




CHAPTER TWO

Betwixt Jesus and Ancestors? Christianity in Southern Africa

Henry Mbaya 
Stellenbosch University

Abstract

This chapter highlights the tensions and conflict that surface among Christians with regard to the relationship between Jesus and ancestors in African cultures, spirituality, and Christian practices in southern Africa. First, it highlights the Hebrew traditions and the arguments of scholars that seem to negate, while others appear to affirm, the tradition of the reverence of ancestors. Second, the chapter discusses the arguments of various scholars that either support and dismiss these practices, as well as Christian traditions that take opposing views on, and engage in differing practices in relation to, this issue. By way of conclusion, the chapter offers perspectives by means of which it suggests that ancestral veneration can be viewed from a cosmological and Christological point of view.

Introduction

Tutu said that African Christians ... [suffer] from a kind of schizophrenia. Missionaries had expected them to become westerners before they could become Christians: “They had to deny their African-ness to become genuine Christians Virtually all things African were condemned as pagan and to be destroyed root and branch...”. Most African Christians accepted this cerebrally ... but their psyche had been damaged by it: “[They are] shuttling back and forth between two worlds,

during the day being respectable western-type Christians and at night consulting traditional doctors and slaughtering to the ancestors under the euphemisms of a ‘party’” (Allen 2006:136–7).

The often-vexed question of the status of the ancestors in relation to Jesus Christ in Western Christianity always intrudes in the life of an African in southern Africa; this is especially the case whenever a crisis occurs. It is an issue that the African has faced since the arrival of missionaries in southern Africa in the seventeenth century. Must the ancestors be invoked alongside Jesus at a time of family ritual observances or crises? Must an African Christian observe ancestral rituals? These critical questions stubbornly refuse to go away. How does the church respond to such questions?

The above quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s biography suggests that this dilemma faced by Africans amounts to living a double life – trying to be genuinely Christian and following African religious cultural values. In effect, Tutu implies that missionary Christianity alienates Africans from their cultural heritage. Tutu’s view would be supported by Salala (1998:133) who is of the view that many Africans ‘double-up’ on Christianity and African traditional religions precisely because Christianity does not address the profound needs and concerns of African people. This is probably one of the reasons that, when faced with a crisis, many African Christians fall back on the traditional practices associated with the traditional African religions.

This question touches on a deeper one – what is the essence of African Christianity, and by implication, of the African churches in southern Africa? This is a pertinent question precisely because underlying it is a deeper one, namely that, unless the church takes African culture seriously, it remains alien, and, therefore, does not fit the African context.

In other words, unless Christianity seriously engages with African values and practices, it remains a foreign element in the southern African context. In light of these critical

questions, this chapter seeks to highlight the relationship between Western Christianity and African culture in southern Africa. More specifically, it seeks to address the issue of the relationship between Jesus Christ and life and belief in ancestors, and its implications for the Christian faith in southern Africa.

Life After Death in Christian Tradition

The Roman Catholic Church Archdiocese of Cape Town (2016), in its blog, proclaims that

most if not all Black Catholics within the Archdiocese of Cape Town (ACT), South Africa, pray to their ancestors. Is this acceptable in terms of our faith? Does it amount to idolatry as some maintain? Should this practice be banned, as some Christian denominations have insisted?

In stating that they ‘pray’ to the ancestors, the church suggests that blacks ‘worship’ their ancestors. This would be a far cry from the missionary era when ancestral veneration was demonised, and the black Christians involved incurred censure. In light of this, what do we make of Jesus’ claim that “no one comes to the Father except through me”? (John 14:6). Does ancestral veneration conflict with worshipping Jesus? The fundamental issue is the notion of life after death for black Catholics as well as Protestants.

The Western missionary churches came to southern African in the seventeenth century with a doctrine of and belief in life after death; Jesus Christ was at the centre of this doctrine (see Fast 1991). However, it was the Roman Catholic Church, and to some extent the Anglican Church, which taught the notion of and practised the ‘veneration’ of saints. The Protestant churches had rejected this doctrine and practice with the Reformation. Nevertheless, the doctrine had a long history and tradition within the church.

Gonzalez (2010) asserts that the notion of life after death has a long tradition in the Christian church. In the early

church, martyrs, and saintly persons, saw themselves as modelling their lives on Christ. Their lives came to exemplify continuity with that of Christ. For instance, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul referred to the Christians as “saints” (Gonzalez 2010:10). In this respect, Paul recognised the Christian believers as living testimony, as people who faithfully followed of the pattern of Christ. They were ‘holy’ people. With the rise of martyrdom in the second century, the idea of saintliness came to be associated with the veneration of the martyrs through physical material objects associated with them.

Gonzalez (2010:10) states that,

as early as the middle of the second century, it was customary to gather at their tombs on the anniversary of their deaths, and there to celebrate communion. Once again, the idea was that they too were part of the church, and that communion joined the living and the dead in a single body. It was this practice that gave rise to saints’ days The practice of gathering relics of martyrs seems to have begun fairly early.

