

# **EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY**

**VOLUME 8**

---

**Volume 8 • Number 2 • October 1984**

---

**Evangelical  
Review of  
Theology**

In review, we find that ancestor worship, especially in relation to its animistic-polytheistic world, is too massive and powerful an entrenchment to be taken by any blind 'general assault'. In our discussion of the social and religious implications of ancestor worship, we find that ancestor worship as an animistic folk religion more or less functions as the centre of life and the common factor which integrates the variegated aspects of peasant life into a coherent whole.

Gates has given us the important insight that little significant encounter has taken place between the Lordship of Christ and the 'powers' of the air, with respect to past dealings in this area. But while he develops his thoughts a great deal in relation to the encounter, he does not tell us how to deal with the situation of contextualization in the event that great numbers of rural folks respond to his kerygmatic approach.

The theological-analytical approach to ancestor worship developed in this article serves only as a guideline for further thought and action, as do the proposals for an adequate functional substitute to fill the spiritual and cultural void that is experienced by those who make their commitment to Christ.

### **ADDITIONAL ARTICLES ON ANCESTOR WORSHIP**

Hung, Daniel M. (1983) 'Mission Blockade: Ancestor Worship', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 19:1:32-40.

Hwang, Bernard (1977) 'Ancestor Cult Today', *Missiology* 5:3:339-365.

Tung, Feng-yuen (1977) 'An Assessment of the Catholic "Ancestor Worship" Movement in Taiwan' *Ching Feng* 50:16-26.

---

**Lim Guek Eng and her husband are undertaking graduate studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, USA. p. 236**

## **Ancestor Worship in the Korean Church**

**Myung Hyuk Kim**

*Printed with permission*

*This article was presented as a paper at the Consultation on A Christian Response to Ancestor Practices, December 26-31, 1983, Taipei, Taiwan. The author outlines the history of Korean Churches' response to ancestor worship and he discusses the future possibilities in the light of the growing secularization of Korean society.*

(Editors)

### **CONFUCIAN CULTURE**

As H. Richard Niebuhr has well pointed out, the relationship between Christ and culture has been 'an enduring problem' throughout the history of Christian expansion.<sup>1</sup> When Christianity was introduced in the land of Korea about 200 years ago, the initial problem was the conflict between the Christian, God-centred way of life and the Confucian, man-centred way of socio-politico-ethical life.

The Korean culture at the last quarter of the 18th century, when the Roman Catholic Christianity was first introduced, was thoroughly saturated in Confucianism centred around the life principle of patriotic loyalty and filial piety. Confucianism was a national 'religion' or policy of the Yi dynasty and it was a basic ethical principle as well as a pragmatic socio-political policy. Filial piety was regarded as a most basic and integral ethical principle of Confucianism to follow the Mandate of Heaven and to reach the union of the Heaven and man, the ideal state of man. It was also intended to bring unity and harmony within the large family system and socio-political settlement in a nation.

Filial piety was practised through propriety and rite both to the living and the deceased ancestors.<sup>2</sup> Propriety occupied such an important position in the Confucian culture that Confucianism was often called a culture of propriety system. Beside the basic ethical motive to express and return filial gratitude to ancestors and to follow the Mandate of the Heaven, there was also a religious element attached to the ancestor honouring rite. Even though Confucius did not teach immortality of soul or after-death, the Confucian tradition taught that when a man dies his soul goes up to heaven and his form goes down to earth and [p. 237](#) that they are united at the ancestor worship ceremony.<sup>3</sup> Yi Yulgok, a saintly Confucian scholar (1536–1583) once stressed the necessity of ancestor worship on the basis of such a religious belief.

