

## **ANCESTRAL VENERATION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF ITS INCORPORATION INTO THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN FAITH**

Abstract:

*In Nostra Aetate* – one of the 16 documents of the Second Vatican Council – the Catholic Church firmly declares: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. .... The Church, therefore, urges all her sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussions and collaboration with members of other religious faith traditions... (cf. NA. 2). The so-called ‘other religions’ as stated by *Nostra Aetate* includes traditional religion in the form of ancestral veneration. It is still widely and popularly practiced by Christians of various ethnic groups in Asia and Africa as well as in other parts of the world – Latin America, Melanesia and Australia (the Aborigines). Despite the suppression and expulsion done in the past, this religious tradition is still able to survive and continue to demonstrate its vital force in the lives of many Asians and Africans, including those who have embraced the Christian faith. In this article we argue that ancestral veneration does not contradict the Christian faith. It has a place in the Christian faith and should be incorporated into, at least, in Catholic Christian devotion.

**Note: artikel ini dimuat dalam EXCHANGE: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research, Vol. 36 No.3 2007, Utrecht, Nederland, pp. 246-280.**

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Religious practice<sup>1</sup> that centres in venerating ancestors or the living dead in general still to this modern day continues to play a significant role in the life of many Christians around the world especially in Asia and Africa as well as in Latin America, Melanesia, Australia (Aborigines) despite the maltreatments and prejudices launched both by a number of scholars and by some pastoral agents of the church. This religious piety is mistakenly understood as something idolatrous, superstitious and necromantic. Ancestral veneration, on the contrary, has some fundamental truth parallel with devotions to angels and saints in the Judeo-Christian faith. It presupposes faith in the continuation of life after corporal death and faith in God as the only source of life, both of temporary life of man on earth and of everlasting life beyond death. There would be no ancestral veneration if there were no faith in the existence of the human soul which continues to live after the corporal death. This religious piety, therefore, should be incorporated into Christian devotional practices.

Veneration to ancestors – exactly like veneration to the angels and saints in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches – is also a kind of religious devotional practice. Ancestors or the holy living dead are never worshipped as God but venerated, honoured, remembered and loved because of their closeness with God in heaven. Through them and with them the living kin can praise and worship God. In addition, devotion to the ancestors can be formal or informal, individual or communal. Like devotion to the angels and saints, in its practices there can be some elements of devotion to ancestors that are somewhat unreasonable or wrong or ‘unhealthy’. Whenever this occurs, the church has a pastoral duty to encourage

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<sup>1</sup> This article is only one part of my whole thesis (300 pages long, single space) entitled *Practical Theology of Ancestral Veneration: Propositions For Asian and African Catholic Church Ministry Today* which was presented to the Pontifical Gregorian University of Rome on March 28, 2006, accomplished as part of the requirements to achieve Licentiate Degree in Missiological Sciences. The article is confined mainly to the policy of the Roman Catholic Church.

the practitioners to correct or abandon such unhealthy elements that may exist in their ancestral veneration. But prior to this, we need to briefly demonstrate the Catholic and Orthodox church's concept of faith regarding the Communion of Saints and the possibility to include ancestors in what the church believes concerning the Community of Saints.

## 2. THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS SHOULD INCLUDE ANCESTORS

The 'Communion of Saints' is one of the articles of Christian faith as stated in the Apostles' Creed which says: 'I believe in the communion of saints'. The word 'communion' here means 'fellowship', while the word 'saints' refers not only to holy men and women having been recognized by the church through a process of canonization, but also to all the faithful on earth, in purgatory and in heaven. Thus, 'the Communion of Saints' as professed by Christians in the Apostles' Creed means a spiritual fellowship or solidarity which binds together the militant church – the faithful on earth, the suffering church – the souls being purified in purgatory, and the triumphant church – all the blessed souls who are believed to have been already with God in heaven, all in an organic unity of the mystical body with Christ as its head and with in a constant interchange of supernatural offices or merits.<sup>2</sup> Theologians assert that the belief in the Communion of Saints was central in the life of the early Church for a long time before it became an object of theological reflection. One of the documents of the Roman Catholic Church teaching explicitly the belief in the Communion of Saints is *Mirae caritatis* – an encyclical on the Eucharist (1902) of Pope Leo XIII. In article 12, it says:

Besides all this, the grace of mutual charity among the living, which derives from the Sacrament of the Eucharist so great an increase of strength, is further extended by virtue of the Sacrifice to all those who are numbered in the Communion of Saints. For the Communion of Saints, as everyone knows, is nothing but the mutual communication of help, expiation, prayers, blessings among all the faithful, whether they have already attained the heavenly home, or are detained in the purgatorial fire or are yet exiles here on earth, all enjoy the common franchise whereof Christ is the head and the constitution is love.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the Roman Catholic Church believes that there is a horizontal mutual interchange of spiritual goods among all members of the tripartite church – the militant on earth, the expectant in purgatory and the triumphant in heaven. The militant church on earth can pray for those being purified in purgatory and venerate those in heaven invoking their intercessory prayers.

Up to this point, we may ask: 'In this ecclesiological reflection – tripartite church – where is the place of ancestors, especially the remote ones who have never heard of Christ?' The answer proposed is that ancestors make up the integral part of the Communion of Saints because of the following considerations. Despite the fact that they have never heard of Christ and never shared spiritual goods – the richness of Christ's life poured out in the Sacraments ministered by the Church – during their time on earth, there

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Communion of Saints', *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04171a.htm> (virtual version, no page). A long discourse of the subject on the Communion of Saints can also be found in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, art. 946-962, Città del Vaticano: Liguori Publications 1994, 247-250.

<sup>3</sup> Leo XIII, *Mirae Caritatis*, art. 12, Rome, May 20, 1902. Cf. F.X. Lawlor, 'Communion of Saints', *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Volume 4, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company 1967, 41.

is no doubt that ancestors are commonly believed to have been with God in heaven. Peoples in Asia and Africa as well as in other parts of the world believe that spirits of their ancestors are in Heaven serving God or in an intimate relationship with God and at the same time they continue to invisibly dwell with the family of their living kin. The church teaches that the Communion of Saints is the church itself,<sup>4</sup> consisting of tripartite members – the faithful on earth, in purgatory and in heaven – with Jesus Christ as its head. If we follow through our Christian belief that there is only one God and one heaven and that all men are destined to only one God<sup>5</sup> and one heaven, we, then, should not hesitate to believe that the ancestors of Christians of Asia and Africa as well as of Christians of other parts of the world are with God in heaven and form the tripartite church. They are part of the triumphant church in heaven; and as the saints or angels are venerated, these blessed ancestors can also be venerated by the living kin of the faithful on earth because of their nearness to God and their intercessory help invoked.

If we believe that Jesus Christ, God who became man, is the universal saviour of all mankind who came before and after Him, this would include good ancestors of Christians of various Asian and African ethnic groups who have never heard of Him. They also must have been saved in a special way by Christ<sup>6</sup> and they are now where Christ is – in heaven. In Catholicism, the church is – as contained in the concept of Communion of the Saints – defined as a fellowship between the living – those who are still on earth – and the living dead – those who are in purgatory and in heaven. In African and Asian religious traditions likewise, human family is commonly understood as a community consisting of the living and the dead. Like Christian saints who are believed to be with Christ and to share the concern of Christ for the militant Church on earth, the saved ancestors who are with Christ also share His concern for the living. In other words, ancestors must be also an integral part of the community of heaven – the triumphant Church.

### 3. WHO SHOULD BE INCLUDED AS ANCESTORS

#### *a) All The Dead Who Are in Christ*

One of the most debated points regarding ancestral veneration is a question as to who should be included in the family of ancestors. In the conviction of most African ethnic groups, for instance, not everyone can become an ancestor, but only those who fulfil specific conditions. The first condition is to attain adulthood which is generally determined by marriage rather than age and which assumes procreation. An unmarried person, however old, is disqualified from ancestorhood because of not having transmitted life to another person and is, therefore, considered a useless person whose name should be blotted

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, art. 946 (p. 247).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Nostra Aetate*, art. 1 states: 'Humanity forms but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people of the entire earth (cf. Acts 17:26), and also because all share a common destiny, namely God' in Austin Flannery OP (ed.), *The Basics Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996, 569.

<sup>6</sup> As for the salvation of those who never heard Christ during their life time on earth, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that it is exactly what the article of faith 'He – Christ – descended into hell and on the third day He rose again' means. The frequent New Testament affirmations that Jesus was 'raised from the dead' presupposed that the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to His resurrection. He descended there as Saviour to proclaim the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there and free all the just who had gone before Him. For further information, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, art. 632-633 (p. 164).

out of memory. A second condition is to die a natural death, excluding tragic deaths such as those by accident, suicide, unclear diseases or in childbirth. Another qualification is to have led an exemplary life by tribal standards, demonstrating good character and behaviour according to traditional morality.<sup>7</sup>

While we need to respect and acknowledge the right of any ethnic group to define ancestorhood; the Church also should have the courage to propose that ancestorhood should be open to all the dead who are believed to have been with Christ in heaven whether one dies young or in old age, married or unmarried. The dead person still can attain ancestorhood provided he or she has demonstrated a good life during his or her lifetime in the world. They can intercede between God and their living kin. It should be parallel to Christian veneration of saints. That is, certain great Christians – because of their heroic faith for instance and recognized by the Church through a means of canonization – are believed to have a special privilege as mediators or intercessors between God and the living Church. Other Christians believed to be in heaven with Christ – though they are not recognized by the Church through a canonization – still can become the intercessors of the living Christians, which can fall under the so-called informal devotion.

In addition, in public parlance, an ancestor is normally understood to be a person who died in old age and has blood ties with people calling him ancestor. But if we trace its origin, the word ‘ancestor’ derives from the Latin verb *antecedere* which simply means ‘to go before’ or Latin noun *antecessor* which means ‘somebody who goes before’,<sup>8</sup> or the Italian word *gli antenati* which literally means simply ‘those who were born before’. Based on the literal meaning of this term as well as on the Christian belief in Communion of Saints, Christian ancestral veneration, therefore, should not be limited to the founders of the clan or the sage tribal kings, those who were married and left descendants behind. Instead, it also should include all the family members who have died providing they are believed by their living kin<sup>9</sup> to be now with Christ in heaven.

