

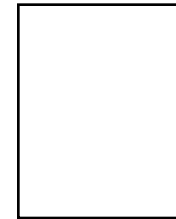
Doing Theology in a Chinese Context

Nancy Porras

The Chinese world is increasingly raising up its own theologians—both those trained in the Western world as well as those trained in Asia. For both groups, one of the most vexing issues in Chinese theology continues to be ancestor worship. In the following article Nancy Porras attempts to analyze some current Chinese thinking on the subject while also offering her own helpful insights.

Successful interaction concerning spiritual things with Chinese must presuppose a thorough understanding of what the Chinese consider to be the most relevant issues of life. These issues will vary depending upon the situation of the individual; for example, growing up in a totalitarian state such as the People's Republic of China presents a set of problems and questions that may largely differ from those posed while growing up in the increasingly Westernized and more democratic Taiwan. However, because of a common heritage and some common socio/political challenges among Taiwan-born and Mainland-born Chinese, a few of these significant issues overlap, such as the implications of capitalism, or the truthfulness and efficacy of traditional Chinese religions.

How should the Christian respond to such issues? Perhaps the most obvious answer to this question is that the Christian should respond in a way that is consistent with Biblical teaching. As sound as this answer may be, the fact is that a strong understanding of the Biblical position on many issues has yet to be developed, especially in regard to the Asian world. Volumes have been written in the West on subjects such as the redemptive work of Christ and how to prove the existence of God. While these may be of interest to a Chinese person, they may not be as relevant as subjects such as a complete analysis of events surrounding death or an attempt at explaining human suffering. Fortunately, both Caucasian and Chinese Christians have recognized the need for developing theologies that deal with issues that are especially pressing for a Chinese person.



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The result has been a number of emerging theologies, such as Lynn de Silva's approach to contextualizing Christianity for Buddhists, or Raymond Fung's ideas on the "sinned againstness" of sinners.

In light of these emergent theologies, the Christian student of Chinese thought is then left with a two-fold task. First, s/he must have some sort of criteria by which to evaluate these new theologies, testing them against Biblical teaching and the response of the church as well as for cultural appropriateness. Second, s/he must work at examining those areas that have not yet been given sufficient thought and create appropriate theologies as necessary. This essay is an attempt at dealing with the first part of the task by developing a set of criteria with which to examine new theologies, and discussing ancestor worship as a case study which tests these criteria.

Doing Theology

Many Christians have never considered the words "doing theology" because for them, any theology that needs to be done was completed long ago. Said another way, a prevailing assumption is that all the answers have already been found by theologians of the past and the job of Christians today is to know these answers and forevermore apply them to the appropriate questions. Note here the concomitant, underlying assumption that the questions are as constant as the answers. In reality, however, the world, God's work in the world, and His interaction with people are not static. Thus, yesterday's questions may not be today's questions, and, furthermore, yesterday's answers may prove totally inadequate for today.

For theology to be meaningful, it must not only show us how Christians in the past dealt with critical issues but provide guidelines for dealing with present-day problems as well.¹ And since the present generation and not a past generation lives in the world today, the present generation must be working out approaches that deal with twentieth-century issues. To reiterate:

Theologizing is the task of each new generation standing in its particular moment of history. It searches the Scriptures in order to discern the will of God and strives to receive guidance on its way toward the obedient life that must be pursued within the concrete issues of the world's concrete cultures (Conn 1984:233).

Put succinctly, the present generation must be able and active

in doing theology.

Evaluating Theologies

As mentioned earlier, a number of Christians have had the insight necessary to develop Christian approaches to contemporary issues that plague the Chinese mind and are thus actually doing theology. However, these new ideas should not be uncritically accepted simply because their originators have made a much needed and appreciated attempt at doing theology. If Christians hope to avoid problems such as heresy and syncretism, they must be capable of examining these theologies and determining whether or not they are sound.

One way of evaluating a theology is to test it against a set of pre-established criteria. Theologians writing on the subject of emerging theologies have suggested various criteria. For example, Wilson W. Chow asserts that theologies require “the illumination and the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” “obedience to the Word of God,” and an attention to “the life situation in which we find ourselves” (in Ro & Eshenaur 1984:83,84). Others add that theology must also be prophetic (Tano in Ro & Eshenaur 1984:95), confessional, and communal in nature (Conn 1994: 241, 246).