When a man dies, his soul might be said either existing or non-existing. It is because that a soul exists with sincere devotion and a soul dissolves without devotion ... When a man's soul is separate after death and has not yet dissolved, it could be moved and elevated and united through my sincere devotion ... Even after a man's soul has dissolved, his reason does not dissolve, and his reason could be moved and elevated ... This is why descendants remember their ancestors and perform ceremonies in a utmost devoted manner.<sup>4</sup>

The ancestor worship ceremony was gradually accompanied even with another religious idea of reward and blessing. It was believed that the faithful practice of filial piety and faithful performance of ancestor worship ceremony would please the Heaven and receive heavenly blessings. Then it was again commonly believed that the deceased souls themselves, not the Heaven, could be able to bless their descendants. The deceased souls took a position of a deity and became the object of worship.<sup>5</sup>

## CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

---

<sup>1</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951), pp.1ff.

<sup>2</sup> Confucius once said that 'Honour through propriety when living, bury through funeral rites when dead, and perform ceremony through rites'.

<sup>3</sup> See Choi Ki Bock, *A Study on the Confucian Ceremony of Mourning* (Sung Kyun Kwan Univ., 1979), pp.128f.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Choi Ki Bock, *ibid.*, pp.129f.

<sup>5</sup> See Park Bong Bae, 'Christianity and Ancestor Worship' (Korean) in Harold Hong et al. ed., *Church and Mission in Korea* (C.L.S.K., 1963), pp.201ff.

Catholic Christianity in Korea was not propagated by foreign missionaries. It was introduced by Korean scholars through their contact with Christian literature obtained in Peking. Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit apostle to China, took up his residence in Peking in 1601 and propagated Jesuit Christianity by means of introducing western science and publishing Christian literature. He published his *True Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven* in 1601 and in his work Matteo Ricci did not take a negative attitude toward Confucianism and its culture. Rather he took it a preparation to Christianity. His mission policy was that of accommodation and through learning.<sup>6</sup>

It was then customary for the king of Korea to send an annual envoy to Peking to present compliments and gifts to the emperor of China. Some of these members came into contact with Matteo Ricci and his p. 238 successors. In 1631 Chong To Won, a member of the annual embassy, took back with him many books including Ricci's *True Doctrine*. The books thus imported to the Korean capital, however, received very little attention.<sup>7</sup>

It was almost at the end of the 18th century when Catholic Christianity began to be rooted in the land of Korea. In 1777 a few celebrated scholars, such as Chong Yak Chon and Kwon Chyol Sin, became interested in the new doctrines, began to expound them, and commenced practising the precepts of the Christian books. And in the winter of 1783 one of the members, a young man by the name of Yi Sung Hun, went to Peking with the annual embassy. While he was in the imperial capital he was converted and baptized. He was given the name of Peter, for it was hoped that he would be the first stone of the Korean Church. Peter Yi returned to Korea in the spring of 1784, and baptized his friend Yi Tok Cho.<sup>8</sup> The year of 1784 is generally regarded as the beginning year of Roman Catholic Church in Korea.<sup>9</sup>

The Catholic teaching which was transmitted to Korea in 1784 was not the same as Ricci's. Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit mission took an accommodation policy and regarded ancestor worship merely as civil ceremony. Both the Franciscan and the Dominican mission, however, regarded the Confucian ancestor worship as religious and superstitious. The two missions sent their petition to Rome. Pope Benedictus XIV made it clear in 1742 that the Confucian ceremony of ancestor worship was not permissible in the Catholic Church. The Chinese Church followed the new instruction and met great difficulties and even persecution in 1784.<sup>10</sup>

The infant Korean Church met difficulties from the very beginning, for she took a critical attitude towards Confucianism and especially its ancestor worship ceremony. Thomas Kim Pum Wu was the first victim who was persecuted on the charge of burning his ancestral tablets. In 1790 the infant Korean Church sent one of their members to Peking and requested Bishop Alexandre de Govea to send a priest to Korea and also consulted about the critical matter of ancestor worship. The messenger returned with the assurance and promise of the bishop that an ordained man would be forthcoming. The messenger was also instructed to make it known that the worship of ancestors was inconsistent with the doctrine of the Church. In accordance to Govea's p. 239 prohibition

---

<sup>6</sup> See Choi Suck Woo, 'Modern Korean Society and Roman Catholic Christianity' (Korean) in *Soong Chun Journal* 5 (1974), p.422.