#### *b) Biological Living Dead and Family Friends*

Another phenomenon generally found in ancestral veneration is the notion that ancestors are peculiar to each ethnic group. This phenomenon, according to some theologians, for instance John S. Mbiti from Africa, is the fundamental reason why a stranger – whether a slave or a woman entering into a patrilineal family by marriage – can never genuinely convert to an African traditional religion centred on ancestral veneration.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Diana B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 2004, 113; Cf. also Zampi Phiri SJ, ‘African Ancestral Veneration: Chewa Belief in Ancestors’, *JCTR Bulletin* 56 (2003), <http://www.jctr.org.zm/bulletins/bull56arti.htm>, 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Sub voce ‘Ancestor’ *Encarta World Dictionary* 2001, <http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary/1861585462/ancestor.html> (virtual version, no page).

<sup>9</sup> Normally Asian and African peoples have a certain criteria to determine whether or not a certain person can gain ancestorhood/heaven. In general only people who have conducted good character and behaviour are worthy to be numbered among the family of ancestors and venerated. People who were abusive or committed grave crimes during their mundane life are regarded as part of the family of ancestors and suffice it to say, they are not venerated. They are not asked for their help or guidance. They are not invited to participate in human affairs.

<sup>10</sup> Hertz Balz, ‘Ancestor Worship II (In Africa)’ in: Karl Müller SVD and S. Bevans SVD (eds.), *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspective*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1999, 21.

This is because ancestral veneration in a sense is an extension of the living family fellowship in which members of the family share a common life-giving experience based on blood ties and psychological emotion. Naturally strangers – slaves – cannot share life-giving experience with people they do not know and with whom they do not have blood ties.

This African pattern is not the case in many other indigenous societies. In Chinese society, for instance, a girl adopted as a *sim-pua* (little daughter-in-law) is permitted a tablet in the hall if she dies. This indicates that she is counted as an integral part of the patrilineal lineage of her adopted parents and according to the customs she is supposed to marry one of the sons of the couple who adopts her.<sup>11</sup> The Manggarai people in Flores, Indonesia, regard a woman entering into a patrilineal family as a constituted part of the family of her new husband. At a farewell ritual called *rui lo'ang* – a ceremony in which the bride is symbolically purified before leaving for her husband's clan – the family of her parents will address the ancestors and tell them that the bride from that day on is no longer counted as the member of their clan and ask them not to look for her. Then, when she arrives at the family of her husband, a similar ritual called *tempang pitak* will be performed. It is a ritual initiation in which the bride is symbolically cleansed, officially welcomed and accepted into the clan of her husband. In the ceremony, the clan of the groom calls its ancestors to participate in welcoming and accepting the bride into the clan and to guarantee her wellbeing, day and night.

While each ethnic group has the privilege to determine the rules and customs as to whom they should include in the constellation of ancestors who they venerate, a Christian ancestral veneration, however, should include all those that are near to us because the realm of the Blessed Dead encompasses all for whom we hold affection.<sup>12</sup> They do not have to be blood-related. Spouses, partners, good friends and those related by marriages should all have their places in a Christian ancestral veneration.

#### *b) Founders of Other Philosophical and Religious Societies*

When serving the Catholic Church as a missionary priest in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston WV, USA, (1998-2004) I had a Vietnamese friend who is also a Catholic priest. One day I accidentally found a couple of statues of Buddha at his rectory,<sup>13</sup> and curiously asked him why he kept them in the Catholic parish. To my surprise he said: 'Why not? Buddha was a good man. He was not God. He was a saint exactly like any other saints in the Catholic Church. As a saint I believe he is now in heaven with God, with the Lord Jesus; and he prays for us like Christian saints pray for us. Besides invoking the Christian saints in my prayers, I also regularly invoke Buddha.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Emily M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in A Chinese Village*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press 1973, 129.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Maulana Karenga, 'Ancestor Veneration' on his website <http://www.senytmenu.org/ancestors.htm#faq> (virtual version, no page)

<sup>13</sup> Rectory is the residence of a Catholic priest or a group of Catholic priests in a parish.

<sup>14</sup> This Vietnamese Catholic priest treats Buddha as a holy man – a saint or an enlightened one – as held by Theravada or Hinayana Buddhism which is known also as Southern Buddhism since it is mostly found in South Asian Countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia and Thailand. On the contrary, Mahayana Buddhism, which is known also as Northern Buddhism because it is mostly found in North Asian Countries such as Nepal, Tibet, China and Japan, sees Buddha not just an enlightened human/saint but he is God and Saviour. For further information, see Richard Cooler, 'Buddhism' in:

I was quite surprised at first and could not believe what I was hearing. But after I took a course on Buddhism and studied at length the phenomenon of ancestral veneration, I came to a conclusion that what my Vietnamese Catholic friend practiced is not wrong. I believe that he is only a representative of countless Asian Christians who have embraced Christianity, adored Jesus Christ as the unique Lord and Saviour and venerated Christian saints, and who still highly revere the saints of their own traditional religions.

In response to the exposition of Julia Ching regarding the syncretistic inclination of Chinese religions – Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Folk Religions – and the difficulty of presenting Christianity in East Asia, Hans Küng verifies the existence of syncretistic phenomena in which people of East Asia see no difficulty in embracing two or three religions at the same time. In East Asia, it is quite possible for a person to be both Confucianist and Taoist, both Buddhist and Shintoist. If Christianity is to be at home in Asia, Hans Küng says, it must become rooted, incarnated, indigenized and inculturated in East Asian culture and society which is so marked by Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism. One of the ways that can be employed in the process is to allow a possibility for people of East Asia to be Christians – confessing Christ as Lord and unique Saviour – while at the same time they still adhere to cultures and moral ethics of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Shintoism. Hans Küng calls this ‘Cultural-Ethical Dual Citizenship’. He indicates that it is even possible for people of East Asia to have a ‘Dual Citizenship in Faith’ since some indigenous Asian religions, to some extent, do not contradict the Christian faith. There is agreement on many issues such as the religious concepts of the ultimate reality – of the Absolute, of God, of the world and of the meaning of human life.<sup>15</sup>

The phenomenon of ‘dual citizenship in faith’ as portrayed by Hans Küng, in fact, occurs not only among Chinese and Japanese in East Asia but also in various countries of Africa, in Indonesia and in Melanesia, to mention only a few. A Divine Word Missionary working among the Chimbu people in Papua New Guinea once reported:

On Sunday, the Chimbu people would honestly try to come away from this cloud mushrooming over their lives and for a while be in contact with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. In their daily worries, however, they would still feel dependent on the ancestors. Whether we like it or not, in many good Christian congregations, people still have two ways of belief systems, co-existing more or less peacefully. Christianity has not done away with the ancestral belief altogether. Still less has it tried to integrate the old beliefs or to put them in the right perspective. The result is either dichotomy of two belief systems, one for Sunday and the other for weekdays, or a weird syncretism which does away with the core of the Christian message and with unique position of Christ in God’s plan of salvation.<sup>16</sup>

Still another missionary priest working among the Chimbu people in Papua New Guinea with a quite surprising tone reported:

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<http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/cooler/Cooler-%20Buddhism%20and%20pagan%20webpage.html>  
(virtual version, no page)

<sup>15</sup> For further information, see Hans Küng – Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions*, New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Groups Inc. 1988, 272-282. For more information regarding Julia Ching’s exposition on the syncretistic inclination of Chinese Religions – Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Folk Religions –, and the difficulty of presenting Christianity in East Asia, see Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1993, 186-220.

<sup>16</sup> Leo Brouwer, ‘Ancestors in Christ?’, *Catalyst, Social Pastoral Magazine for Melanesia* 3/2 (1973), 49.

Sometime Chimbu people come to the parish priest asking him to pray and say mass, because their pigs are dying, children are sick, food does not grow well, etc. But very often this is already their second step. They have already killed a chicken or pig on the 'ples matmat' (cemetery). Now they want to try the other way too, in case the first one does not work. In our thinking these two things – *Catholic Mass and ancestral rite* (the phrase in italic is mine), do not go together. In the thinking of the Chimbu people they fit in quite well (...) What can we do, if people use both ways of 'praying' (...) ?<sup>17</sup>

In Flores, the only island with strong Catholic presence in Indonesia, the so-called 'double standard of faith' or 'dual citizenship in faith' – to use the terminology coined by Hans Küng – is still widely practiced by Catholics. In regard to this, we have three fresh examples. First, in September 2004, the Catholic Minor Seminary of St. John Berchmans at Todabelu-Mataloko in central Flores celebrated its 75th anniversary. Among the activities conducted during the celebration were two rituals of the indigenous religion of Ngada People, central Flores, called *Kaba Manu* – Sacrifice of Chicken Buffalo, and *Toa Kaba* – Sacrifice of Buffalo. *Kaba Manu* is a ritual sacrifice of chicken offered to the ancestors. While *Toa Kaba* is a ritual sacrifice of a buffalo offered to the Absolute Being – God. Archbishop Mgr. Longinus da Cunha, the bishop of the Archdiocese of Ende, Central Flores, symbolically slaughtered the animal by putting a spear on its neck. The two rituals of the traditional religion were held on September 14, 2004, distinctively and separately from the Catholic Mass done at the peak of the celebration on September 15, 2004.<sup>18</sup>

Second, on Sunday January 22, 2006 a landslide occurred at *Desa Ranaka*, a small village in West Flores Island, burying a number of local people. After two days of searching, the rescue workers failed to find two bodies of the victims. People then performed an ancestral rite in a bush near the place of natural disaster asking the favour and guidance of their ancestors to help them find the bodies of their loved ones. In evening of the same day people also attended a Eucharistic Celebration at the Church of St. Mary the Immaculate led by Fr. Michael Wangku, with the main intention to ask God's blessings so that the rescue workers might be able to find the bodies of the victims.<sup>19</sup> The two rituals – the ancestral rite in the bushes and Holy Mass in the Church – were performed separately by the same people with the same goal, that is, asking the favour of God and of the spirits of their ancestors to help them find the bodies of their loved ones under the giant mud of landslide.