In the mid-second century, the “Martyrdom of Polycarp” tells us that the bones of Polycarp “would have been more precious to us than pearls” (Gonzalez 2010:57). It is as if the door between earth and heaven were opened by the prayers of the saints. The medieval period was the climax of this spirituality. While the Roman Catholic Church preserved this tradition and spirituality, most Protestant churches of the Reformation abandoned it at the Reformation. In the seventeenth century, these two Church traditions were brought to southern Africa representing these two contrasting positions. With regard to the Roman Catholic Church, in many ways there are parallels between the doctrine and practice of the veneration of the saints and martyrs and African religions and spiritualities.

The Veneration of Ancestors in Hebrew Scriptures

A number of texts in the Hebrew Scriptures indicate God's disapproval of ancestral veneration. Deuteronomy 18:9–14 provides ample insights into God's view of practices associated with ancestor worship, or veneration, and divination (New International Version):

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving to you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no-one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord; because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.

This text suggests that exclusive worship of Yahweh distinguished the Israelites from other nations that venerated their ancestors. In other words, monotheism constituted the identity of the Israelites. It characterised and defined their religion. Then, there are also texts such as Leviticus 19:31 which prohibit the Israelites from interacting with “ghosts”, and “departed spirits” for guidance and/or divination (Num 22:7, 1 Sam 6:2, and Josh 13:22 also concern divination). Similarly, Samuel had warned Saul against the sin of witchcraft: “For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft” (1 Sam 15:23).

Some scholars have argued that ancestral worship is forbidden in the Bible and, as such, is irreconcilable with the Christian faith. For example, in his doctoral dissertation, “Ancestor worship and the challenges it poses to the Christian mission and ministry”, Choon Sup Bae concludes that “analysis of the phenomenon of ancestor worship and its articulation [in] the Bible has proven conclusively that ancestor worship is essentially a form of idolatry in spite of the justifications employed by the traditional religions” (2007:212).

New Frontiers in Contemporary Missiology

However, the Bible also describes traditions that suggest that the notion was widespread. Andriolo (1973:1661) notes that worship of the dead was common among the nations:

The Bible itself refers to such practices as ensuring the dead are gathered together with the clan on ancestral land (Gen 50:24–25), caring for the dead spirits (Deut 26:14; Is 57:6), and consulting them for occult knowledge (Deut 18:11; Is 8:19–22; 19:3; 1 Sam 28:3–25). It is clear that ancient Israel venerated its dead (Deut 10:15).

Ross Kane affirms (2018) that

the people of Israel continually harkened back to God's work among their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and among Samuel, David, and the prophets. In the words of the psalmist, "the righteous will be kept in everlasting remembrance" (Ps 112:6). Remembering ancestors reminded Israel of God's work across history and of their own dependence upon the moral communities that preceded them.

Hence, it would seem that the veneration of ancestors in southern Africa some has parallels with the old Jewish traditions. Why has this practice endured over the ages? Victor Molobi (2005) has identified Exodus 20:5 as a key text in favour of the practice of the veneration of the ancestors: "for I the Lord God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love and keep my commandments". This appears to justify Africans' consideration of ancestors as intermediaries: "Even if you do right but your predecessors did wrong, you may be liable for their sins and punishment accordingly. This understanding causes African traditionalists to ask favours from their senior ancestors for, supposedly, they have already bypassed the life of the living and its challenges" (Molobi 2005). In this respect, some Hebrew traditions may have parallels with the notion of ancestral veneration in some

cultures in southern Africa. However, in African culture, spirituality and religion, underlying the question of the ancestors is the deeper issue of the nature of life.

Unity of Life and Law of Harmony

For ages, Africa has understood and experienced life as dynamic. It is power, a form of energy, a vital force. In this framework, the natural world and spiritual world live as parts of a web, in harmony with each other. Equilibrium establishes this order and ensures continuity of life. This life is also integral, a unity; hence, life and death operate along a continuum – death leads to life; the body yields to the spirit; the spirit may also be embodied. Life here has implications for life after death. According to BJ van der Walt (2003:75), “the greatest duty of human beings is to live in harmony with the spirit, human and the natural world”.

Morality, that is, good human behaviour, humanness, entails good conduct towards humans as well as nature since these are interrelated. Finally, life is conceived as a ‘collective’ rather than as separate pieces. It is this chain of interrelatedness that gives meaning to the life of an African. A good disposition towards other humans, nature, and animals is valued as an expression of humanness. If anything goes wrong at any level of this structure, the whole structure is affected.

The ‘Veneration’ or ‘Worship’ of Ancestors in Southern Africa?

Long before missionaries’ arrival on the sub-Saharan continent, Africa had conceived of the notion of life after death. The ancestors, who Mbiti calls the “Living Dead” (1969), were the embodiment of life after death. Hence, ancestors have long constituted the pillar of African religion and spirituality. Citing Hammond-Tooke, Bogopa defines ancestral spirits as “the foundation of the Southern Bantu religion. All cultural groups have a special name to refer to the ancestors, and the names for these special beings are more often used in the plural

form as a sign of showing respect” (2010:2). In South Africa, different terms are used by various cultural groups to refer to ancestors. AmaZulu refers to them as *amadlozi*; for amaXhosa, ancestors are *izinyanya*. In Sesotho, they are known as *badimo* (2010:2).

