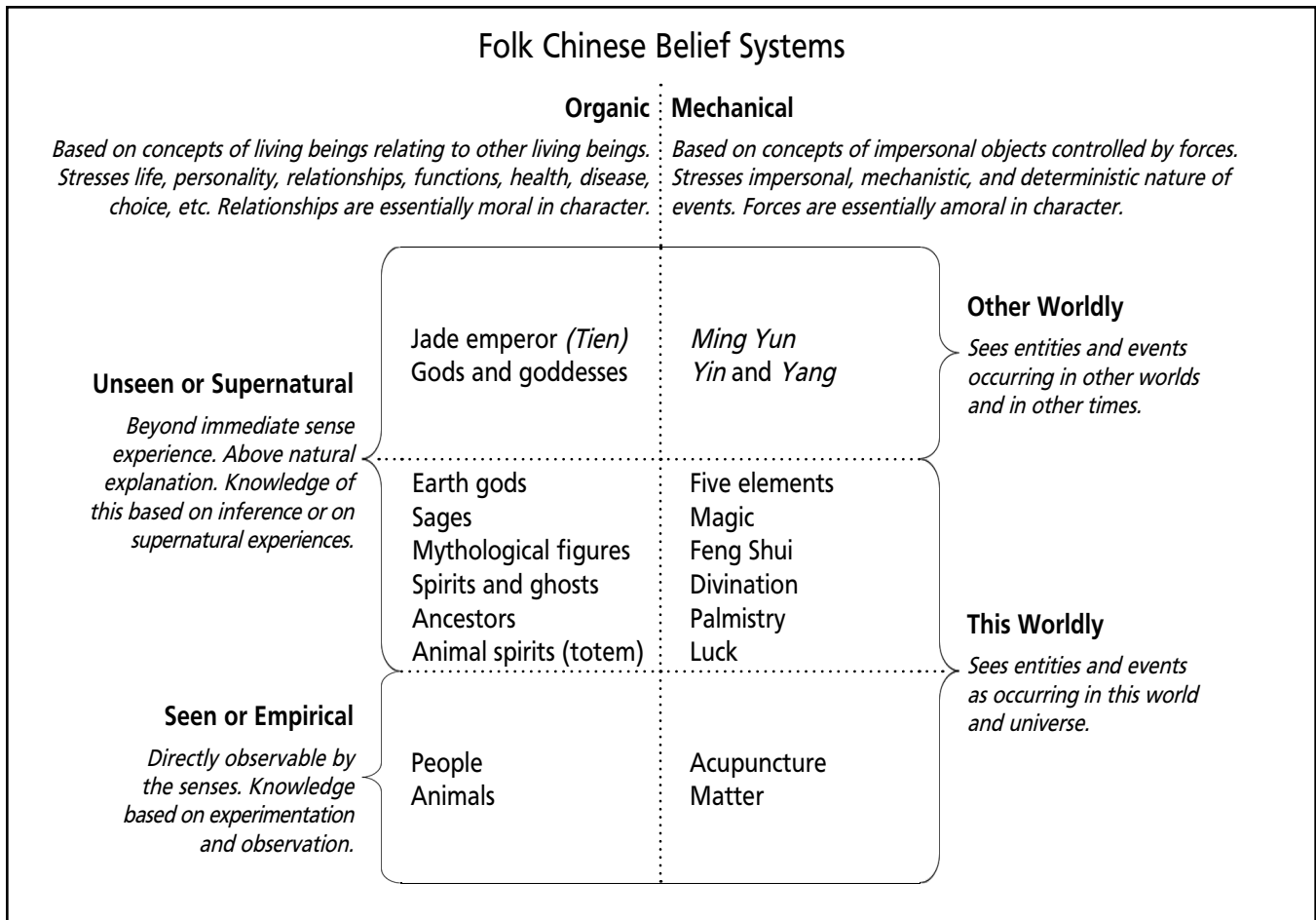
rigid or categorical, Hiebert points out that "boundaries between the categories are often fuzzy" and cautions us that the "organic and mechanical analogies form a horizontal continuum with many shades between the poles" (1999:50).