Lastly, on Wednesday February 2, 2006 Simeon Bera Muda SVD and Remigius Ceme, SVD, two professors teaching theology at St. Paul Catholic Seminary of Ledalero, Flores, celebrated a Holy Mass at Nilo, a village located near St. Paul Major Seminary, to start reconstruction of a giant statue of the Virgin Mary of about 18 meters high that had been knocked down by storm a few weeks before. After the Eucharistic Celebration was over, the local faithful performed an ancestral rite to ask the intermediary help of the ancestors

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<sup>17</sup> Herman Janssen, 'Dilemma Over the Departed – Ancestor Veneration: A Problem of Syncretism in Pastoral Work', *Catalyst, Social Pastoral Magazine for Melanesia* 4/4 (1974), 3.

<sup>18</sup> 'Toa Kaba, Korban pada Pesta Intan Seminari Mataloko' (The Sacrifice of Toa Kaba at the 75th Anniversary of Minor Seminary of St. John Berchmans in Mataloko), Flores, *Post Kupang* (September 2004). The English translation is mine.

<sup>19</sup> 'Dua Korban Tanah Longsor di Rongket Belum Ditemukan: Keluarga Minta Petunjuk Leluhur' (Two Victims of Landslide at Rongket Have not Been Found), *Post Kupang* (January 2006). The English translation is mine.

in their effort to rebuild the statue of the Virgin Mary. ‘We need to greet and welcome our ancestors,’ one of them said, ‘because they are our intermediaries with God.’<sup>20</sup>

After exploring these religious phenomena, double standard in faith as claimed by Hans Küng is not unique to people in East Asia, but also is found in Indonesia, Melanesia and various ethnic groups in Africa. Many Christians in Asia and Africa as well as at other parts of the world have embraced Christian faith, yet at the same time they are still linked to their own traditional religions. They venerate the Christian saints and their own ‘saints’ – the ancestors, in two distinct separate ways. While agreeing with Hans Küng’s point that it should not be a problem for people of East Asia to embrace the Christian faith as well as the culture and moral ethics of Buddhism, of Taoism, of Confucianism and of Shintoism, in my view, we do not have to call such religious attitude a ‘dual religion’, ‘dual cultural-ethical citizenship’ or ‘dual citizenship in faith’, or a dichotomy of two belief systems as claimed by Leo Brouwer and Herman Janssen, if we are able to properly understand the ancestral belief systems and put them in the right perspective.

In its effort to inculturate the spirit of Jesus Christ – the Christian faith – the church is called to embrace, integrate and incorporate in her bosom all values of other cultures and traditional religious traditions providing they do not contradict the Christian faith. One such value is ancestral veneration. Christians of various ethnic groups in Asia and Africa should be allowed to include the holy figures from their traditional religions in Christian veneration. Ancestors, sage kings, the founder of clan, the founders of other philosophical and religious societies such as Confucius, Lao-tze, Mencius, to mention only a few, should be incorporated into Christian veneration of saints. Christians in East Asia or Africa should be free to approach those holy figures as the blessed who are now with Christ in heaven. Like Christian Saints, they also, together with Christ, are concerned with the welfare of the living on earth.

#### 4. ELEMENTS OF ANCESTRAL VENERATION NEED TO BE GIVEN SOME LIGHTS

Under this subheading we will give theological lights to some points frequently debated when people are talking about ancestral veneration. Some of these points are as follows: 1) The abodes of the ancestors: Are they with Christ or in the mountain hollows? 2) The sacrifice of food and drink to the ancestors: Is it okay? 3) Man’s soul after corporal death: Does the soul of man reincarnate? 4) Do the ancestors really have power over their living kin?

##### *a) The Abodes of the Ancestors*

Most of the indigenous Christians in Africa and Asia believe that the ancestors live at or around their graves, in the valleys, in the mountains, in the homes of their living kin, in ancestral shrines, in bushes and in big rivers. The ancestors are able to enter into and possess human individuals or brute animals.. They may come from anywhere.<sup>21</sup> With

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Patung Maria Kembali Dibangun’ (The Statue of the Virgin Mary Is Being Rebuilt), *Post Kupang* (February 2006). The English translation is mine.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Dr. Charles Nyamiti, ‘African Ancestral Veneration and Its Relevance to the African Churches’, *CUEA: African Christian Studies* 9/3 (1993), 15.



regard to this notion of beliefs, some Christian theologians suggest that this belief should be corrected. In the light of Christian faith, they say, we should proclaim that the saved ancestors are not living in holes and hollows, in treetops, on mountain slopes or in cemeteries as many country folks still believe to this day. Instead, they are where Christ is – in heaven.<sup>22</sup>

But our question is: where is heaven? Is it in the sky, in the stars? None of us knows for sure. When I gave a course on the role and nature of Christian saints to a catechumen with a Protestant background, he curiously fired this question at me: ‘You just said that the saints are in our lives, in the church. Aren’t they in heaven? How can you say that they also are with us here in the world?’ In responding to the question I said: ‘If we talk about God it is correct to say that He is in heaven; He is in the universe; He is in our church; He is in the mountains and valleys; and He can also be in our hearts. Everything is possible for God because for Him there is no time and space limit. It is also true for the saints because they are spirit beings.’

This notion also applies to the ancestors. As spirit beings ancestors have the capacity to exist anywhere. They are definitely in heaven with Christ yet they also can be in the homes of their living kin in the world; they can be in the grave yards as well as in the mountains, in the forest and in the bushes. J.V. Taylor, therefore, is not wrong when quoting what in general Africans believe in regard to various abodes of the ancestors:

Those who are dead are never gone:  
They are there in the thickening shadow.  
The dead are not under the earth:  
They are there, in the tree that rustles,  
They are in the wood that groans,  
They are in the water that runs  
They are in the water that sleeps,  
They are in the hut,  
They are in the crowd,  
The dead are not dead.

Those who are dead are never gone,  
They are in the breast of the woman,  
They are in the child who is wailing  
And in the firebrand that flames.  
The dead are not under the earth:  
They are in the fire that is dying,  
They are in the grasses that weep,  
They are in the whimpering rocks,  
They are in the forest,  
They are in the house, the dead are not dead.<sup>23</sup>

### *b) Offering Sacrifice of Food*

Another element commonly practiced in ancestral veneration is the offering sacrifice of food given to the dead and the way it is performed varies from one ethnic group to another.

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<sup>22</sup> Brouwer, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Herman Janssen, ‘Dilemma over the Departed, Ancestor Veneration: A Problem of Syncretism in Pastoral Work’, *Catalyst: Social Pastoral Magazine for Melanesia* 4/4, 16.

The kinds of food offered are normally the ones familiar to human meals, such as rice, mushrooms, chicken, goat, water and palm wine. One of the frequent questions launched by those who are not in favour of such practices is whether or not the dead ancestors still need to eat and drink. Perhaps the same question we need to ask regarding similar offerings directed to God such as animal sacrifice in the Old Testament,<sup>24</sup> or money collected during the Holy Mass that is supposed to be united with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Altar. Did the Almighty and Powerful God need to be regularly fed by a goat? Does God really need and accept our money offering in a literal sense or are they only the symbol of the sacrifice of our very self and our love for God?

First of all, it would be very unwise to condemn the practice of offering the sacrifice of food to the dead before we really make an effort to understand it. Based on my own experience, born and growing up in a Catholic family yet still holding traditional religious customs such as the practice of ancestral veneration, I am certain that my parents and my grandparents do not mean that the dead really take their offering sacrifice in a literal sense, but in a symbolic sense. It is a sign of their love, affection, honour and obedience. It is a vivid reminder that the dead are not really dead but are still very much alive and are the invisible part of the living family. The strong concept of human community as consisting of the living and dead<sup>25</sup> leads peoples of Asia, Africa and Melanesia to think their dead are still very much alive in another world and treat them as if they also had a kind of life like the living on earth who have corporal needs of eating, drinking and clothing.

That the offering sacrifice of food is mostly taken symbolically rather than literally is also clear in ancestor veneration of ancient Egypt and its changes over time. In the pre-dynastic period of Egypt, jars and bowls of food and drink were buried with the dead so that they might not be hungry, and flint knives and harpoons so that they might hunt and defend themselves. Soon afterwards, the practice shifted from burying the real articles to burying only the symbolic or representative ones such as models of boats, of cattle, of hippopotami and of servants, with the intention that they would be magically turned into spiritual counterparts needed by the dead. Then in a later period, in the *mastabas* of nobles of the Old Kingdom contemporary with the III and VI dynasty, the food-dishes were reduced to tiny conventional substitutes. Instead of placing costly furniture with the dead, the walls were decorated with pictures of the things that the deceased might need in the future life. Thus, a noble, for instance, was pictured in a skiff with his wife, hunting wild fowl with a boomerang or spearing a hippopotamus with a harpoon. Peasants tilled the fields with yokes of oxen, reaped the grain and threshed it. Women ground the wheat in flour, made bread and baked it, and prepared all the other dishes for the noble's table. All the scenes of a busy agricultural and commercial civilization were represented in the netherworld. In the tombs of the New Empire, these pictures were replaced by religious texts which gave the deceased instructions as to how to survive in the netherworld.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> There are plenty examples concerning animal sacrifices offered to God in the Old Testament such as sacrifice of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16), of Noah (Gen 8:20-21) and of Abraham (Gen 22:1-13), to mention only a few. Hebrew 9:1-28 speaks about the worship of the First Covenant as an archetype of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Did God the creator of the big universe really eat Abel's tiny goat? Or is such an offering simply a symbol of offering of man's heart/love to the Creator God?

<sup>25</sup> The people of Kongo, for example, defines clan (*luvila*) as a community of all members, alive as well as dead, descended from a common ancestor. For more information, see Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1993, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis Bayles Paton, *Spiritism and the Cult of the Dead in Antiquity*, New York: The McMillan Company 1921, 189-190.

