

# Editorial Reflections

## *Ancestor Veneration: The Debate Continues*

**T**he *IJFM* usually offers a further selection of recent “others’ words” either online or in print on subjects of missiological interest. In this issue we have collected some perspectives on the subject of ancestor veneration—as a short primer for those unfamiliar with the varying perspectives on these rites.

Lim (p. 109) references certain historic consultations which have debated ancestor veneration, and prominent among these was the 1983 “Conference on the Christian Response to Ancestor Practices” convened by Bong Rin Ro. This was an effort to generate “functional substitutes” for Christians who wished to maintain public honor for their ancestors. The Asia Theological Association assisted Ro in publishing a monograph under the title *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985). Included in that volume is Donald McGavran’s “Honoring Ancestors in Japan” (pp. 303–318).

Chuck Lowe, who served with OMF and as a professor at Singapore Bible College, did a thorough study of Christian participation in ancestral practices under the title, *Honoring God and Family: A Christian Response to Idol Food in Chinese Popular Religion* (Billy Graham Center: Wheaton, 2001). In this volume Lowe provides a study of II Corinthians 8–10 and the subject of eating meat offered to idols, but he does so by comparing the Greco-Roman folk religious world of Paul’s Corinth with the Asian folk religious (shenist) world with their ancestor rites. Lowe builds a case for the remarkable parallels of the rituals in these two societies, and his conclusion is that one should abstain from food or meals offered around the ceremonies (a more prohibitive approach). Nevertheless, his is an exhaustive study and one that respects the broad range of Christian perspectives on these rites, and for that reason we wholeheartedly recommend this publication. Although Lowe includes references to anthropological perspectives, readers might suspect that Lowe sees almost a one-to-one correspondence between modern Asia and classical Asia Minor, and his applications may appear automatic and a bit too reductionist for the anthropological reader. But on this score, Lowe recognizes three typical *contextual* orientations to the realities

of ancestral rites in Asian societies: the philosophical elite tend to interpret them more rationally; the bureaucrats treat them more pragmatically; and the masses view them from a perspective of Spiritism.

On the matter of finding functional substitutes for Christian faith, we commend a chapter in the book by Mark Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* (Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture, University of Hawaii Press, 1998, p. 129), in which he discusses how indigenous movements in Japan have reframed their approach to ancestral altars in the home. Mullins makes it clear that these more radical expressions of faith choose to maintain a greater respect for the liminal nature of the dead in the traditional Japanese worldview. And we commend as well the article by Alex Smith, “The Struggle of Asian Ancestor Veneration,” in which he offers a quick review of the cultural and religious constraints on generating Christian substitutes for ancestral rites (*Family and Faith in Asia*, ed. Paul De Neui, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2010, pp. 161–182).

Simon Chan’s *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (InterVarsity Press Academic: Downers Grove, IL, 2014) takes this subject in a fascinating theological direction. Chan critiques the elite and more remote paradigms of Asian theologians and finds them insufficient for advancing mission in Asia; fortunately for us, his background in Pentecostal studies makes him sensitive to the grassroots religiosity of the Asian masses. He outlines a methodology that should allow Asian theologies to blend historical theological resources of the church with efforts at Asian contextualization. He views the religiosity surrounding these ancestral rites from the vantage point of our historic affirmation of the “communion of saints,” and calls us to reconsider our theology in relation to the Asian family’s bond between the living and the dead.

Chang-Won Park’s recent publication, *Cultural Blending in Korean Death Rites: New Interpretive Approaches* (Continuum Int’l Pub: London, 2015) provides a framework for interpreting ancestor practices among Koreans as a “total social phenomenon,” and appreciates all the interrelationships involved in three rituals: the funeral rites (*at* death); the ancestral rites (*after* death); and, his inclusion of a third ritual of Bible verse copying *before* death (practiced by Christians). Park’s contribution makes it clear that further research is refining our Christian understanding of the entire ancestral phenomenon. **IJFM**