My goal is not to invent a totally new or unique set of criteria just for the sake of originality, but rather to synthesize the valuable criteria that have already been offered by other theologians. Also, in keeping with the limited scope of this essay, an extensive treatment of each criterion will not be provided. However, the reader is encouraged to consult the bibliography to provide direction for more detail. To enhance clarity, divisions will be made between various aspects of these criteria (e.g., Scriptural and cultural), but the reader should remember that these are only to aid in comprehension of the material and do not necessarily represent clean divisions that occur in reality.

The first few criteria examine a theology in terms of the Bible and the body of believers for whom the focus of the theology is most relevant. Emerging theologies must start with the Bible. This is not to say that they end with the Bible, nor that they ignore the context. But their direction must be from Text to context (life situation), rather than from context to Text. Chow explains:

If we begin with the context, we may be able to set a theological agenda, but very often the Scripture is used, if not manipulated, to support theologians' viewpoints or

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conclusions which are primarily shaped by sociological, psychological, political and cultural factors (in Ro & Eshenaur 1984:85).

Next, theologies must square with the whole of Scripture, and not merely with isolated verses which serve as “proof texts.” Included here is rigorous, honest exegesis which approaches the text with a willingness to see and accept what it actually says.

Finally, a theology must not be created in isolation, but within a community of believers who are led by the Holy Spirit. Crucial issues confront the whole church as well as individuals and should be responded to by the whole church. This will include the church universal to the extent that an issue has global implications.

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The next few criteria deal with socio/cultural questions. First, a good theology will begin with a proper perspective on the culture in question. Paul Hiebert uses the term “critical contextualization” to refer to such a perspective. Within this framework, all elements of a particular culture are not blindly embraced, nor are they all ethnocentrically rejected. Rather, important elements are studied to determine those which must be rejected because “the forms and symbols are too closely tied to the specific beliefs of the old religion,” those which are completely acceptable as is, and those which “can be used with new meanings given to them” (Su 1985:3).

This decision-making process is an instance where the involvement of the Christians to whom a theology is particularly addressed is especially important. As lifelong members of their own culture, they will know, better than anyone else, the apparent as well as the underlying meanings that are associated with a symbol or ritual. They will also have the most insight in deciding whether or not certain elements should be incorporated into their Christian experience.

Another necessary requirement is relevancy. The issues that are being addressed as well as the theologies presented must both deal with areas that are truly significant to those directly involved. Furthermore, one must include all of the related elements of a particular issue. For example, a theology of death that does not address the question of reincarnation will not be terribly helpful for a Buddhist.

Along these lines, a new conceptual approach or modified behaviors presented within a theology must be carefully contextualized. Christians must guard against the error of “contextualizing a secondhand expression of the Christian faith”

(Chow in Ro & Eshenaur 1984:81). In other words, good theologies will not simply be old approaches dressed in new clothes. Rather, a good theology will emerge when Christians who are currently dealing with the critical issues express a Biblical response that is meaningful to their culture in both form and content.

Lastly, the word “meaningful” as used above includes the element of comprehensibility, specifically, comprehensibility to the “average Wang” on the street. A new theology is of no use if its language is too specialized, even if this specialization is a form of “Christian-ese.”

In sum, the Bible and the church as well as socio/cultural factors must be considered when evaluating and creating a new theology. The next section of this essay will discuss the contemporary Christian response to ancestor worship among the Chinese and evaluate these responses based on the criteria delineated above.

The Chinese and Their Ancestors

Kenneth S. Latourette has said that ancestor worship²

forms a bulwark of that outstanding social and economic unit, the family; it makes for the conservation of much of the past; it is the means of moral and social control, and it acts as a check on individualism. As a factor in moulding Chinese thought and life, it can hardly be exaggerated (1962:540).

Because this is the kind of issue that must be addressed with a strong Christian theology, it is appropriate to include with the considerations covered in this essay. For those who suspect that ancestor worship is a thing of the past, Lucy Tan states as late as 1985 that even “in the many homes where materialism has destroyed the worship of Chinese gods, ancestral worship prevails” (in Ro 1985:79). Before discussing how Christians have responded to this challenge, it may be helpful to provide a brief overview of the motivations behind the practice of ancestor worship and of the practices themselves.