The symbolic nature of offering sacrifice of food for the dead also can be noticed in ancestral veneration among the Taiwanese. There is a difference between the offering sacrifice of food given to the ancestors at ancestral hall – a domestic altar – and the offering sacrifice of food given to the ancestors at the gravesite. Typical offerings at a domestic altar are a half chicken, cleaned, cooked, seasoned and chopped into bite-sized pieces; a pork liver, boiled, seasoned and sliced, stir-fried eggs; various soups; and cooked rice. Chopsticks and bowls are always provided. The foods offered at the graves are not soaked or cooked nor seasoned. Most of them are dry and unpalatable.<sup>27</sup>

According to Emily M. Ahern, after further comparing the stark difference of the offering given to the supernatural beings such as *Tho-te-kong* – the lowest ranking god accessible to humans (a chicken, plucked and cleaned but still whole; a scaled, cleaned fish; noodles that have been soaked but uncooked) and *Thi:kong* – the highest ranking god who is inaccessible to humans (raw foods such as a live fish, a whole raw pig, two stalks of sugarcane uprooted whole from the ground with roots and leaves still intact, etc), the dry foods offered at the grave may mark a great distance between the ancestors as the resident of the ancestral hall and ancestors as residents of the grave.<sup>28</sup> The symbolic nature of this practice is also very apparent during the mourning period during which the deceased is treated just like a living person.

In Korea, for instance, a burning cigarette is lit for the newly dead who smoked. Whenever a daily meal is prepared, a portion is placed for the newly dead person, as if the deceased were still participating in family meals.<sup>29</sup> During the first 8 days of the mourning period, the Manggarai people, in Flores-Indonesia, still count and treat the newly dead as a living member of the family. At home he/she is still given a bed and a special place – a chair – to sit. At meal time the newly deceased is called by name to eat. A portion of food in a plate is placed at a special place in the house. The deceased is given his/her favourite food. With these customs, we come to a conclusion that the living family members do not really believe that the dead do eat the food offering in a real sense of the word. Instead, these offering sacrifices of food are performed mainly to show love, respect and longing for the dead, and to nurture a continuous fellowship between the dead and the living kin. Psychologically, such practice is very human and it, therefore, cannot be condemned as a practice of vanity.

### c) *The Powers of Ancestors*

Another aspect of ancestral veneration that is quite phenomenal is the notion that ancestors or the dead in general have some kind of power to influence their living kin. This power can be both a blessing and a curse. Ancestors can guarantee protection as well as impose punishment. The ancestors can take delight in their descendants; but they also can be angry when they are forgotten or when certain social laws are violated, causing fear for the living kin. They are believed to manifest their unpleasantness by sending certain bodily or spiritual calamities – sickness, sudden death, harvest failures – to the living. Thus ancestors are experienced both as *fascinosum* as well as *tremendum*: they are tremendous

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<sup>27</sup> Ahern, 166-167.

<sup>28</sup> Ahern, 168-169.

<sup>29</sup> Roger L. Janelli and Dawnhee Yim Janelli, *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society*, Stanford CA: Stanford University 1982, 82.

and fascinating at the same time.<sup>30</sup> How should we properly view such religious customs and beliefs?

First of all, the view of traditional religious traditions that the ancestors have powers over the living is a direct consequence of the belief in the existence of life after death. The ancestors are still very much alive and still continue to have an influence on the lives of their living kin. Even though they are invisible, they are a constituted part of the clan, of the human community – a belief beyond doubt that is shared by Christianity when speaking of the Communion of Saints. Those who are in heaven are also the constituted part of the Mystical Body of Christ, the church, and – together with Christ – still actively ‘influence’ – help, protect, pray for, guide – their brothers and sisters who are still on a pilgrimage on earth. If we believe that ancestors – the saints of the traditional religions – are in heaven with Christ and still actively help, protect, pray and guide their descendants on earth, together with Leo Brouwer,<sup>31</sup> we should make sure that we put the ancestors in the right place within the Christian faith and not see them as a power independent of Christ. They cannot be used as a last resort for people who do not envisage another way out. It must be affirmed that ancestors have powers to influence the living, yet that power derives from Christ. Ancestors cannot help the living apart from Christ. Neither can they harm their living kin.

#### *d) Death As Rebirth Into Eternal Life Vis-à-vis Reincarnation*

Still another aspect of Asian and African traditional religions that the Church needs to dialogue with before embracing ancestral veneration is the belief of some ethnic groups in reincarnation of the human soul. Let us start with some examples from Africa. After death, according to the Chewa people in Kenya, ancestors reincarnate into their descendants’ offspring. It is generally believed that the Chewa ancestors come back to the living community on earth through the infant naming ceremony. Thus naming a child after a particular ancestor symbolizes the mystical union between the ancestor and the living community.<sup>32</sup> According to the BaManianga people in Kongo, a living person consists of three elements: *nitu* (the physical, visible, mortal body); *kini* (the invisible body, a shade or reflection of *nitu*); and *mwela* (soul which has no form). A Manianga scholar, named Fukiau-kia-Bunseki, states that *mwela* separates itself from *nitu* and *kini* at death and looks for a chance to reincarnate into an about-to-born-baby. The BaManianga people (plural of Manianga), indeed, believe in reincarnation of *mwela*, yet some of them say that this reincarnation is true to the extent of physical resemblance. Thus a son may look, smile, talk or walk like his father or grandfather without having his father’s *mwela*. Since this kind of reincarnation has to do only with physical resemblance, it is traditionally believed that the spirit of a dead person may continue to reincarnate in several generations to come. Thus, the reincarnation of a *mwela* is not seen as an event that occurs just one time but is a continuing trend.<sup>33</sup> In other words, it can be understood as the process of ceaseless duplication of the soul – *mwela*.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Nyamiti, ‘African Ancestral Veneration’, 82; Janelli and Janelli, 154-159.

<sup>31</sup> Brouwer, 53.

<sup>32</sup> Phiri.

<sup>33</sup> Bockie, 129-130.

The Akan people in Ghana also widely believe in the possibility of the reincarnation of the human soul. According to their traditional belief, all people, especially ancestors reincarnate themselves into the world – mostly into their own clan or descendants – in order to complete their purpose of being,<sup>34</sup> called *nkrabea*. *Nkrabea*, they say, is a reason and a purpose for every person to be born. It is a duty and mission given by *Nana Nyame* – God – that must be accomplished in the mundane life of every person. Two of these missions are to live an ethical life and to produce offspring. If the person fails to fulfil this mission, he/she must be reincarnated as many times as necessary in order to achieve what was mandated by *Nana Nyame* in the beginning. So in the end there is universal salvation for all.<sup>35</sup>

Like many people in Africa, various ethnic groups in Asia also share some kind of belief in reincarnation. The Ch'inan people in Taiwan, for instance, believe that at some point after death, the soul of the deceased is judged by the rulers of the underworld. If he is found extraordinarily worthy, he is allowed to go to heaven. If he is found guilty, he is either punished severely or he must reincarnate into the living community in the world. However, the Ch'inan people believe that the living kin can help the guilty soul avoid the punishment in the underworld or prevent the soul from reincarnation by performing certain rites at the eve of the funeral known as *kong-tiek*.<sup>36</sup>

Such a belief – reincarnation of the human soul – is, indeed, foreign to Christianity, and the church needs to have courage in saying that Christianity cannot embrace the values of other religious traditions that are incompatible with Christian faith. In the view of Christian faith, salvation is, indeed, universal since it is meant for every human person, yet this is only possible in and through Jesus Christ – God who became man. Each human person – a Christian – has a call and mission to love God and his neighbours (cf. Mt 22:37-40). This is the key to attaining immortal life with God for eternity. In the process of pursuing this eternal life in God we were given Jesus Christ as the Saviour, the perfect model and the way to salvation: ‘I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die’ (John 11:25-26). Jesus Christ warns that if we fail to freely choose to love God and our neighbours – the poor and the little ones (cf. Mt. 25:31-46, 1 John 3:14-15) and fail to repent from this failure and accept God’s merciful love, we shall be separated from God forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and from all the blessed in heaven is called ‘hell’.<sup>37</sup> Even if we die in God’s grace and friendship, yet still imperfectly purified in the world, we are still assured of eternal salvation. But after death we who fail to be purified perfectly in the world will undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the eternal joy of heaven.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, all humans including the remote ancestors of the Asian and African peoples do not need to return to the world through a means of reincarnation of the soul in order to undo the wrong doings

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony Ephirim Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, Trenton NJ/Asmara (Eritrea): Africa World Press Inc. 1997), 38.

<sup>35</sup> Donkor, 74-75. It is believed that every soul – after the death of the body – is immediately judged by the ancestors in heaven, perhaps on behalf of God – *Nana Nyame*. If the good outweighs evil, then the person is admitted into the ancestorhood/heaven. But if found to have more evil than good, the person is denied ancestorhood. He/she has to reincarnate himself or herself into the living community in the world in order to undo the evil deeds. The couple who died childless may also reincarnate for the sole purpose of having children. For further information, see Donkor, 140.

<sup>36</sup> Ahern, 221.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, art. 1033 (p. 269).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, art. 1031 (p. 269).

done in the mundane life as believed by some Asian and African traditional societies. According to the Christian faith, God the Supreme Love can purify us if we die in a state of impurity.

e) *Christian Ancestral Devotion Vis-à-vis Syncretism*

During the defence of the dissertation of the present author entitled *God's Global Household: A Theology of Mission in the Context of Globalization* (February 17, 2006) at Pontifical Gregorian University, Faculty of Missiology, one of the questions asked by the moderator to the doctorate candidate was this: 'In your thesis you frequently make statements such as "the recent interest on contextual theology has increased awareness of the value of context in doing a theology of mission". Do you think contextual theology is really a new thing? Can you give us some further explanation on that?' The doctorate candidate said in response: 'The answer is yes and no. It is not new because the effort to contextualize the Christian message has been always the character of the Church since it was born 2000 years ago. Each theology is contextual in its own time and situation. Yet, contextual theology is also new today in a sense that it is a rediscovery.'