Take note that the ancestors consistently belong to the middle level and thus are separate from the upper level. The dead ancestors exist and have to be accorded their due. They can provide help, but they can also create problems: if the living experience bad luck or worse, it may be because they have neglected to honor their ancestors. Where do they resi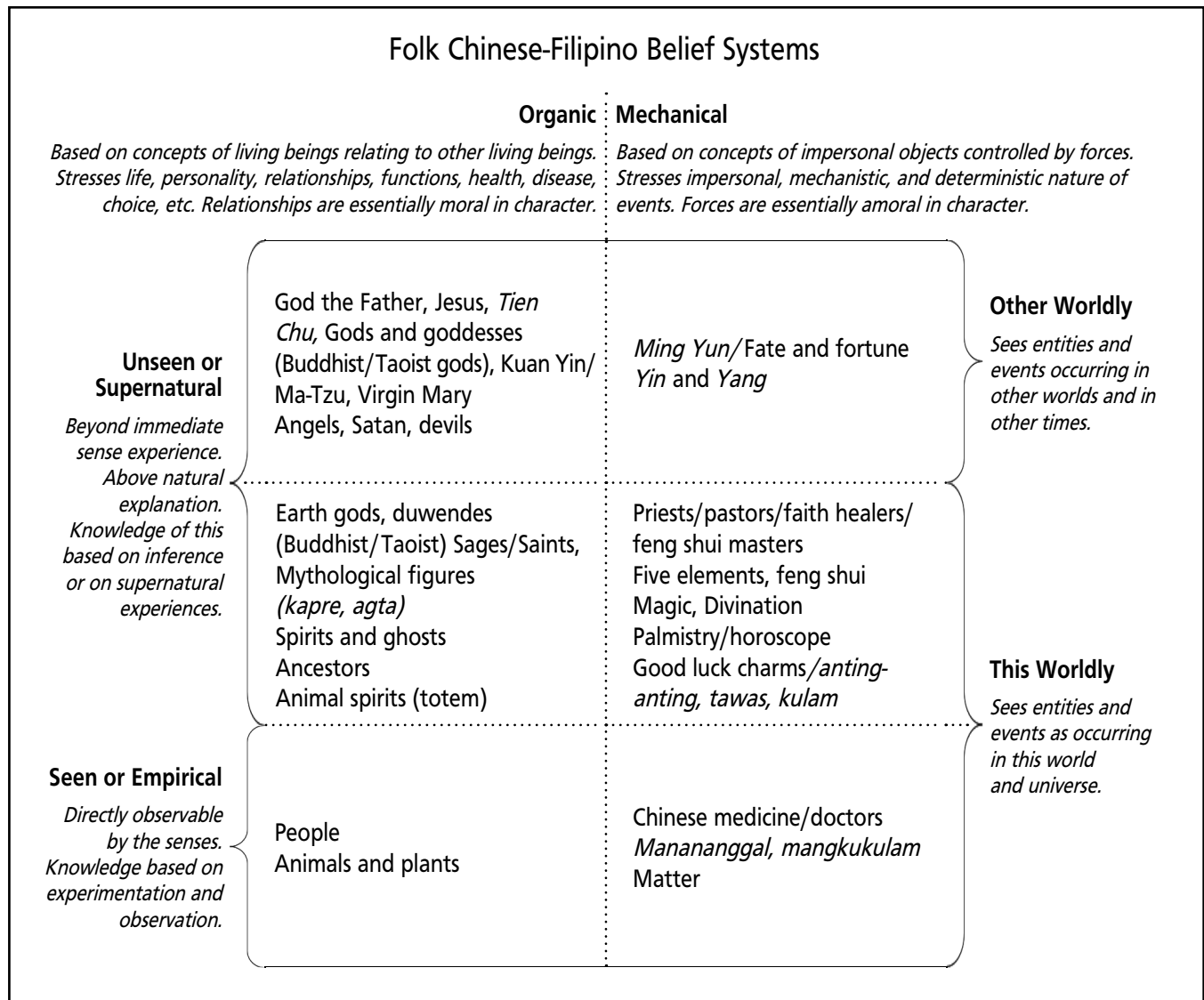de? In heaven or hell? In the Yellow Springs? In the earth? In the air? In the rivers? It depends on their status and on the believer. There is no single answer. They can be anywhere. But gods they are not (Chamberlain 1987:47).

It is obvious that syncretism is a common characteristic of Chinese religion. While syncretism is at work in all religions, the extent to which Chinese religions have been "religions of harmony" has allowed more latitude for the phenomenon than have the more exclusivist and mono-theistic religions (e.g., Christianity and Islam). Chinese religion is itself a model of syncretism, intermingling elements of ancient Chinese religious traditions (such as divination and ancestor venera-tion) with those of "Greater Traditions" (Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism) into a complex mosaic.

A careful study of the Chinese worldview clearly shows that ancestors are distinct from gods. Ancestral practices are a form of veneration, but they are best viewed as filial piety and not idolatry. This is similar to the way that Roman Catholics understand the "veneration" of Mary and the saints. For those who struggle to accept this view, please reference recent missiological works on how to reach folk religionists. (e.g., van Rheenen 1996; Hiebert et al 1999; and Yip 1999).

Figure 2. Folk Chinese-Filipino Belief Systems

Folk Chinese-Filipino Belief Systems

Organic — Based on concepts of living beings relating to other living beings. Stresses life, personality, relationships, functions, health, disease, choice, etc. Relationships are essentially moral in character.

Mechanical — Based on concepts of impersonal objects controlled by forces. Stresses impersonal, mechanistic, and deterministic nature of events. Forces are essentially amoral in character.

Unseen or Supernatural — Beyond immediate sense experience. Above natural explanation. Knowledge of this based on inference or on supernatural experiences.

Other Worldly — Sees entities and events occurring in other worlds and in other times.

This Worldly — Sees entities and events as occurring in this world and universe.

Seen or Empirical — Directly observable by the senses. Knowledge based on experimentation and observation.

God the Father, Jesus, *Tien Chu*, Gods and goddesses (Buddhist/Taoist gods), Kuan Yin/Ma-Tzu, Virgin Mary Angels, Satan, devils

Ming Yun/Fate and fortune *Yin* and *Yang*

Earth gods, duwendes (Buddhist/Taoist) Sages/Saints, Mythological figures *(kapre, agta)* Spirits and ghosts Ancestors Animal spirits (totem)

Priests/pastors/faith healers/feng shui masters Five elements, feng shui Magic, Divination Palmistry/horoscope Good luck charms/*anting-anting, tawas, kulam*

People Animals and plants

Chinese medicine/doctors *Manananggal, mangkukulam* Matter

2. Cultural, not Religious

Second, ancestral veneration is cultural, not religious, basically rooted in *filial piety*. In Chinese thought, *xiào* (filial piety) is one of the most important virtues to be cultivated; it's a love and respect for one's parents and ancestors. The Confucian classic *Book of Filial Piety (Xiao Jing)*, written around 470 BCE, has historically been the authoritative source on xiào. The book, a conversation between Confucius and his student Zeng Shen (Zengzi), is about how to set up a good society using the principle of filial piety, and thus for over 2,000 years has been one of the basic texts in the Chinese Imperial Civil Service Exams.