Inherent in a Chinese worldview is the idea that man, although in one sense dependent upon the spiritual realm, also has the power to influence and even manipulate this spiritual realm. The occasion of the death of a relative presents an obligation on the part of the living relatives to positively exert their influence on the spiritual world for the benefit of the deceased.

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Traditional Chinese religion teaches that when a person dies, his/her soul does not go to any immediate resting place, but rather embarks upon a journey to the “other-world” (Tan 1978:3,4). Living relatives can ensure the success of this journey and happiness during their stay by providing offerings of necessities which mirror life’s necessities here on earth. Negligence of these duties will provoke the wrath of the dead ancestor who will create trouble for the living relatives. Thus, a significant motivation for ancestor worship is fear.

Some Chinese will argue that they perform ancestral rituals out of love and respect for their ancestors and not out of fear or significant belief in the spiritual realm. Indeed, a large part of the original meaning of ancestor worship was to “edify filial piety, and to show gratitude to ancestors” (Yuan-Kwei in Ro 1985:130). While this may be the attitude of some Chinese, most who participate in the ancestor cult are practicing more than just filial piety.

A number of specific rituals are included in ancestor worship. The most common of these are extensive funeral rites and memorial services, maintenance of an ancestral table and tablet, and seasonal festivals (Su 1985:7ff). Within each rite are traditional activities and behaviors expected of the participant. Because of the extreme importance of ancestor worship within the fabric of Chinese society, refusal to participate often results in ostracism from the family and society.

**The Chinese and Their Ancestors—
A Christian Response**

What is a Chinese Christian to do, then, in the event of the death of a relative or during seasonal ancestral practices? This has been the question of a number of theologians. The following discussion represents a general response among Chinese evangelicals. Usually the problem is dealt with at two levels. One level seeks to present the Biblical view of God, man, and the nature of the spiritual realm in contrast to the Chinese view of the same. Usually three main points are provided.

First, what does the Bible have to say about filial piety? One of the most well-known verses which addresses this issue states, “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Ex. 20:12). Another is Ephesians 6:2, which says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” There are also a few other verses which address filial piety from a negative position, such as Exodus 21:15 (“Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death.”) and Proverbs 30:11,12

(“There are those who curse their father and do not bless their mothers; those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth.”).

Are these verses too obscure to really provide any Biblical direction? Taken by themselves, that may be the case. However, the Bible demonstrates a prevalent theme of God’s acceptance of the Israelites’ consistent filial piety. He chooses to call Himself the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” a name which was a constant reminder to the Israelites of their ancestors and of what God had done for them. In addition, Jesus’ disciples continue to remind the Israelites of their ancestry when preaching the Gospel of Christ (for example, Acts 7).

Thus, the Christian can venerate his/her ancestors without going against Biblical teaching. Unfortunately, many Chinese believe that “Christians care nothing for their ancestors, and that one has to abandon one’s regard for one’s ancestors before he can join the church and be baptized” (Liao in Ro 1985:211). Chinese Christians need to make it plain again and again that their faith has not negated their love and respect for their ancestors.

A second main point provided by theologies on the subject of ancestor worship deals with the worldview that underlies its beliefs and practices. This point tries to present an alternate worldview where God, rather than the spirits, is in control of life here on earth, life after death, and the present spiritual realm. Because God loves people and is concerned for their welfare, the reality of His control is quite comforting when compared to the belief that numerous and often vengeful spirits reign over man. Furthermore, within this view merit or favor in the spiritual realm is not based on works but on God’s grace.

A third point of theologies addressing ancestor worship concerns the Chinese understanding of death. Although Lucy Tan, in her article “Ancestor Worship Judged by Scripture,” and Philip A. Schwab, in his article “Biblical Understanding of Ancestor Practices,” both provide Biblical answers concerning the state of a person upon death, neither goes into much detail (which may have been for the sake of brevity). Larry Caldwell argues that a complete theology of the dead must include the matters of “soulsleep,” purgatory, instantaneous resurrection, and the dead’s relationship to the living (1983:6ff). This author would add the subject of reincarnation for Chinese with Buddhist backgrounds.