<sup>7</sup> L. George Paik, *The History of Protestant Missions in Korea 1832-1910* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1929 (1970)), pp.31f.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>9</sup> See Choi Suck Woo, *ibid.*, p.426.

<sup>10</sup> See Choi Suck Woo, *ibid.*, p.428.

of ancestral worship zealous Christian converts tore down their ancestral tablets and set them on fire. The consequence was the inauguration of systematic persecution.<sup>11</sup>

## CONFLICT AND PERSECUTION

There was a man of noble class by the name of Yun Chi Chyong in a town (Jin San) of a southern Province (Chulado). He was converted in 1786 when he was 28. In the summer of 1791 his mother died and during the funeral period he refused to make ancestral tablets or to offer sacrifices to ancestors. This act brought a great commotion among his relatives and severe criticisms by them. Petitions were sent to the king. Yun Chi Chyong was finally brought to trial in a provincial court in October. He was tortured and reported to have said as the following: 'Since I accepted the Heavenly Lord to be my great parent it would not be right and honouring not to follow the order of the Heavenly Lord. Since the religion of the Heavenly Lord prohibits making a wooden tablet I buried it under the ground. I would rather do wrong to my deceased mother than to the Heavenly Lord'.<sup>12</sup> An investigator of Yun's pointed out Yun's pertinacity to follow Catholic teaching at the cost of disobeying the order of the king or the parent as the following: 'In every word he honours the teaching of the Heavenly Lord. It might be right for him to disobey the order of the king or the parent. It would be however never right to disobey the teaching of the Heavenly Lord under the severest punishment. He would take it an honour to be beheaded'.<sup>13</sup> On receiving a report of Yun's trial and many critical petitions, the king was finally persuaded to give a sentence of execution. In December 1791 Yun Chi Chyong and Kwun Syang Yen, his nephew, who also refused to offer sacrifices were beheaded. The event of persecution is called as the Shin Hae persecution, for it happened in the Shin Hae year of 1791.

Even a Chinese priest James Chu Moon Mo who was sent from Peking to Korea in 1794 was beheaded in 1801 on a charge of both religious heresy of denying filial piety and abolishing sacrifice to ancestors and political conspiracy against the nation. Under such a tense situation a certain Korean Catholic by the name of Whang Sa Young wrote a letter to the bishop of Peking in which he proposed an appeal to the Christian nations in Europe to send sixty or seventy thousand soldiers to conquer Korea. This document was discovered by a government p. 240 agent. It resulted in strict enforcement of the anti-Christian edicts and an intensification of the persecution.<sup>14</sup> Now Catholic Christianity was regarded as a perverse religion against filial piety and patriotic loyalty. It was even suspected as revolutionary against the nation. The Korean Catholic Church met persecutions at the hands of the government in the years 1801, 1815, 1819, 1827, 1839, and finally in 1866.

## A NEW APPROACH

The burning issue of ancestor worship in China was dealt with by Rome from a new perspective. On December 18th of 1939 the newly elected pope Plus XII issued an encyclical on the Chinese custom of ancestor worship in which he declared that in a

---

<sup>11</sup> See L. George Paik, *ibid.*, pp.32f.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Choi Suck Woo, *ibid.*, p.429.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>14</sup> See L. George Paik, *ibid.*, pp.34f.

modern age in which the spirit of traditional customs has greatly changed the Confucian ancestor worship should be regarded merely as a civil rite to express filial affection to ancestors.<sup>15</sup> In 1940 the Korean Catholic Church took a rather tolerant attitude towards traditional ancestral worship and allowed such behaviour as bowing in front of a corpse, a tomb, or a picture of the deceased, burning incense in front of a corpse or at the ancestral worship, and preparing and offering foods in memory of the deceased.<sup>16</sup>