Filial piety means to be good to one's parents, to take care of one's parents, and to engage in good conduct both inside and outside home so as to bring honor and a good name to one's parents and ancestors. It means to perform the duties of one's job well so as to obtain the material means to support one's parents. It also means to carry out sacrifices to the ancestors. Furthermore, it means to not be rebellious, to show love, respect and support, to display courtesy, to ensure there are male heirs, and to uphold fraternity among brothers. Lastly, filial piety means to wisely advise one's parents (including dissuading them from moral unrighteousness), to display sorrow for their sickness and death, and to carry out sacrifices after their death.

Ancestor veneration is so important because filial piety is considered the foremost virtue in Chinese culture, and it is the main concern of a large number of traditional stories. One of the most famous collections of such stories is *The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars (Ershi)*. These stories recount how children exercised their filial piety in the past. While China has always had a diversity of beliefs, filial piety has been common to almost all of them; respect for the ancestors is the only moral virtue common to almost all Chinese. These traditions were sometimes enforced by law; during parts of

the Han Dynasty, for example, those who neglected ancestor veneration were subject to corporal punishment.

For Confucius, xiào (filial piety) was not merely blind loyalty to one's parents. More important than the norms of xiào were the norms of *rén* (benevolence) and *yì* (righteousness). For both Confucius and Mencius, xiào was a display of rén which was ideally applied in one's dealings with all elders, thus making it the norm for intergenerational relations. But in practice, xiào has become reserved for one's own parents and grandparents, and has been elevated above the notions of rén (benevolence) and yì (righteousness). Hence family-centeredness is prominent in ancestral practices.

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3. Continuity, Less Discontinuity

The third theological tenet for a biblical contextualization of ancestor veneration is to give more emphasis to continuity rather than discontinuity with the people's cultural and religious background (cf. 1 Cor. 7:17–24). This is the best way to develop indigenous (Chinese) theologies and to catalyze more effective movements to Christ. In relation to ancestor veneration, this positive stance towards accommodating as much of the indigenous culture as possible might enable a better understanding of our biblical affirmation of the "communion of saints," as advocated and developed also in Simon Chan's recent book *Grassroots Asian Theology* (2014).

As referred to above, Chinese and oriental cultures (including their primal and folk expressions) have a deep sense of interconnectedness that extends to maintaining relationships with the ancestral dead. They perceive the dead to be separated from human society merely by a curtain of invisibility. In these communalistic cultures the concepts of being surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1) and "the communion of saints" (essential to the Apostles' Creed) make perfect sense. The Christian faith is continuous with the faith of ancestral heroes, and God is as much *the* god of our ancestors as He was the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." To those in similar cultures, this formulaic title of God's self-disclosure to the Hebrew ancestors and the lengthy biblical genealogies are very relevant texts, for they emphasize the continuity of God's presence both across the generations and across the divide that separates the living from the dead.

Unfortunately, much of Protestantism has emphasized the cultural discontinuities that must be acknowledged as proof of genuine conversion. While some aspects in the Christian faith will necessarily disrupt traditional culture (discontinuity), most of our faith affirms the "folk" sense that we are not alone. This particular aspect of primitive revelation found in all folk religions, that we are part of a great community that stretches back through many generations, reflects the biblical idea of a "cloud of witnesses." It resonates with the biblical "family of God" imagery, which then develops into the "heavenly church assembly of living spirits" (Heb. 12:23) and eventually into the creedal concept of the "communion of saints."

For instance, in native Filipino funerary rites, art objects and other artifacts express this deep reverence for the dead and the continuing importance of the dead for the living. The rituals connected to *Todos los Santos*, and the extended time of mourning signified by *pasiyam* (prayers such as a novena every day for the first nine days after the burial for the

departed), *padasal* (prayers for the dead 40 days after the burial), *babang-luksa* (first year death anniversary) and other such commemorative markers, speak of a people whose relational sense is unbroken by death, and who believe in the continuing claims of the dead upon the living. Many upland community festivals are meant for ancestral heroes, like Kabigat and Balitok among the Ikalahan. In these communities, the *caniao* (a dance ceremony) is, at its base, not so much a religious as a social rite, a way of affirming ties with the ancestral spirits who are invited to participate in the drinking, feasting and dancing. It is also a way of identifying who belongs to the community. The caniao is a sign and seal of the people's sense of identity together as a community (Maggay 2005:47).

This sense of connectedness explains the anxiety of Protestant converts among these tribes; they want their dead also to wear the burial blanket that identifies them with their clan. The practice serves as a locus of identity—of who they are and what they shall be in the afterlife. Without a burial blanket, one wanders about like an outcast, not able to belong anywhere. Their animism is not preoccupied with the worship of spiritual life forces, but with maintaining harmonious ties with ancestors, *anitos* (spirits) and all other spirit beings.