What concerns us here is the apparently stagnant contextualization of Christian faith in some parts of the world especially in Asia and Africa. To these two continents, Christianity was brought as a package wrapped by Greco-Roman-European cultures. In regard to this, Paul Cardinal Zoungrana from Burkina Faso once remarked:

Inculturation is not something new to evangelization. Christ inculturated His Message to the socio-cultural world which was His own. The apostles and their successors inculturated it in the Greek, Roman, Western World (...) Our problem in Africa is that the last great phase of evangelization began hardly more than a century ago, at the time when Christianity had been inculturated in the western world for more than 19 centuries. It is this Christianity which has been inculturated in Europe which is being presented in Africa as *the* Christianity. At the present time it is desirable to strip it of all its too uniquely western aspects, to make a distinction between the Christian religion and the form in which it is presented.<sup>39</sup>

The frequent question raised by many in Asia and Africa today is: Why did the contextualization of the Gospel – inculturation – stop with the cultural context of the Greco-Roman and European cultural world? With this new awareness in mind, there has been a widespread effort of the local Church in Asia and Africa as well as the universal Church to make relevant the life history of Christ – Christian faith – in the Asian and African religious and cultural context. Pope John Paul II, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, wrote:

The Church lives and fulfils her mission in the actual circumstances of time and place. A critical awareness of the diverse and complex realities of Asia is essential if the People of God on the continent are to respond to God's will for them in the new evangelization. The Synod Fathers insisted that the Church's mission of love and service in Asia is conditioned by two factors: on the

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<sup>39</sup> This is part of the Cardinal Paul Zoungrana's Presidential Opening Address to SECAM 4th Plenary Assembly, Rome, 1975. The text is edited by Chidi Denis Isizoh in *The Attitude of the Catholic Church Toward African Traditional Religion and Culture: 100 Excerpts from the Magisterial and Other Important Church Documents*, Lagos/Rome: Ceedee Publications 1998, 244-245.

one hand, her self-understanding as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ gathered around her Pastors, and on the other hand, the social, political, religious, cultural and economic realities of Asia.<sup>40</sup>

The effort to contextualize the Christian faith into Asian and African contexts as well as to incorporate some of the noble values of Asian and African religious and cultural traditions today, however, is not without fear, and one of the fears is the danger of syncretism.<sup>41</sup> With this in mind, already in 1974, Sttimio A. Ferrazzetta in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau, said that the inculturation is necessary for the growth of the Church in Africa; yet it is a difficult task. It must be carefully done by persons who are well prepared; otherwise one can open the door to syncretism.<sup>42</sup> In *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II also made a note: 'In the process of inculturation (...) in all cases, care must be taken to avoid syncretism.'<sup>43</sup>

Yet interestingly, despite the fear of the possibility of religious syncretism in the process of contextualization – inculturation – of the Christian faith today into Asian and African cultural and religious contexts, syncretism is in fact common among world religions. In the development of Judaism, for instance, it took many religious elements from its neighbouring nations such as Egypt (circumcision), Mesopotamia (myths of world's creation), Iran (angels and paradise) and Greece (Synagogue). The Church itself also has been very syncretistic since it was born 2000 years ago. Christianity is not only a synthesis between Hebrew history (the Old Testament Bible) and Greek Philosophy (platonic love and stoic asceticism), but also syncretism of later Judaism (the resurrection of the body) and Greek and Roman religion (part of the Marian cult derived from veneration of the goddess Athena and goddess Diana). God of the Hebrew *creates* but does not *generate*; the Greek and Roman gods *generate* but do not *create*; the God of Christians *creates* (the world/universe) and *generates* (a Son – Christ).<sup>44</sup> Even though the Church never used the word *syncretism* to portray its encounter and assimilation with the Greek and Roman cultures and religions but *inculturation*,<sup>45</sup> the process of that encounter is syncretistic in its nature.

Because of these undeniable historical facts, scholars in the area of religious studies, for instance Leonardo Boff from Latin America, have distinguished *true syncretism* from *false syncretism*. In their argument, syncretism is *true* or *legitimate* if in the process of

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<sup>40</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, art. 4, New Delhi, November 6, 1999, 4

<sup>41</sup> Syncretism is generally defined as a mixture of religious beliefs of two or more religions or values of different cultures. In sciences of religion, syncretism does not have a positive or negative meaning. It is neutral. In religious context, however, people have a tendency to view it as a negative religious phenomenon since it carries a message that indicates impure, heretic, lost identity, unfaithful, unorthodox or not genuine. Cf. Mario de Franca Miranda, *Inculturazione della Fede: Un Approccio Teologico*, Brescia: Editrice Queriniana 2002, 154-156.

<sup>42</sup> Isizoh, 272.

<sup>43</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, art. 62, Yaounde, September 14, 1995, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Odon Vallet, *Piccolo Lessico delle Idee False sulle Religioni*, Milano: Paoline Editoriale Libri 2002, 170.

<sup>45</sup> 'Inculturation' can be briefly defined as an expression of the process by which the church becomes inserted in a given culture. It has been popularly used only recently since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In missiological discussion it was probably used for the first time by J. Masson SJ, *L'Eglise ouverte sur le monde*, NRT (1962), 1032-1043. He uses the expression: 'un catholicisme inculturè' (p.1038). The Final Statement of the First Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (Taipei, April 22-27, 1979) speaks of 'a Church indigenous and inculturated'. According Yves Congar OP, the world 'inculturation was coined in Japan as a modification of the word "acculturation"'. For further information, see Arij A. Roest Crolius SJ and T. Nkèramihigo SJ, *What Is so New About Inculturation?*, Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana 1991, 2.

incorporating elements of other religious traditions and cultures into the *Christian identity* is safeguarded, in which *the same redemptive reality* – Christian salvation – is expressed anew. On the contrary, if the very basis of the Christian faith is not safeguarded, which happens in the *false syncretism*, we do not have an inculturation of the Christian faith, but have another new different faith,<sup>46</sup> in which both the Christian faith and the elements of other religious traditions lose their identities and manifest into a new different faith.<sup>47</sup> In the process, it also can happen that the two religious traditions – the Christian faith and an element of another religious tradition – may remain as two distinct faiths standing side by side in a peaceful manner without losing their own identities.<sup>48</sup> In line with this, Hendrik Kraemer also says that the kind of syncretism that is inadmissible is that which would imply a systematic attempt to combine, blend and reconcile inharmonious, even often conflicting religious elements in a new, synthesis, which tends to propose a religious relativism with the implication that all religions are equally valid and that it does not matter what one believes.<sup>49</sup> Being aware of this problem, in *Ecclesia in Asia* Pope John Paul II calls Asian theologians to be wise in their theological endeavour, saying:

Theological work must always be guided by respect for the sensibilities of Christians, so that by a gradual growth into inculturated forms of expressing the faith people are neither confused nor scandalized. In every case inculturation must be guided by compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the faith of the universal Church, in full compliance with the Church's Tradition and with a view to strengthening people's faith. The test of true inculturation is whether people become more committed to their Christian faith because they perceive it more clearly with the eyes of their own culture.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> De Franca Miranda, 163 and 174.

<sup>47</sup> The examples of false syncretism would be the various syncretistic religious movements promoted by the New Age Movement in which they among others try to incorporate Christian faith and the oriental cosmic religious traditions. The result is, for instance, Christ of the Christian faith is viewed by the New Age Movement as *cosmic Christ* who appears as the solar *logos*. Backed by theosophical speculations on reincarnation and detached from his ontological union with God the Father, the personification of a cosmic 'world teacher' of Christ can freely roam through the ages and become repeatedly manifested in a chain of spiritual personalities. At a future horizon, the same Christ is expected to return as Aquarius, symbolizing the peak of evolution and the universal *avatar*. As the historical Jesus, according to the occult theories of the New Age Movement, represents the early *logos*, the moment of his awakening to the 'Christ consciousness' constitutes the cosmic marriage, fusion of all energies of macro-micro cosmos. In his resurrection He has finally assumed a pure vibrant body which radiates the cosmic energies of the age to come. Passion and Easter, they believe, initiate a cosmic dance of transformation, appearance of the fullness of energies of a deified human life. It is clear that the Christ taught by the New Age Movement is not the Christ of Christianity nor He is taught or believed as such in oriental cosmic religious traditions. The extern cosmic religions do not acknowledge the existence of the cosmic Christ as promoted by the New Age Movement. For further information, see Michael Fuss, 'New Age and Europe: A Challenge for Theology' in: Michael Fuss (ed.), *Rethinking New Religious Movements*, Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, Research Centre on Cultures and Religions, 1998, 655-657.

<sup>48</sup> The examples would be some Christian Catholics in Asia and Africa who separately venerate Christian saints and then their own traditional saints – ancestors, sage kings, and – particularly for Christians in East Asia – Laotze, Confucius or even Buddha, which can be called as dual religions or dual citizenship in the words of Hans Küng. In this case, it is apparent that a person or a group of people embrace two different faiths and practice them separately, without trying to fuse them into one new religion or incorporate one or the other to the more dominant or stronger religious tradition, which in most case is the Christian faith.

<sup>49</sup> Mariasusai Dhavamony, 'Interreligious Dialogue and Theological Method', in: *Il Metodo Teologico Oggi Fra Tradizione e Innovazione*, 3rd Interantional Forum Path 2004/1, 193.

<sup>50</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, art. 22 (p. 21).



In *Ecclesia in Africa* he makes the same appeal, explicitly mentioning the danger of (false) syncretism:

Inculturation is a difficult and delicate task, since it raises the question of the church's fidelity to the Gospel and the apostolic tradition amid the constant evolution of cultures. The process of inculturation should be conducted in an ongoing manner, respecting the two following criteria: compatibility with the Christian message and communion with the universal church. (...) In all cases, care must be taken to avoid (*false*) syncretism.<sup>51</sup>

Let us now return to our main object of reflection, Christian ancestral veneration. Is our effort to incorporate the Asian and African ancestral veneration into Christian veneration syncretistic? The answer is an emphatic yes. As it has always happened through the life of the church since its birth 2000 years ago, the integration of ancestral veneration into the Christian faith involves a syncretistic process. Yet, it is not *a false syncretism* but *a true, a legitimate or an admissible syncretism*. There are at least two reasons why.