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) reaffirmed the tolerant attitude towards other religious traditions. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (section 37) reads as the following: ‘Even in the liturgy, the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not involve the faith or the good of the whole community. Rather she respects and fosters the spiritual adornments and gifts of the various races and peoples. Anything in their way of life that is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error she studies with sympathy and, if possible, preserves intact. Sometimes in fact she admits such things into the liturgy itself, as long as they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit’.<sup>17</sup> The traditional Roman Catholic teaching on purgatory in a way justified the Confucian ancestral worship, since p. 241 the Catholic Church has taught to pray for the dead.<sup>18</sup> Now the Korean Catholic Church allows bowing, burning incense in front of a corpse or a picture, and offering prayers for the dead during the funeral service and on the 3rd, 7th, and 30th day from death. The Catholic Church even set a day of November 2 as a day of memorial and visiting ancestral graves.<sup>19</sup>

## PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY

Just like the Catholic Christianity, Protestant Christianity in Korea was not started by foreign missionaries. It was introduced and planted by Korean merchants through their contact with Protestant missionaries residing in Manchuria. In 1878 the So brothers, Sang Yun and San U (also known as Kyong Jo), went to Manchuria to peddle merchandise and came to contact with John Ross and John MacIntyre, Scottish Presbyterian missionary. They were converted and the elder brother San Yun was baptized by John Ross in 1879. So Sang Yun went to Mukden with Ross to assist in the Bible translation and printing, while the younger brother returned home. Sang Yun came back to Korea as a colporteur and smuggled the translated portion of the New Testament to his home village in Uiju and settled in Sorae in Hwanghae Province in 1883 a hundred years ago. Thus So Sang Yun became instrumental in the conversion of his neighbours and scattered the seed of the Gospel in the northwest of Korea. There was already a handful of Protestant Christians when the American missionaries entered the country in 1884 and in 1885.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> See Choo Jae Young, *Confucian Concept of the Heavenly Lord and Ancestor Worship* (Korean) (Seoul: Kyung Hyang, 1958), p.3.

<sup>16</sup> See Kang Youn Hee, ‘The Problem of Ancestor Worship in Christianity in Modern Korean Society’ (Korean), *Sa Mock* 37 (1975, 1), pp.100f.

<sup>17</sup> Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p.151.

<sup>18</sup> See Sebastian Bullough, *Roman Catholicism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, (1963), p.141: ‘The notion of purgatory and the notion of prayer for the dead go hand in hand: the ‘communion of saints’ unites the living with the dead in prayer’.

<sup>19</sup> See Choo Jae Young, *ibid.*, p.202.

<sup>20</sup> See L. George Paik, *The History of Protestant Missions in Korea*, pp.51–54.

Now the infant Korean Protestant Church faced the same puzzling problem about the ancestor worship as the Catholic Church faced a hundred years before. There was a first Korean convert who was secretly baptized and whose conversion was not made known even to his family. Yet his neglect of his religious duties soon placed him under public suspicion. It was a critical time, for the first Protestant missionaries in Korea had to decide the very important question of their policy toward the custom of ancestral worship. Should it be conformity and compromise, or rejection? The missionaries at once adopted the latter course. Ancestor worship was now clearly declared to be contrary to the Christian teaching.<sup>21</sup> One of the very interesting p. 242 methods used in settling the question and reaching the definite conclusion was that of the questionnaire in a democratic procedure. A missionary sent out papers to the Christians and asked them to write down their views of the practice. The unanimous opinion was that ancestor worship was contrary to the New Testament teachings and that offering sacrifice was foolish. One of them said: 'For me, of course, I must remember my parents, but offering sacrifice to them is, I know, foolishness'.<sup>22</sup>