People from folk cultures understand this better than those belonging to highly individualistic cultures. Western worldviews assume people are all atomized individuals who live entirely in the present, without any notion that humans have some connection to an invisible society of those who have gone before. I would suggest that followers of Christ from folk cultures need to compose new songs to praise the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to record their genealogies in their own indigenous art forms; not to do so might invite wholescale (unorthodox) syncretism. We cannot afford to repeat the "heresy" of the Judaizers who expected Gentile converts to simply adopt Jewish forms and religious requirements.

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We must expect a greater continuity with their own traditional forms, rather than the typical discontinuities of an alienating Protestantism.

Missiological Principles

These three theological presuppositions surrounding ancestor veneration lead to three *missiological* principles in forming Christ-centered communities: cultural integration, community conversion, and socio-religious transformation.

1. Cultural Integration

This main principle is oriented towards adopting the existing socio-religious culture as much as possible within biblical guidelines (1 Cor. 7:18–19). Its goals are to integrate the Christian faith with the ethnic and cultural identity of the people and to have strong indigenous church leadership from the beginning—a leadership with four important characteristics: self-governing, self-propagating, self-supporting and self-theologizing. Failure to follow these indigenous principles has resulted in the "transplanting of foreign churches," and not the planting of indigenous churches. Such "cultural dislocations" invite real syncretism and Christo-paganism.

Contextualization follows the wisdom of the divine incarnation. Jesus (with ceremonial washing), John the Baptist (with the use of baptism) and Paul (with use of the altar to the unknown god, Acts 17) all risked being misunderstood in their use of local forms; they chose to meet people at the point of their cultural and religious understandings, and then built a bridge of communication, taking them from the known to the unknown. This is the principle of "becoming all things to all men" (1 Cor. 9:19–23). The alternative is either one of creating new forms that would most likely feel foreign (and which would most

likely be rejected) or leave a vacuum, an "empty house" that would invite in seven demons worse than the first! Of course, the content and meaning of all religious forms, rituals and festivities—even secular ones like Valentine's Day or Memorial/Heroes' Days—have to constantly be explained and re-interpreted, lest they lose their meaning and relevance. The need for a biblical reinterpretation of ancestor veneration is what will allow for a proper cultural integration.

Chinese folk religion, which permeates Chinese society, is inseparable from Chinese culture. Except in the case of the professional religious elite who live apart in monasteries, religion in China is so woven into the broad fabric of family and social life that there has not been a special word for a category of religion until modern times. To a great extent, the basic ideas of ancestral veneration coincide with beliefs and values that pervade Chinese culture as a whole. Suggesting the model of an "Asiatic mode of religion," Chan and Hunter stress that "religion is part of culture and the cycles of daily life" (1994:54). This implies that Chinese socio-religious practices and beliefs are, according to Western categories, actually more "cultural" than "religious."

Can biblical Christianity become the fulfillment of Chinese religion? Can Christians use the traditional forms of ancestral veneration so as to infuse and enrich them with biblical meaning? And might they even show that Christians who accept ancestral veneration in obedience to the Fifth Commandment—honoring one's parents—actually care about their ancestors even more than folk Buddhists do? For this to happen, it's essential that

> Conversion should not "deculturize" a convert... The convert may try to adopt the evangelist's culture;

instead the attempt should be firmly but gently resisted. (Willowbank Report 1978:78)

There is often no need to substitute new rites or practices in exchange for old ones. There are already rituals and festivals within cultures that are in and of themselves purely cultural and amoral (the Reformers' *adiaphora*). These should be welcomed and adopted by Christians, because they are familiar and give a sense of solidarity and security for the people. The goal is to develop local theologies and local expressions of Christianity which are culturally appropriate and wholesome; any other way would mean a perpetuation of arrogant cultural and theological imperialism. We must seek to use the existing cultural forms and expressions except when they distinctly clash with the message of the Gospel.

Many Protestants have no effective "theology of culture" beyond a rejectionist position, so they do not consider the useful function of indigenous ways. They don't realize that most of their very own socio-religious expressions have been "baptized" into Christian usage by their previously pagan ancestors. They deny and reject for others what their faith-ancestors have done for them. Instead, I would suggest they follow Bavinck's view of *possessio,* to take possession of "heathen forms of life" and to render them new; in the case of ancestral veneration, retaining and enlisting its practices in the service of Jesus Christ is "perfectly proper" (1960:178). Tippett observes

> In the process of incorporating converts into their new fellowship group or congregation, indigenous forms, rites, festivals, and so forth, which can be given a new Christian value content, have greater likelihood of finding permanent acceptance than foreign forms and rituals. (1985:185)

Ricci, the Catholic Jesuit, successfully did this in 15th century China, thereby avoiding the creation of a

socio-religious vacuum. It's estimated his strategy resulted in 300,000 converts, which could have led to an even greater movement had his approach not been stopped by the pope. Although Roman Catholicism exonerated Ricci's position in 1939, it has experienced limited growth due to religious forms that remain too Latin (Western).