Admittedly, the Bible often does not have much to say on

these subjects. In any case, the Christian ought to be familiar with passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, which speak of the "state of the soul" until and after the resurrection, and Matthew 25:31-46, which describes the judgment (Schwab 1985:111). Furthermore, the Christian should know the implications of the various views of death for both the living and the dead. Even a small amount of Biblical teaching may prove more satisfying to the non-believer than a large amount of the often fatalistic views of other non-Christian religions.

Mentioned earlier was the existence of two levels within theologies addressing the problem of ancestor worship. While the first level wrestles with questions of belief, the second offers functional substitutes. In other words, if Christians decide that certain behaviors are not acceptable, substitute behaviors must be provided that will be acceptable for the Christian to perform when s/he is faced with ancestral activities. Note that the solution to the difficulties does not lie in eradicating or ignoring anything and everything that has to do with ancestors, but in the proper Christian response to such areas.

Many functional substitutes for the various aspects of the ancestral cult have been suggested. Andrew Su presents a convincing treatment of such substitutes in his paper "The Christian Approach Toward Taiwanese Ancestor Worship" (1985). His ideas are incorporated here along with others' suggestions not mentioned in his paper.

Death of an ancestor is one of the most difficult tests for a Chinese Christian. During the mourning period behaviors are largely prescribed, and deviation from the norm is not often tolerated. Christians, however, must deviate from the norm in order to avoid compromising their beliefs as well as creating confusion among non-believers.

Most Christians agree that abstaining from anything resembling idolatry and refusing to show tacit agreement with a non-Biblical worldview is a must. Thus, burning paper facsimiles for the deceased, burning joss sticks to the gods, or following the ritual instructions of a Buddhist or Taoist priest is inappropriate. Ambiguous behaviors like bowing, which the Christian might interpret as simply showing respect, should be done with caution since non-believers may not make a distinction between showing respect and worship.

Another recommendation is to include as many Christian elements as possible into the funeral. This might mean reading Scripture that deals with life after death or the lovingkindness of God rather than recitation of Buddhist, Taoist, or Con-

fucian writings. Another possibility is to display the cross as an identification with Christ rather than the spirits. Some also suggest singing Christian songs during the funeral as well as the funeral procession.

A second significant time for ancestor worship is during memorial services. These “usually take place twice a year, on the anniversaries of the recently deceased’s birth and death” (Su 1985:16). Rather than a time of more non-Christian practices such as setting out food offerings or enlisting the help of spirits, these services can be times of enjoying family fellowship. Su describes the particularly good idea of having family reunions on these days. During these times the family is encouraged to remember their ancestors and learn from their lives. Stephen Liaw points out that prayers and songs can also serve as a witness to non-Christian relatives (1985).

All of the above suggestions can be used during celebrations of seasonal festivals, with similar consideration taken for questionable behaviors or rituals. One last important aspect of Chinese ancestor worship is the ancestral (or deity) table, usually placed in the living room, and the ancestral tablet, which sits on the table or hangs on a wall, also in the living room. On this table is the name, date of birth, and date of death of the deceased. The presence of this tablet “signif[ies] that the ancestor’s spirit will stay in this tablet and receive the worship of the descendants forever” (Liaw in Ro 1985:187).

Because Christians do not believe that an ancestor’s spirit resides in the table nor that worship of his/her spirit is appropriate, the ancestor tablet has been denounced. Usually recommended as a replacement of the tablet is some sort of remembrance of past ancestors, such as a book tracing the family tree and the ancestor’s biography. Tablets hung on the wall can be replaced with Scripture verses or photographs of the deceased.

Especially essential to all functional substitutes is the understanding by the Christian that not participating in certain activities does not signify any sort of loss. If a new Christian is unwilling to forego certain elements of ancestor worship, it may very well be that s/he simply has not reached a maturity level that recognizes that being a child of God provides a great deal more security than any kind of spirit appeasement. George MacKay, pioneer missionary in northern Taiwan, said it this way:

If Christians decide that certain behaviors are not acceptable, substitute behaviors must be provided that will be acceptable for the Christian to perform when s/he is faced with ancestral activities.

When people know they are secure under the guidance

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and protection of an all-loving omnipotent heavenly Father, propitiation of and prayer to the ancestral spirits lose importance (Ro 1985:213).