There were rules made in the Korean Church for the catechumens to take and profess to obey at baptism. The first of the seven rules used during the period of 1891–97 read as the following: 'Since the most High God hates the glorifying and worshipping of spirits, follow not the custom of the honouring of ancestral spirits, but worship and obey God alone'.<sup>23</sup>

## SHRINE WORSHIP

During the last decade of the Japanese 36 year occupation of Korea (1910–45), the Korean Protestant Church faced a more difficult problem of shrine worship. Japanese government began to impose shrine worship upon every school and church in Korea from around 1932. While the Japanese people understood shrine worship as a religious ceremony of worshipping ancestral gods and the emperor god, Japanese government officials in Korea tried to persuade the Korean people to take it as a civil and national ceremony and forced them to participate in the shrine worship ceremony.<sup>24</sup> Missionaries as well as Korean Church leaders expressed opposition against the Japanese imposition of shrine worship and met great difficulties. On December 30, 1935 a Japanese official in charge of education summoned a number of school principals (missionaries) and admonished them in the following words: 'Shrine is a place where the spirits of our national father and veteran statesmen are dedicated and a public institute toward which we express our respect and reverence ... From an educational viewpoint it is necessary to worship such consecrated spirits, for it is an essence of national morality ... Therefore shrine worship is nothing more than a practical discipline of respect and reverence to ancestors'.<sup>25</sup> P. 243

Instead of complying with the Japanese enforcement of shrine worship, school principals (especially of the Presbyterian missions) decided to leave schools or close them. By February of 1938, 18 schools under both the northern and southern

---

<sup>21</sup> See L. George Paik, *ibid.*, pp.157f.

<sup>22</sup> See L. George Paik, *ibid.*, pp.220f.

<sup>23</sup> See L. George Paik, *ibid.*, pp.225f.

<sup>24</sup> See Kim Yang Sun, *History of the Korean Church: Study of the Maesan Christian Culture* (Korean) (Seoul: Christian Literature Co., 1971), pp.172–176.

<sup>25</sup> See Kim Yang Sun, *ibid.*, p.180.

Presbyterian mission were closed. Japanese government became more adamant enforcing the shrine worship upon the Korean Church. In September of 1938 Japanese police officials threatened the Presbyterian General Assembly that they must adopt the shrine worship as a patriotic national ceremony. Under a war-like police threat Hong Taek Ki, the chairman of the assembly, was trembling to illegally announce the adoption. The adopted motion was recorded as the following: 'We understand shrine worship is not a religion and is not contradictory to the Christian doctrine. Realizing that it is a patriotic national ceremony, we have decided to take the lead in participating in shrine worship'.<sup>26</sup> In spite of such an imposed resolution, the Korean Church (especially Presbyterian) stood resolutely opposed to the Japanese enforcement of shrine worship and went through many sufferings.

## RECENT TRENDS

The Korean Presbyterian Church in general went through many sufferings and faced much persecutions because of her strong opposition both to the Confucian ancestor worship and Japanese shrine worship. Many were imprisoned and even met martyrdom.

Some of the new converts even today face the persistent problem of ancestor worship, for the Confucian tradition dies hard even in a modernized age. Local pastors have to take counsels with some of the new converts on this annoying problem of ancestor worship.

The Rev. Yonggi Cho, pastor of the famed mammoth Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul, gave rather tolerant advice to a certain new convert with a strong Confucian background and troubled with the problem of ancestor worship in 1977. In a public sermon delivered on November 30, 1979, the Rev. Cho amplified his remarks on the same subject giving an illustration of his counsel given to the new convert as following:

Ancestor worship is nothing but honouring one's parents. I do not understand why people say it is an idol worship ... Parents are parents whether they are alive or dead. Isn't it our custom to visit our living parents and prepare food for them?... It is quite natural that we think of our deceased parents on such day as of their birth or death. It is quite all right to prepare p.244 food thinking of our deceased parents as if they were present, erect a cross instead of an ancestral tablet, and bow down ...