2. Communal Conversion

Second, contextualization should aim at families coming to Christ, and through them, to extend out as a movement among their people. Unlike the prevalent "extraction evangelism" of many Christian missions, this approach calls for movements in which believers are encouraged to stay *inside* their family

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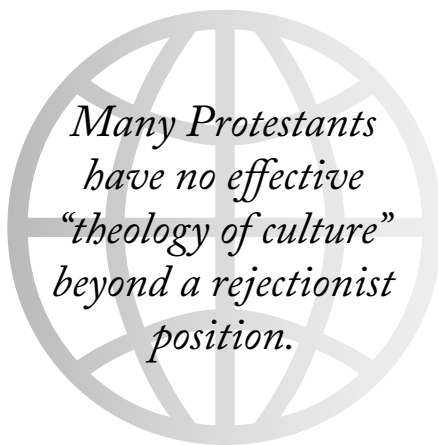
and communities, so that they might share their faith with them (cf. Lim 2010). The focus must be on reaching the adults, preferably the leaders of households, clans, communities and even whole peoples. Sadly, Protestant missions have often focused on the marginalized and the young, who have then experienced severe stress and persecution as a price for the church's rejectionist stance. Not being major decision-makers, these young believers are considered rebels and traitors when they refuse to follow family traditions. There is much wisdom in the early church's practice of prioritizing ministry to heads of households, responsible adults who upon turning to Christ (and immediate baptism!) may influence and include

their whole families. This will insure a solid beachhead for evangelization, and also avoid any unnecessary trauma and persecution of young converts.

Moreover, to achieve communal conversions, community involvement is necessary. The prerequisite for a church-planting movement (CPM) is that the worker earns his right to be accepted and heard by the community. In the past, successful missions have been accomplished through works of mercy, like health care and education. At present, many forms of community development work have been used. In fact, any professional skill will do! This is the advantage of the expatriate: his community service cannot help but be visible—hence access to leaders is almost unavoidable. However, this access must be combined with a sensitive focus on befriending and ministering to leaders. It must also include urging these new leaders to actually take leadership (that is, making decisions) in order to build the Christian community. Without indigenous leadership from the beginning, there will be a very minimal possibility of having a communal turning to Christ that moves across an entire people.

Because of the highly integrated character of ancestral rites within Chinese culture, changes cannot be imposed from the outside. The expatriate must delegate leadership to the more culturally sensitive new believers who then can decide which old forms to maintain, modify or discard. These local leaders should be encouraged to use old forms and re-invest them with new meaning and value. Such changes must be done as early as possible:

> When good functional substitutes have been proposed and accepted at the time of the primary religious change (conversion)…these have stood the test of time and proved effective. (Tippett 1985:185)

Historically "people movements" that build on communal conversion only happen when the groups are truly

indigenous, and self-governing and self-theologizing are established from the outset.

3. Socio-religious Transformation

All this is not to say that the primal or folk worldview and practices should not be modified. In fact, they will and must be transformed "from glory to glory." Yet in the process, the theologies, liturgies and praxis that evolves will surely contribute in an orthodox way to the enrichment of the glorious unity-in-diversity of the Christian faith.

Historically, Christianity has been able to turn pagan and secular traditions into Christian ones, so there should be no lack of confidence that the Christian movement can take on the whole Chinese religious worldview and practices, too! The Chinese Christ-centered communities can be spiritually transformed "from the inside out" as they give relevant witness in their society by their development of distinctly Chinese forms of worship, catechesis and festivals.

Fortunately, we have one significant model of this transformation in Hong Kong: *Tao Fong Shan* ("The Mount Where the Wind of *Tao* [or *logos*] Blows"). Its buildings use Chinese temple architecture and its Christian community has sought to live out and demonstrate the most sensitive and contextual integration of the Christian faith and Chinese culture, including ancestral veneration. It was founded by the Norwegian Lutheran missionary, Karl Reichelt (1877–1952) who arrived in China in 1903. He found that a poor relationship existed between Christians (especially Western missionaries) and the general population, and he made a first-hand study of the life and practices of the founders and the principles of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in China.

Reichelt set up a Christian "monastery" in Nanjing in 1922, where visiting monks and serious "seekers" (averaging a thousand a year) could

come for meditation and discussion. He transferred to Hong Kong in 1927, where he introduced "the universal, the cosmic, the all-embracing Savior Jesus Christ" to all those who visited this "monastery." Converts were baptized, but instead of letting them join the existing churches, he encouraged these "Friends of the Tao" to spread out and evangelize in the temples and monasteries. Reichert wrote,

> Although not joining the external church, such enter the yearly increasing number of unknown and unregistered Christ-followers. (cf. Kung 1993)

Although it had a plan to multiply into a movement, it had a complex structure which made it difficult to replicate.

Reichelt's approach was "from above," and focused on the socio-religious elite. I would prefer a strategy for transformation from the "bottom up" through church-planting and disciple making movements (CPM/DMM) that are now growing among secularized and/or folk Buddhists in China, Japan, Cambodia and Myanmar. On the matter of ancestor veneration practices, these movements combine a focus on family conversion and family-to-family evangelism, but most important is that inquirers and new believers are discipled in a less religious manner, with less concern about religious practices. Rather, they are encouraged to grow "unto Christ" by being more generous (more caring towards and sharing with their neighbors), which is the agape law of Christ (Gal. 6:1–2, cf. Mic. 6:6–8; Amos 5:21–24). This is the transformation vital for ancestor-venerating cultures. It means freedom from fear of ancestors, nature spirits, fate and/or gods, which is the source of so much superstition.

Such is the contextualization approach to the evangelization and transformation of peoples and nations. It is not

> *Their secularized worldview is a form of syncretism that denies the existence and power of beings which operate in the "excluded middle."*

"syncretism," because it focuses on the content and meaning of Christ and his finished work on the cross, and it also emphasizes that the forms must be culture-sensitive. Those who accuse this socio-religious approach of syncretism can be counter-charged with their own syncretism. Their secularized Enlightenment worldview which enshrines modern scientific rationalism is a form of syncretism that denies the existence and power of beings which operate in what Hiebert calls the "excluded middle." A missiological approach that aims at socio-religious transformation from the inside out is the best way for syncretism(s) to be identified and corrected.