*First*, ancestral veneration is compatible with the Christian faith. The ancestors are believed to be the blessed who have been with God in heaven and who play an intermediary role between God and the living in the mundane world, which is also what the Church believes regarding the role of its saints or all the blessed who are now in heaven with God. With all other saints of the Church, the ancestors continue to communicate with the living and pray for them, at least for their own descendants.

*Second*, in the process of the incorporation of ancestral veneration into Christian veneration, the Christian faith is still safeguarded. Nothing is added or taken away from the Christian faith. On the contrary, they – ancestral veneration and Christian faith – are reciprocally enriched. That is, the ancestral veneration enriches the Christian faith by widening its concept regarding the blessed in heaven. The blessed in heaven should include all good men and women who came before Christ since the foundation of the world – African and Asian ancestors are among others, yet they have been saved by Christ in a special way. In other words, the triumphant Church should be extended also to the ancestors believed to have been with Christ in heaven, and with Christ they also have great concern for their living brothers and sisters – their descendants – who are still in pilgrimage on earth. Yet at the same time there is a need to Christianize this veneration by purifying some of its unhealthy elements. For instance, since the ancestors are believed to be with Christ in heaven, they should not be feared. They are not cruel to the living. In case some of the ancestors had an imperfect earthly life, there is God's loving purification after death. Therefore, there is no need for the sinful ancestors to **reincarnate** or be reincarnated in order to repair their once imperfect worldly life.

## 5. NAME, PLACE AND CHARACTERISTIC OF A CHRISTIAN ANCESTRAL DEVOTION

Ancestral veneration that has been incorporated in Christian veneration, I propose, is called Christian ancestral veneration or Christian Ancestral Devotion since it is practiced by indigenous Christians in the frame of the Christian faith and acknowledged by the Catholic Church as a valid expression of Catholic faith. If we use the schema of Catholic

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<sup>51</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, art. 62 (p. 18). The word 'false' in bracket is mine.

devotions,<sup>52</sup> the schema of Catholic devotion which includes ancestral veneration would be as follows:<sup>53</sup>

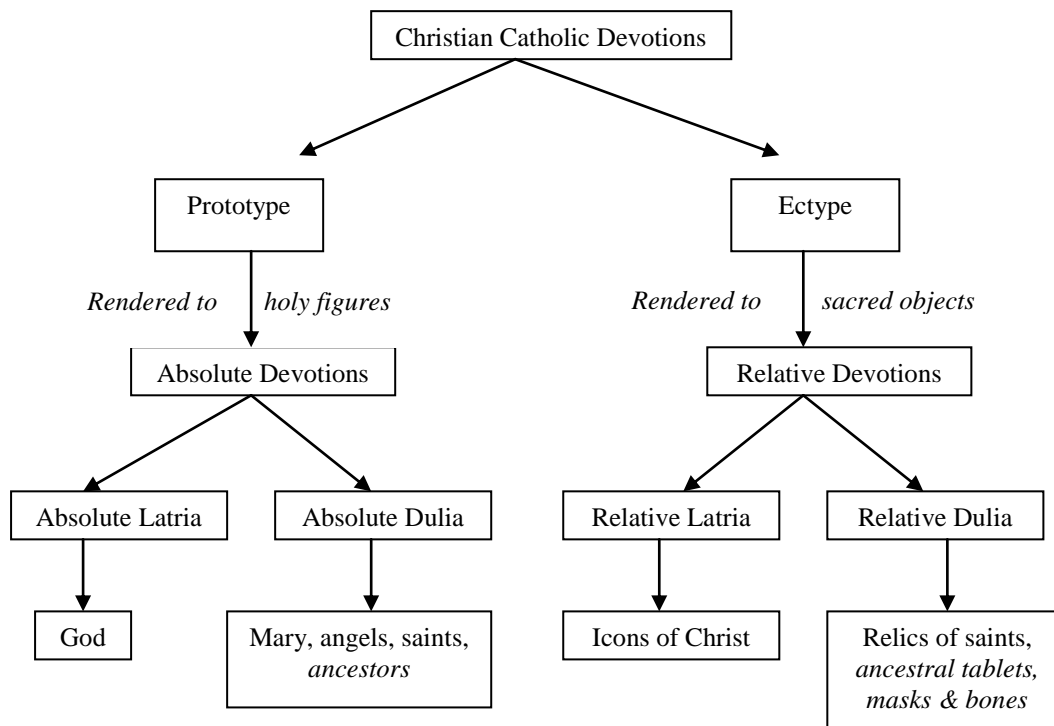


fig. 1

Like its counterpart – Catholic devotion to the angels and saints – Christian Catholic ancestral devotion can be formal or informal.

<sup>52</sup> In Catholic religious sphere, devotion is defined as practices of piety that give concrete expression to the will to serve and worship God by directing it to some particular object such as a divine mystery, person, attribute or even to some created reality that is related to God. For further information, see P.F. Mulhern, s.v. 'Religious Devotion', *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* 4, 832. Then Catholic devotion can be distinguished between three ranks, namely, devotion to God called *latria*, devotion to holy figures such as angels and saints called *dulia* and special devotion to Mary the Mother of Jesus God who became man called *hyperdulia*. In addition to this distinction, Catholic devotion can also be distinguished between: *prototype* and *ectype* of devotion and *material and formal object* of devotion. A *prototype* of devotion is understood as the original and proper possessor of devotional prerogatives or excellences. A prototype in this technical sense is always a person either God or saints who are close to God. Prototype of devotion is never an object or a thing. Devotion rendered to a prototype is absolute (*cultus absolutus*). Absolute devotion is subdivided into *absolute latria* and *absolute dulia*. The *absolute latria* is, of course, always God Himself or the Godman Jesus Christ. Examples of *absolute dulia* are the Virgin Mary and all Christian saints. A devotion is called *ectype* when it is regarding an object and not a person. The prime character of devotion to *ectype* is relative (*cultus relativus*). Relative devotion can be subdivided into *relative latria* and *relative dulia*. A sample of relative *latria* would be a devotion rendered to the image of Christ or the image of the Blessed Trinity. An example of relative *dulia* would be a devotion rendered to a relic or a picture of saints. For further information, see Pohle-Preuss, *Christology: A Dogmatic Treatise On The Incarnation*, St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co. 1922, 278-279.

<sup>53</sup> The place of the ancestors venerated falls under the devotion of *absolute dulia*, where various customs of venerating tablets, masks, bones of the dead fall under *relative dulia*. Therefore, Christians should easily notice what is essential and what is not in the ancestral veneration.

### *a) Formal Christian Ancestral Devotion*

Christian ancestral devotion is formal or public when it is done openly by many Catholic Christians and it is supposed to be officially declared by the Catholic Church – I would say, at least by the local church, and for the entire local church. As formal devotion, Christian ancestral veneration is supposed to be dated in the liturgical calendar of the church;<sup>54</sup> again at least in the local church where ancestral veneration is still found strong. These ancestral veneration should be united in the official liturgical celebration of the church such as in the celebration of Holy Mass and in the Liturgy of Hours. All Saints Day and All Souls day can be extended to Ancestors Devotional Day for certain local churches. Another possibility would be that any local church in Africa and Asia should be given an ample freedom to choose a day dedicated to ancestors and celebrated it formally and publicly by the all Catholic Christians in that local church. Special attention should be given at Lunar New Year – *Imlek* – for the Chinese, harvest time, weddings, naming of children – baptism, at funeral, mourning period, death anniversary, to mention only a few. At these special occasions, the faithful should be given time and space during the Eucharistic Celebration to address their ancestors in a traditional language prayer.

### *b) Informal Christian Ancestral Devotion*

Christian ancestral devotion is informal, when it is done within families and not incorporated in the Eucharistic Celebration. People should be free to practice it without being restricted to the liturgical calendar of the local church, providing it is not done in a way contrary to the official teachings of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Christians also should be allowed to perform ancestral rites as in its original forms,<sup>55</sup> providing they invoke the ancestors exactly like they invoke the Christian saints, keeping in mind that ancestors are only intermediaries between God and the living kin. Informal Christian ancestral devotion has a spontaneous character. Traditionally, ancestral veneration was supposed to be done at a village of origin of the practitioners, at the sacred ground where the ancestral shrines and tombs of the ancestors are located. But because of the change of time and culture – migration, working far away from villages or the cities of origin of the ancestral devotees – a Christian ancestral veneration should be possible to be done in a flexible manner, anywhere and any time<sup>56</sup> based on their needs and life situation.

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<sup>54</sup> How exactly the Eucharistic Celebration that integrates in commemoration of the local ancestors is done should be the task of the liturgists. But I would say, during Holy Mass offered in honour of the ancestors there are a number of occasions in which the ancestors could be addressed: at the beginning done either by celebrant priest or a leader of the faithful, in opening prayer, in the prayers of the faithful, in the offertory prayer, in the preface, in the Eucharistic prayer and during the homily. At my first Holy Mass after ordination, for instance, the procession of main celebrant priest and the co-celebrant priests started at the ancestral hall. There rite was begun by calling, addressing and inviting the ancestral spirits to participate with the living family in the joy of the celebration, praising and thanking God for the gift of priesthood given to me their great-great grandson and invoking for their prayers, protections and guidance.

<sup>55</sup> The ancestors are, for example, venerated by giving them offering sacrifice of food, drink, etc, as a symbol of prayer or a sign of love, respect and honour.