Thus, the point is not to tear the tablet away from the reluctant believer, but to bring him/her to a place where the tablet is no longer considered necessary.

Evaluating the Christian Response

The important question to ask at this point is: “Is this theology of ancestor worship, (i.e., the Biblical viewpoint and functional substitutes provided) really a good theology?” One way of answering this question is to test it against the criteria developed earlier. This task will constitute the final section of this article.

The first set of criteria has to do with Biblical soundness. More specifically, does this theology grow out of the Text (as opposed to the context) and does it square with the whole of Scripture? Examination of the writings of the various theologians who have offered a Christian approach indicates that, for the most part, this theology is Biblically sound. However, there is one point at which they are definitely on shaky ground.

Part of squaring with Scripture, a requirement discussed earlier, is faithfulness to the whole of Scripture and avoidance of the use of isolated verses as “proof texts.” This is precisely the practice of a number of writers when trying to provide a Biblical view of life after death. For example, at least three that I read offered Ecclesiastes 9:5,6,10 as evidence that activity such as communication with the dead doesn’t really occur. The point of this passage has nothing whatsoever to do with communication with the dead, and it should not be taken out of context so that it appears to be relevant. Some also try to make a case for the same point using Luke 16:19-31, the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Here again, the point of the story has nothing to do with communication with the dead.

The fact of the matter is that the Bible tells us little or nothing about this subject, as well as very little about heaven. Difficulty arises, then, when one desires to present Chinese with specific truths about their ancestors and life after death and there is not much to say. An honest approach would admit this lack, rather than pretend that Christians really know more than what the Bible actually says (or doesn’t say) about life after death.

Another aspect of the first set of criteria concerns involve-

ment of the church. This theology represents both Caucasian and Chinese Christians who seem to be working at the grass-roots level, rather than from ivory towers while wrestling with this issue. In addition, this theology seems to do a good job of attempting to incorporate the church into the pragmatic aspects of dealing with ancestor worship. For example, some have suggested that, for the Taiwanese, having the church perform the funeral arrangements of the deceased might be better than the usual funeral homes, which often cheat the grieving families and include non-Christian rituals during their preparation (Liaw in Ro 1985:191).

The second set of criteria has to do with socio/cultural elements, such as the matters of a proper perspective on culture, relevancy, contextualization, and comprehensibility. For the most part, this theology is very strong in these areas. To begin with, it seeks to separately examine all of the important elements and decide what should be done with each, i.e., reject, keep, or modify and keep, rather than blindly accepting or rejecting everything.

As for relevancy, there is hardly a more pressing issue among the Chinese than ancestor worship when it comes to considering Christianity. Further, this theology does a good job of considering the whole picture, even down to small details such as what to wear and appropriate mourning phrases during the funeral procession. One possible improvement would be more discussion directed towards individuals who are the only Christians in their family. Many of the suggestions provided can only be implemented if the entire family wants to make a change, and are not helpful for a single son or daughter who may have little control over the ancestral practices.

Note as well that suggestions do not have a foreign flavor to them but seem to be appropriate for Chinese culture. Finally, since the information this author read was not written in Chinese, a judgement could not be made as to whether the language of this theology is suitable for the "average" person. If, however, these writers are as straightforward in Chinese as they are in English, there should be no significant problems in understanding the ideas set forth.

Conclusion

This essay has briefly demonstrated the need for Christians across the globe to be doing theology now. It also presented a set of criteria in order to aid in the evaluation and creation of

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pertinent theologies. Lastly, it examined ancestor worship on the basis of these criteria in order to provide an example of such evaluation. Overall, the theology of ancestor worship as presented by the evangelical community and discussed here proved strong when measured against these criteria.

Hopefully, other Christians will use these criteria to develop and evaluate new theologies relevant to the Chinese world. Consideration of subjects such as capitalism, secularism, oppression, and revolution as found among Chinese might be a good starting point.

Notes

1. For an excellent and more detailed discussion of the dynamic versus static nature of theology, see Harvie Conn's book, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.

2. The term ancestor worship is traditionally used to identify the ancestor cult in Asia. However, the reader should understand that ancestor appeasement is often a more accurate description. Relatives usually do not worship their ancestors' spirits as gods, but rather hope to appease the spirits in order to avoid their wrath and gain their favor.

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