Part III: Practical Steps in the Formation of Contextualized Christ-Centered Communities in Ancestor-Venerating Contexts

Having now introduced both historical and biblical perspectives (see my previous article in *IJFM* 32:3), the third and final step is to offer two practical applications with respect to the formation of contextualized Christ-centered communities in ancestor-venerating contexts. They apply to the development of both theology (worldview) and spirituality (lifestyle).

Contextual Theology

The formation and development of theology must be relational and culture-sensitive—a simple matter of friends inviting others to join them in a spiritual journey, rather than salesmen forcefully trying to close a deal (cf. Richardson 2006). Since there is a wide variety of ancestral beliefs and practices among the Chinese, it is necessary that the evangelist-theologian must first study the socio-religious background of the non-believers in each particular context. The pattern should be to listen carefully,

and to accept their views (including religious ones) non-judgmentally, with "gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15), even if they might be dead wrong. Corrections can come later in discipleship, if necessary, as they prayerfully reflect—both individually and corporately—on the Scriptures with the guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 16:12–15).

There should be only a single stumbling-block: "Christ and him crucified" (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–2:5). The Christ-believer can learn the balance of biblical teaching later and, moreover, can unlearn aspects of his own unbiblical worldview later on in the discipling process. Salvation is through his simple faith in Jesus, so he can come to Jesus "just as he is," in his own context, with no requirement for immediate worldview change. Otherwise, who of us can claim to be saved, since all our worldviews are yet to be completely biblical (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8)? Most of us expect too much from new believers. We expect them to embrace more than belief in Jesus, but also that they immediately begin to follow our own religious beliefs and values (actually, those from a particular socio-religious denomination).

Andrew Walls (1997) has suggested just how the process of theological contextualization proceeded historically. He identifies three stages in this process, illustrating it with an analysis of the transformation of Hellenistic thought in the early centuries of the church, a process which extended for more than three generations. During the first stage the Hellenistic church experienced the "missionary stage," typified and led by Paul as he began to adapt Jewish vocabulary and forms to Hellenistic categories and vocabulary. Paul abandoned the proselyte model of dealing with Gentile converts, and as a missionary, expected that any theologizing would need to select Greek terminology, symbols and rituals in any effective communication of God's truth.

> He undertook substantial symbol theft from the Gentile world. Thus he can boldly seize the Hellenistic idea of

pleroma, the totality of emanations between the transcendent God and the material universe, and identify it with Christ (Col. 1:19). The thought of Christ as the *pleroma* of emanations lifts the understanding of his cosmic function into a realm far beyond what the old categories of messiah-ship could ever convey. (1997:149)

The Greek *pleroma* corresponds to that middle region of the Chinese worldview, and in like fashion for the missionary, there is the potential that the symbols of ancestor veneration societies might be deployed in a way that "lifts" our understanding of Jesus' cosmic function.

The second stage in the contextualization process is the "convert stage." Walls suggests that the main feature

Most of us expect too much from new believers.

of this stage is that of identity, and that Justin Martyr is its most prominent representative. This apologist was convinced that Christ could inhabit his Hellenistic world and transform it, and he sought to

> maintain his Christian identity within the Hellenistic intellectual identity, which he could not abandon because it had shaped his life and his mind. (1997:149)

Sadly, most indigenous Christians throughout the world struggle daily with the question of their identities. They are told over and over that the route to success is only by adopting the dominant modern culture and that their own native cultures and mother-tongue languages are dead ends. Even more

sadly, the churches of Christendom reinforce this cultural oppression by not valuing and promoting the local vernaculars. Non-vernacular-speaking church workers and expatriate missionaries must be convinced—and must labor to convince indigenous Christians—that Christ truly seeks to inhabit and transform their cultures and worldviews from within.

As Walls (1997:150) notes,

> Conversion…means to *turn what is already there in a new direction.* It is not a matter of substituting something new for something old—that is proselytizing, a method that the early church could have adopted but deliberately chose to jettison. Nor is conversion a matter of adding something new to something old, as a supplement or in synthesis. Rather, Christian conversion involves re-directing what is already there, turning it in the direction of Christ.

To fulfill Revelation 7:9, the gospel must be communicated in ways that recognize and embrace the fact that conversion to Christianity does not require indigenous peoples to change their cultural identity or language. Rather, Christ seeks to be "at home" in their culture and language so that Christianity comes to have the flavor of the people's heart and familiar speech.

The third and final stage in this process is what Walls calls the "refiguration stage," typified in those earlier centuries by the patristic theologian, Origen. This stage can only be achieved by a generation that follows after the convert stage, that has grown up in the Christian faith and that is reconciled to its pre-Christian inheritance—and yet is not afraid of it either. To flesh out this refiguration stage and its interaction with the heathen culture, Walls references the comparison Origen made to the manner in which the Israelites used the gold and spoils from heathen Egypt to construct their most holy religious objects.