<sup>56</sup> In July 2005, I happened to talk with my oldest sister by phone from Madrid to Flores, Indonesia. She and her husband teach religious education for kids ranging from pre-school to high school. Her oldest son was about to leave home for the first time for university located far away from home. According to the custom they should first go to the village of origin of her husband to invoke the intercessory helps of their ancestors

Some also say that not all Africans – nor all people at my home place nor all Asians – practice ancestral veneration.<sup>57</sup> While others say that there is no uniform system of beliefs in ancestors in black Africa, even in the same ethnic group.<sup>58</sup> Still others worry that some of today's young generations distance themselves from traditional customs or even are unaware of them.<sup>59</sup> Zampi Phiri is concerned about ancestral veneration that is dying because of the influence of modern capitalism, people moved out from ancestral lands to distant lands, setting up family there and never participating in the clan – family ancestral festivals and ceremonies.<sup>60</sup>

These phenomena are not uniquely found among African ethnic groups but among various Asian and Melanesian ethnic groups as well, including among my ethnic group of Flores, Indonesia. This should not be a surprise for a number of reasons.

*First*, a variety of religious expressions is common in every religion. The Hindus in Bali, Indonesia, practice religious customs that might not be familiar to the Hindus in India. The religious attitudes of Catholics in Portugal and Spain to some saints – say to St. Antonio and St. James the Apostle – are different from religious attitudes of Catholics in the Philippines or in Mexico; and we should not make any attempt to force uniformity on such variety because that effort would amount to making religious expression poor or crippled.

*Second*, not all Africans and Asians practice ancestral veneration. This phenomenon also should not be a surprise. In monotheistic religious traditions which allow some sort of intermediary role of spiritual beings (angels, saints, ancestors) between God and human beings, veneration to the angels, saints and ancestors is at a secondary level. It has a relative character. In a sense, it is not always necessary to invoke the intermediary role of these spirit beings. The living community is free to approach God directly without involving celestial mediators. Even in the Catholic Church, Catholics are not obliged to venerate all the saints officially recognized by the church through a means of beatification or canonization but only the principle ones; while the veneration of many other saints are consigned to the local churches, nations,<sup>61</sup> or religious families.<sup>62</sup> The veneration to the ancestors should be likewise. Veneration of them is relative. Besides approaching God through the mediation of the ancestors, people can still approach God directly as it happens in some Asian and African ethnic groups in which ancestral veneration might not be found.

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at the ancestral shrine and tombs. But because of the great distance between their village of origin and the town where they live and work as well as public transportation difficulty, they could not make it. So my sister asked me if they could just invite the spirits of ancestors to their home and perform the ancestral rites there. I said a strong yes in response. It should not be a problem because ancestors are spirit beings. Like God, angels and saints, they are not confined by time and space. They can be greeted and invoked any time and anywhere far away from ancestral shrine and their tombs. In case one no longer knows how to perform the traditional ancestral rite, it should be possible to pray in a Christian way and part of the prayer can be inserted with the invocations of the help and guidance of the ancestors. My sister and her husband did in accordance with my council. My point here is that ancestral veneration should be flexible and open to any change.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Fergus J. King, 'Angels and Ancestors: A Basis for Christology?', *Mission Studies* 11/1 (1994), 11.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Charles Nyamiti, 'Ancestral Veneration in Africa', website of *African World*, <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/nyamiti.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Stinton, 112.

<sup>60</sup> Phiri, 4.

<sup>61</sup> For instance, devotion to St. Anthony is strong in Lisbon (Portugal) and in Padua (Italy), or to Santiago – St. James the Apostle – in Spain, but there might be no devotion to these saints in other local Catholic churches in other part of the world and they will never be encouraged to do so by the church.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium – Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy*, art. 111, in: Flannery, 152.

*Third*, regarding the distancing of a young generation from traditional customs including ancestral veneration, and some others are even unaware of them. Culture and religions, Mariasusai Dhavamony says, are closely related, though they are distinct. Religion, in fact, finds its experience and expression by means of cultural signs, symbols and language.<sup>63</sup> In other words, culture is the vehicle carrying the religious message. According to the recent findings in the area of anthropology, however, culture is subject to change.<sup>64</sup> This means that African and Asian cultures will not be always as they were or they are today. A man's culture is a living reality and consequently it is in a continuous process of change and it is beyond our capability to stop that change. We only hope that in the process of cultural change, the values of man's religion remain as a vital force for the life of man. If the phenomenon of cultural change is applied to the Asian and African ancestral veneration, we should not be surprised to see that some young generations distance themselves from traditional religions and customs because cultures as their vehicles have changed drastically. In order to anticipate this reality, the form of ancestral veneration should be flexible and substituted by some sorts of modern cultures that fit the spirits of the young generation. The new generations in Africa and Asia should be free to practice their religious belief regarding their ancestors in a modern style and modern way. It should, for example, be possible for young generations to venerate their ancestors through a means of flowers or other suitable items instead of offering food and drink or libation. Both flowers and food offerings, more or less, carry the same meaning – symbols of love, prayer and respect for the living dead.

### *c) Formal and Informal Devotion in Comparison*

Like in Christian devotions to the angels and saints, we will also find some differences between formal and informal Christian ancestral devotions. Christian ancestral devotions are normally rigid and static when they are integrated into the church's liturgy such as the Holy Eucharistic Celebration. They are less warm. They have less emotional appeal. There is little variety in their forms and expressions because they have to follow the rules of the church's liturgy. My first Holy Mass after ordination was done in an inculturated liturgy. It was a big joyous feast for my home parish. Before the offertory prayer, an elder came forward and stood in front of the altar and on behalf of the assembly he announced to the ancestors that the most blessed sacrificed of Holy Mass was about to begin and invited them to participate:

O all of you the spirits of our ancestors, listen to our voice!  
 You know we are all gathered here today singing and dancing,  
 because your son, your grandson and great grandson, Fr. Alex Jebadu,  
 has been ordained as the Lord's priest.  
 He has been endowed the celestial gift of priesthood.  
 All of you the spirits of our ancestors,

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<sup>63</sup> Dhavamony, 178.

<sup>64</sup> For instance, according to Anthropologist Herskovits, psychologically culture is the learned portion of human behaviour and sociologically it is the man-made part of the environment. See Arij A. Roest Crolius SJ, *Theologia dell' Inculturazione*, Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana 1993, 19, for further information. According to the anthropologists Carol R. and Melvin Ember, culture always changes because culture consists of learned patterns of human behaviour, and human belief and cultural traits can be unlearned and learned anew as human needs change. For further information, see Ember Carol R. Melvin, *Cultural Anthropology*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall 1999, 321.

therefore, come and join us in giving thanks to the Almighty.  
O you the spirits of our ancestors, we implore you.  
Guide your son and grandson Fr. Alex Jebadu, in his priestly ministry.  
Accompany him wherever he goes and guide him, do not let him be shaky in his life path.  
O you spirits of our ancestors, we are all Christians today.  
We invite all of you:  
come and join us in the celebration of the most perfect thanksgiving Sacrifice of Jesus upon the altar.<sup>65</sup>

When listening to this traditional prayer, people had mixed feelings. Some felt uplifted because of the invitation of the spirits of ancestors into the Christian Catholic celebration – Holy Mass. But some lamented that the prayer did not have a strong appeal to the ancestors like the ones performed outside the Holy Mass. That is, an elder on behalf of the living community address the ancestors, holding sacrifice of food and drink in his hands. In addition, in the original forms of ancestral veneration, an elder or the head of the family presided the ancestral rites usually acts as a sort of priest. He is the leader of the sacred family and has a responsibility as a medium between the living family and the ancestors. He is the one who speaks to the ancestors on behalf of the living family. This notion is not quite apparent when the Christian ancestral veneration is integrated into the Eucharist Celebration.

Even if the leader of the family is given time and space to render supplications to the ancestors in a traditional sacred language, it still does not fit in well. The prayer is not spontaneous since it has to be prepared and carefully follow the rules of the church's liturgy. One of the frequent complains regarding liturgical inculturation is that the rites of the traditional religion are simplified after being integrated into the church's liturgy. They are trimmed so much until they lose their richness in expression. In other words, they become rigid and not warm. The language used in communicating with the ancestors and the way it is done do not touch enough the emotional aspect of the human person.<sup>66</sup> Because of this difficulty, Christian Catholics should be allowed to perform ancestral veneration informally as it is, without integrating it into the liturgy of the church, yet it still has a Christian character.

## 6. EXTERIOR FORMS OF CHRISTIAN ANCESTRAL DEVOTION

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<sup>65</sup> This prayer was delivered at my home parish in Flores, Indonesia September 25, 1995 by an elder of my clan during my first Holy Mass after the ordination into the priesthood.

<sup>66</sup> Take for instance the *Kong-tiek* ritual of the Ch'nan in Taiwan, a ceremony held to help the newly dead who is being punished in the underworld because of his sins in the mundane life. In its original form the ritual is performed by a Taoist Priest in an open place attended by all people in the village. The Ch'nan in Taiwan believe that the journey to the underworld is long and difficult. The soul of the newly dead has to pass a bridge surrounded by dangerous monsters ready to catch the soul of the dead person passing through. The Ch'inans also believe that in underworld there is *Tho-te-kong* – earth god – who is willing to accompany the soul of the newly dead on his journey to the underworld and protect him from the dangerous monsters. Yet *Tho-te-kong* needs to be paid by the prayers and money offerings from the living family on earth. All this imaginary of the underworld is dramatized in a *Kong-tiek* ritual and it is believed it can protect the new dead from danger on his way to the underworld and help him settled there. For further information, see Ahern, 221-226. The idea of *Kong-tiek* ritual fits well with the Catholic Church's belief of purification after death. Now the question is how the church incorporates the *Kong-tiek* ritual into the Catholic Church's liturgy. If the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, decides to take it over and replace the whole dramatic *Kong-tiek* ritual by simply saying prayer or by offering a Holy Mass for the newly dead, it would be a terribly simplification to the *Kong-tiek* ritual of the Ch'nan people of Taiwan which is very rich in imagination and popular in the hearts of the Ch'nan people.