We honour our parents with bowing down. It is not a sin to bow down to deceased parents. It is not an idol ... Our deceased parents have gone either to heaven or hell. Even though they have gone to hell, they are our parents. Having an affectionate remembrance of them is keeping God's commandment ... The Apostle Paul was a great man. To the Jews he became like a Jew to win Jews. To those under the law he became as one under the law that he might win those under the law. To those outside the law he became as one outside the law that he might win those outside the law ...

To perform an ancestral worship is really a good thing. In the past we performed sacrificial rites to God.

This sermon gave rise to a hot discussion and met with nationwide criticism. The *Christian Weekly Press* (Nov. 7, 1981) printed critical remarks often Christian leaders as the following: 'We express our filial courtesy to our living parents. Deceased ones are not persons. Preparing food and bowing is contradictory to the Commandment' (Prof. Chung Sung Koo). 'What Christianity takes important is person. We believe in God as a person. Deceased parents are not persons ... Bowing to impersonal beings is nonsense' (Rev. Chung Chin Kyung). 'In [1 Corinthians 10:20](#) Paul said, 'What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. Sacrificial rules

---

<sup>26</sup> See Kim Yang Sun, *ibid.*, p.189.

are prescribed in the Scriptures. Ancestor worship is an idol worship' (Prof. Lee Jong Yun). 'There have been two kinds of mission policy in Asia, accommodation and transformation. Whereas ancestor worship was tolerated in such countries as India, China and Japan, it was not tolerated in Korea. The first mission policy in Korea was transforming old customs. It rejected wine, tobacco, opium, divination, and ancestor worship. Though ancestor worship is a traditional cultural rite it includes idolatrous elements and cannot be tolerated' (Prof. Kim Myung Hyuk). 'Preparing food and bowing to the deceased parents even without making an ancestral tablet is an obvious idolatry. Jesus himself abolished the Jewish sacrificial system and instituted worship with prayers ... Numerous men of faith have suffered because of this problem of ancestor worship. It would be a disgrace to them if we said that bowing without tablet is not an idolatry' (Prof. Chun Kyung Youn of Hankook Theological Seminary). 'If there is a pastor who says that it is all right to prepare a sacrificial table and bow, he must be lacking in theological foundation' (Rev. Choi Hae II). 'Preparing food and bowing is contradictory to theology and Bible' (Rev. Choi Hoon). p. 245

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Tradition dies hard. There is even a revival and resurgence of tradition in the third world. Affirmative voices toward tradition and cultural heritage are widely heard both in the theological and political worlds. The Vancouver assembly tried to affirm the Canadian Indian religious traditional spirituality as consonant to Biblical spirituality. Prof. Pyun Sun Whan, a noted Korean liberal theologian and a champion of dialogue with other religions, has recently expressed his affirmative view about ancestor worship in *The Dong-A Ilbo* (December 24, 1983), a widely circulated daily newspaper, as the following: 'Ancestor worship is a social product of a large family system. To express filial piety and perform sacrifices is following the Heaven designated ethics. Ancestor worship is an expression of filial affection, not an idolatry'. Mr. Jin Hee Lee, minister of Cultural Affairs and Information and spokesman of the Korean government, has also exhorted Christian leaders to take a rather affirmative attitude toward Korean culture and proposed a task of 'Koreanization of Christianity' in a public speech to a gathering of Christian leaders on December 16, 1983.

It is time that we evangelicals should be alerted to fully understand the relation between the Christian Gospel and secular culture and to provide clear-cut solutions in concrete situations. We may be doing well if we realize the criticizing, transforming and recreating power and function of the Gospel in various cultures as it has been seen throughout the history of Christianity.

---

Dr. Myung Hyuk Kim is professor of Historical Theology in the Hapdong Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Seoul, Korea. p. 246

## Church Unity Amidst Cultural Diversity A Protestant Problem