> The work of Christians, he concludes, is to take the materials of the heathen world and fashion from them objects

for the worship and glorification of God… And that is what Origen and all his successors did; the classical Christian theology that we associate with the early centuries—its doctrines, creeds, and confessions—was made from the materials of the Greek intellectual world and by means of its methods. The corpus of Neoplatonic thought was spoiled from the pagan world as thoroughly as ever the Israelites could have spoiled Egyptian gold, and from it was hammered out the doctrine of the Trinity. (1997:149)

The burning question for many Christians in non-Western cultures is whether the Jesus preached to them by Western missionaries can ever be "at home" in their native culture. Will they have to surrender their identity and culture to follow another culture's "native Jesus"? In other words, does the conversion demanded by the gospel include the changing of their socio-religious identities? Must they live in a split-level Christianity? Or will vernacular translations of Jesus and the Scriptures open the door for Christ to enter fully into their cultures? To develop dynamic and relevant Christianity, the alternatives to contextualization have produced poor results in terms of developing a dynamic and relevant Christianity. Walls (1997:152) perceptively notes,

> Christian faith must go on being translated, must continuously enter into vernacular culture and interact with it, or it withers and fades.

This third stage is the theological crucible for Chinese Christians who confront our ancestor veneration. Like Origen in the Hellenistic world, we must find a biblical way forward that welds biblical truths with the values and rites of our socio-religious culture. Moreover, since most Christians are known to be rejectionist towards "ancestor worship," we must try to avoid being categorized as or associated with mainstream "rejectionist" Christianity. Being categorized as a more accommodating Roman Catholicism might be the best way forward. If we are suspected or

The ethos of these rites was originally and primarily ethical, and requires us to respect a certain spirituality in these Christ-centered communities.

accused of being part of a rejectionist religious community, we must apologize for such attitudes in the past and present. This is a very important act of humility that is often needed to open up an opportunity for us to share the gospel with those who venerate ancestors.

Contextual Spirituality

Believers should also demonstrate this theological paradigm shift in their spirituality. Above all, they must show that they remember their ancestors and honor them from the bottom of their hearts, and even exceed the honor given ancestors by non-believers (cf. 1 Tim. 5:8). We must suppress any urge to criticize these rituals of remembrance as non-Christian practices and, alternatively, allow for an indigenous yet Christian spiritual process to continue developing.

As I pointed out in my comments on filial piety above, it is historically quite clear that any spirituality surrounding ancestor veneration is primarily moral in nature. Before Buddhism came to China with its doctrines of heaven, hell, reincarnation and transmigration of souls, there was hardly any concern for elaborate burial practices (like burning paper money, or pleading for blessings and protection from ancestors). The classical Chinese emphasis on filial piety is much simpler and is generally concerned with displaying proper morals:

> Filial piety is the root of all virtues and the stem out of which grows all moral teaching. It starts with the service of parents, proceeds to the service of the Ruler, and culminates with the establishment of the character. (*Xiao Jing,* ch. 1)

And from one essay of Ou Yang Shieu, a noted scholar and statesman in the Sung Dynasty:

> It is more important to provide respectfully and affectionately for the needs of the parents when they are alive, rather than worship them by burning paper money and spreading a feast before ancestral tablets which are more superstitious practices. (Chang 1975:838–839)

So, we can see that the ethos of these ancestor rites was originally and primarily ethical, and I believe it requires us to respect the way in which a certain spirituality will emerge among Christ-centered communities in these contexts.

First, it requires that we allow and encourage young believers to follow their family traditions, including bowing down, offering incense (cf. Mal. 1:11), eating food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8, 10) and making tablets or scrolls, just like Paul did not object to the Corinthian practice of "baptizing the dead" (1 Cor. 15:29). Out of love, they must never cause their families, clans and communities to stumble over practices that are merely cultural (1 Cor. 10:32–33, cf. 8:9–13.)

In Korea, Yonggi Cho, the senior pastor of the famous Yoido Full Gospel Church, got into big trouble with the Presbyterian churches there because he taught that a believer could bow down during "ancestral worship." He remarked,

> We Koreans serve our living parents by bowing down. Why is it alright (sic) to bow down to living parents and not to dead parents? Dead parents are still the parents, thus it is not sinful to bow down to dead parents during ancestral worship. (www.goni.kimc.net/sacrifice.htm)

I believe his stance must be emulated.

Secondly, once people have received Christ (and have preferably been baptized with their families), they must be discipled in private and in small groups. All efforts must focus on winning their extended families to the same faith as soon as possible. If they

(especially family heads) regard their ancestors as gods/deities, and hence worthy of their worship, they will surely realize very soon that repentance requires leaving such idolatry. If they fail to realize this, a gentle dialogue or probe into the foundational meanings of their new-found faith in "Jesus is Lord" will lead them to burn their idols and paraphernalia. If they (especially family heads) continue to view their ancestors as human spirits who hover among the living, who are capable of providing or withholding protection, who threaten them with bad luck unless offered food, then these new believers may be helped to discover functional substitutes. Better yet, they can be encouraged to gradually drop the practices bit by bit, without calling attention to their conversion in the community.

Thirdly, we must accept that the forms of an emerging Christ-centered spirituality will most probably differ from mainstream westernized Christianity. There is no divine or universal form of Christianity which is suitable for all believers at all times. This is how indigenous theology will evolve, too. However, this is not to affirm an uncritical, "to each his own" theologizing. Caught in the tension between scripture, church tradition and one's culture, each believer must choose the way to follow Christ and obey God's word in his own context. We must believe that the Holy Spirit will use the word of God to illumine and direct each believer to become God's "priest, prophet and king" in Christ, especially in the Bible reflection or sharing time with his disciplers or small groups. Christians will encounter a plurality of options rather than one single choice in ancestral veneration, as they reflect on biblical principles, cultural values and family practices. It is not the church or the pastor, but the believers themselves who will make the decisions. Some errors in discernment may occur, but the believing community around them should help keep them in check.