As with the Christian Catholic devotions to the saints, there are at least three major external expressions of Christian ancestral veneration: *prayers* asking for the intercessory helps of the ancestors; *keeping their pictures*, tablets (particularly for the Chinese) or ancestral masks and bones of the ancestors and pilgrimages.

a) *Prayer with and through the Holy Living Dead*

In Christian ancestral veneration, prayer is probably its most dominant visible expression in which the Christian faithful in Africa and Asia invoke the intercessory help of the ancestors who are believed to be with Christ in heaven. Christians in Africa and Asia or Christians anywhere – especially those who still dearly venerate their ancestors – ask the blessed ancestors to pray for them who are still on pilgrimage on earth. When the ancestral veneration is integrated in a Eucharistic Celebration, ancestors also should be included among other saints and their names, when possible, are explicitly mentioned. With the insertion of the ancestors, one part of the Eucharistic Prayer I (Roman Canon), for instance, would run as follows:

In union with the whole Church we honour Mary, the ever virgin mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God. We honour Joseph, her husband, the apostles and martyrs, Peter and Paul, Andrew (...) and all the saints, *and our ancestors through whom you have founded our family and clan, you have given us life, lands and water, and all we need to sustain life in our village (...)* May their merits and prayers gain us your constant help of protection.<sup>67</sup>

Another possibility would be to invite the ancestors to pray to God *with* the living community during the Holy Mass. With the insertion of the ancestors, one part of the Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer IV would run as follows:

Countless hosts of angels stand before You (God) to do your will. They look upon your splendour and praise you night and day. United with them, *and with our ancestors who have gone before us, through whom you have given us abundant harvests, cattle, goats, chicken, fish,* and in the name of every creature under heaven we too praise your glory as we say: Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.<sup>68</sup>

The Catholic Church believes that, that the saints – after being received into their heavenly home and being present to the Lord Jesus, through Him and in Him and with Him – do not cease to intercede with God the Father for the living.<sup>69</sup> This should include also the ancestors who are believed to be with God in heaven. That is, like the Christian saints ancestors who now reigns with Christ also offers up their prayers to God for men. What the living need to do is to invoke the ancestors and to have recourse to their prayers, aid and help for obtaining benefits from God through Christ His Son and our Lord who alone is the Redeemer and Saviour.

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. 'Eucharistic Prayer I', *Vatican II Weekday Missal*. The part in italic is an insert addressed to God asking for the local ancestors to pray for their descendants who are participating in the Holy Mass.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. 'The Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer IV', *Vatican II Weekday Missal*, 916. The part in italic is an insert addressed to God which tells God that the faithful on earth intends to praise and glorify God not only with the angels and Christian saints but also with their ancestors who are believed to be with Christ in heaven.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, art. 49, in: Flannery, 75.

### *b) Pictures, Tablets, Relics, and Masks*

Devotions to the saints in the Catholic Church are frequently expressed through veneration of their sacred images such as icons, statues and relics. Their icons and statues decorate the Catholic and Orthodox churches. These images help Christians, Catholics and Orthodox alike, to connect themselves with the living saints who reign with Christ in heaven. In line with this Catholic and Orthodox religious practices, veneration of pictures, tablets (for the Chinese) and masks of the ancestors should, as it has been the practices of Asian and African traditional religions, become valid expressions of the Christian ancestral veneration as long as they serve as symbols that represent the living ancestors who are now with Christ in heaven. Their masks, as Leo Brouwer suggested,<sup>70</sup> can decorate churches to remind people that the saved ancestors are with Christ and, like other Christian saints, they can still help their living kin only in and with Christ.

I am convinced that for some people in Asia and Africa they psychologically and emotionally feel much closer to their ancestors and feel more comfortable to pray to God through the intermediary role of their own ancestors than to Christian martyrs no matter how well they know the story of their heroic faith. For many ethnic groups living in traditional villages in Asia and Africa their own ancestors also have shown heroic lives simply by bequeathing them life and all they need in life. They are their own saints and their relics – masks, bones and tables – are dear to them.

### *c) Pilgrimage to the Holy Sites*

The third dominant exterior expression of Christian ancestral veneration is pilgrimage to sacred places such as tombs of the ancestors. Pilgrimage in fact is a common phenomenon practiced in all religions both ancient and modern. Christian Catholics usually show their love and honour to the martyrs and great saints by making a long trip to visit the tombs where their remains are buried or where they spent of most of life times serving God and the Church. For Christian Catholics in Asia and Africa, it should be alright to show their love and honour to the ancestors by making pilgrimages to the sacred places where the remains of their ancestors are buried.

## 7. CORE MOTIVATIONS OF A CHRISTIAN ANCESTRAL DEVOTION

If ancestral veneration can be accepted to be incorporated into Christianity – and thus it is simply called *Catholic Christian ancestral devotions*, it should have at least three fundamental motivations why the ancestors are remembered and honoured in special devotions, exactly like the motivations of the devotions to the Christian saints and martyrs. They are: love of them, imitation of their exemplary life and invocation of their intercessory help for the living.

### *a) Love*

The first core of any Christian ancestral veneration is love. The living kin honour and respect ancestors out of love, and not out of fear as some Asians and Africans hold. The

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<sup>70</sup> Brouwer, 53.



Church should help the *Catholic Christians* to know that once the ancestors are with Christ in heaven they are loving and do not have any desire to harm their descendants. The *Catholic Christians* in Asia and Africa love their ancestors because the ancestors have loved them first and in various ways when they were in the world; and even after death the ancestors still continue to love and guide their living kin from heaven. We must admit that some ethnic groups in Africa and Asia still hold a belief that ancestors some times come to impose calamities for their descendants. In such a case, the Church is called to proclaim the opposite. The ancestors who are now with Christ in heaven are not that evil. They are not cruel to the living community but loving and we should respond to their love also with the same love.

#### *b) Imitation*

The second fundamental reason of devotion to the ancestors for the Christians is to imitate their exemplary lives. Remembering and loving the ancestors who are in heaven with Christ should spur the living kin to imitate their exemplary life so that they too one day may attain ancestorhood and be with Christ for eternity. It would be weird to imagine when the living kin love so much their ancestors who have gained eternal life with God in heaven, while at the same time they make no effort to take their footstep – their heroism, their wisdom, their moral life examples, to mention only a few.

#### *c) Mediation*

The third fundamental motivation of Christian ancestral veneration is the belief that ancestors, like angels and saints, play an intermediary role between God and the living kin. Since the ancestors are now in heaven with many other saints with Christ as their head, they can transmit God's gifts and blessings to the living, and the living in their part can invoke their intermediary help.

### 8. CONCLUSION

Since the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church has had a much more positive attitude toward some good values in other cultures and religious traditions. In regard to religious traditions in the form of ancestral veneration, however, the church should go beyond the attitude of simply showing respect and toleration. The church is called to incorporate ancestral veneration into Christian faith and make it as an integral part of the Catholic devotion. If this effort is properly done, the following will be achieved:

Firstly, the weird syncretism – double religion or dual citizenship in faith – unconsciously held and practiced by Christians in Asia and Africa will come to an end. Ancestral veneration will be practiced as an integral part of Christian religious piety. Secondly, The church will be enriched by the ancestral veneration of the traditional religions and vice versa. The church's understanding of the triumphant Church in heaven, for instance, will be extended to including the saints of the traditional religions – the ancestors. The ancestral veneration also will be enriched by the Church in the sense that Christian faith will purify some elements of the traditional religions. Since we believe that ancestors are with Christ in heaven, for instance, they are not cruel to the living; and therefore, there is no reason to fear them. Lastly, we believe that the incorporation of the ancestral veneration into Christian faith will help the

growth of the Church in Asia and Africa. It will help the Church in Asia and Africa to have a universal as well as local Asian and African face.

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Dear Freek:

Thank you for resending me the article after being reedited.  
The corrections made really make the article even sound better. In general I accept all the corrections except the following:

1. I have no idea of what 'the Judeo-Christian Faith' is apart from a cultural reference, normally American, to speak of commonalities between Judaism and Christianity. Since Judaism is not mentioned at all in this article but Christianity and in particular Catholicism are (and modern Judaism would not agree with the 'Communion of Saints' nor ancestor veneration of the 'living dead (preferring to keep an agnosticism about life after death) and many other traditions of Christianity would not accept the major premises of this paper) I strongly suggest that a more accurate title would be '... incorporation into Catholic Christianity'. And the references to Judeo-Christian faith be replaced.

**Alex:**

The expression "Judeo-Christian faith" has been used by many theologians. If I well understood the term, it simply means the Church – Christians whose faith is based on the religious tradition of the Jewish people (Old Testaments). The term does not refer to two religious traditions: Judaism and Christianity, instead only to one religious tradition, namely, Christianity which has its foundation in Judaism. In this article I use the term in that sense.

Confer with the use of the following expressions: 1) *Greco-Roman Church* does not refer to two Churches, Greek Church and Roman Church, but to a Church that is based on Greek Culture and Roman Culture. 2) *African-American culture* does not mean that there are two distinct cultures, African Culture and American culture, but a culture that is influenced by or has its roots in African ethnicity in America. 3) *An African-American man* does not refer to two individuals, an African and an American but to a man who is an American but ethnically African. 3) When I say *I am a Judeo-Christian*, it does not mean that I am a member of Jewish religion and of Christian religion, instead to me as an individual Christian whose faith is based on Judaism.

Despite this explanation, I think, if Freek thinks that the readers of the journal find it difficult to digest the terminology, it can be substituted by other similar terms.

2. Corrected version: the corporal corporeal death: see article p. 1:

Alex: both terms are correct.

3. Corrected version: if there **were** no faith in the existence of **the human person** **which** **who** continues.... See article p. 1

Alex: the human soul which.... NOT the Human person who..... They are two expressions which carry two different meanings. The later is not what the article intends to say.

4. **practiced** **practised**, see article p. 6

Alex: Both are correct. The verb *to practice* is commonly used in American English.

5). ancestors are not living in holes and hollows, in treetops, on mountain slopes or in cemeteries as **common folks** **traditionally** believed.

Alex: many country folks in Asia and Africa still believe it till today. That is the reason I put the sentence in the present tense.

Thank you.

Cordially,

Alex Jebadu, SVD