Fourthly, their spirituality must also be holistic and strategic. This is especially true since our objective is to disciple and transform entire peoples into Christlikeness without dislocating them from their socio-cultural heritage. We want these new communities of Christ-followers to be in a position to disciple adults, even community and socio-religious leaders, so they can lead in the theologizing, the education and the worldview transformation of the rest of the populace. We must try to befriend Buddhist and Taoist monks and nuns. Christians should participate in the activities of the *Qing Ming* and *Chong Yang* festivals. When we join in socio-religious and other affairs, we show our willingness to cooperate with people of good will to establish

These new believers may be helped to discover functional substitutes.
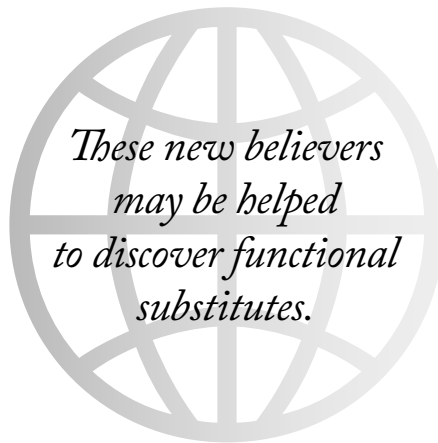
shalom/peace and thereby earn the right to form Christ-centered communities among them and with them.

This spirituality is based on our relationship with God and reflected in our relationship with our fellow man. It is not measured by adherence to religious practices which vary from culture to culture. God delights in creativity and diversity. We must avoid being judgmental or legalistic (Rom. 14:1–15:7); we must allow freedom of conscience; and we must encourage each fellowship of believers to find how to express their religious faith in light of the Scriptures.

After all, the best way to honor ancestors is to sincerely love our neighbors

today, through our social activities on their behalf or our "good works." This is what Christian spirituality is: to glorify God by shining his light into the world through our good works (Mt. 5:16). This is the summary of the Torah in the Great Commandment (Mt. 22:37–39) and in the Golden Rule (Mt. 7:12)—to do to others what you would want to be done to you—which is the positive (and higher) version of Confucius' dictum, "Don't do to others what you don't want to be done to you." This is perfected in Jesus' New Commandment which raises the standard to the highest level: to love one another as he loved us (Jn. 13:34–35), which is, self-sacrificially!

We should therefore use our time, energy, resources, and skills to do community services whether from our homes, offices, or public property. If needed and capable, we can build community ministry centers, and also turn our existing church buildings into such. There is really no need to build more religious buildings for conducting more religious services, for any meeting can turn into a church (Christ-centered worship and liturgy) when it includes prayer, Bible reflection and sharing (cf. Mt. 18:19–20; 1 Tim. 4:4–5).

Conclusion

This contextualization of the gospel in ancestral venerating communities affirms a biblical faithfulness and theological relevance that will transform Chinese and similar cultures from within, and allows for more effective movements to Christ where ancestor veneration has inhibited the gospel. With the rise of new religious movements across the globalized world of the 21st century, this sensitive approach may be the most relevant and effective mission strategy for peoples of Buddhist and primal worldviews.

In my assessment, it is dubious whether rejectionist denominations and churches will adopt this mission paradigm

officially. Their leadership and laity have already been perceived by their compatriots as isolated, un-filial, and even unpatriotic sub-cultural minorities. This perception is actually quite accurate, for they have westernized and modernized and have completely rejected the folk Buddhist worldview and practices. Most of them are so bound to their church traditions that they are hardly open to even questioning the macro-issue of the socio-cultural barriers between their Christianity and the wider community. They may even take pride in a rejectionist religious heritage that has welcomed the persecution and martyrdom of their forebears. Many even have an eschatology that only a minority (the elect) will be saved anyway. Moreover, to make a change in their position would require much spiritual maturity and humility, for it infers that the more accommodating Roman Catholics and liberals have been right all along, and it may also require some form of public apology towards their respective non-Christian neighbors. These conditions make effective evangelism very difficult and Christ-centered movements as well as Christ-centered communities and people movements virtually impossible.

What is needed most urgently today are new church-planting movements in these ancestor-venerating contexts. A new contextually-sensitive faith in Christ will be effective in breaking this traditional stronghold that has kept multitudes of folk Buddhists and folk religionists from Christ. New brands of Christianity in ancestor-venerating contexts have actually begun, but we still need to see more multiplication of Christ-centered communities through insider movements and house church networks. The integrity and reputation of biblical Christianity in this post-modern and multi-cultural world is at stake. Moreover, the eternal destiny of more than 1.5 billion ancestor-venerating people is at stake, too. Without this crucial shift in perspective, we insure that they will reject Christ because of a Christianity that is perceived to be

*C*hurches may even take pride in a rejectionist religious heritage that has welcomed the persecution and martyrdom of their forebears.

dishonoring toward parents, elders and ancestors. Indeed, this shift of perspective might cause some to hesitate, but for the sake of the gospel and by God's mercies, we must at the very least prayerfully support those who are presently attempting to shift their paradigm in evangelizing societies which venerate ancestors. **IJFM**

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