On the other hand, Hans-Jergen Becken states that the answer to the question of what an ancestor is “will reveal some differences from the occidental forms of ancestor veneration” (1993:335). The answer derives from “the communal understanding of African society They celebrate the communion of their family to which also the late members belong” (1993:335). The Zulu Nazarite leader, Shembe, had also “given a place to the ancestral spirits in his system of theology In his church, the dead are entitled to veneration, and commemoration services are held in their honour” (Vilakazi 1986, cited in Becken 1993:335).

Specifically with regard to southern African context, even though these terms seek to understand the nature of the relationship between Africans and their ancestors, there are critical problems in trying to fully comprehend the relationship between them. According to Becken, the Western expression ‘ancestor veneration’ “refers to the quasi-religious act of solemn commemoration of late relatives” (1993:335). This relationship involves use of material items, mostly blood, as a means of propitiation of the ancestors. Hence, ancestral veneration entails the commemoration of the departed in which the relationship is materially and spiritually expressed.

At the centre of ancestral veneration is the issue of values and their role in the ordering of society. The relationship between the cosmos and its implications for the earth is crucial in African religions and cultures.

Max Gluckman distinguishes the attributes of the ancestors from the nature of their relationship with their progenitors. He states that “ancestors represent positive moral forces who can cause or prevent misfortune and require that their descendants observe a moral code.” He further states that

Chapter Two

the cult of the dead, on the other hand, is not exclusively directed to kinsmen, but to the spirits of the dead in general. Here spirits are prayed to for the achievement of the amoral or antisocial ends, whereas ancestors can be petitioned only for ends that are in accord with the basic social principles (1937:117).

Klaus Nürnberger (2007) acknowledges the widespread practice of the veneration of the ancestors. He has persuasively argued that the fundamental weakness of Western Christianity has been its inability to present a Christology that meaningfully addresses the existential needs of Africans, a gap that has been filled by ancestral veneration. He argues that the missionaries preached a Jesus too removed from Africans' mundane issues and, consequently, that this Jesus seemed unconcerned with their daily lives. This sharply contrasts with the authority of immediacy in the lives of Africans. In other ways, the veneration of the ancestors occupies a place in the lives of Africans that rivals that of Jesus (2007:54–69). This Jesus failed to meet the needs of Africans in times of crisis. Igor Kopytoff (1971) seems to make a similar point. He states that

ancestors are vested with mystical powers and authority. They retain a functional role in the world of the living, specifically in the life of their living kinsmen; indeed, African kin-groups are often described as communities of both the living and the dead. Ancestors are intimately involved with the welfare of their kin-group but they are not linked in the same way to every member of that group.

The ancestors are deemed to have role in and influence over the lives of the living. In fact, some Africans tend to believe that the ancestors control their destinies. From the evangelical perspective, it would seem that the power that is attributed to the ancestors rivals that of Jesus Christ – they occupy a lofty place of power which seems to supersede that of Christ. According to Fortes (1965), the link “is structured through the elders of the kin-group ... the representatives of the ancestors and the mediators between them and the kin-group”.

Anderson asserts that veneration of the ancestors

is not an outmoded belief which is dying out in South Africa's urban areas. The veneration of ancestors is still widely practised in the black townships of South Africa as in many parts of Africa, although the incidence of veneration of the ancestor cult among church members is not as high today as it was thirty years ago (1993:29).

Luvuyo Ntombana (2015) seems to suggest that Protestant churches have built bridges between ancestral veneration and Christian spirituality. In his studies of Pentecostals, he observes that very few differences exist between these religious groups with regard to African rituals. He asserts that the African independent churches and the mainstream churches permit their members to practise male initiation with accompanying ceremonies (2015:119).

Furthermore, he observes that the mainstream churches observe a line of separation between "church life" and "cultural traditional life" and that while they allow their members to observe these rituals only outside church spaces, the African independent churches permit them to take place within their sacred spaces (2015:119). He observes that the mainstream churches allow its members to perform such rituals, even those involving sangomas (traditional healers) as long as the practice remains strictly within the family (2015:119).

"Surrounded by a Great Cloud of Witnesses"

Mbiti once stated that the "spiritual world of African peoples is very densely populated with spiritual beings" (1969:75). According to Mbiti, this world is inhabited by divinities and spirits (Mbiti 1969:75). Africans relate to these spirits through rituals, and they consider these spirits to be an extension of their lives. There is, therefore, a very close relationship between the two forms of life. The biblical perspective is similar. The model of church militant and church triumphant is not at all at variance with the African notion of the living

Chapter Two

dead, that is to say, the ancestors. To put it differently, the notion of the soul surviving death is not exclusively Christian. African belief in the continuity of life is a notion with a long, strong tradition in religions and cultures in Africa. Thus, Mbiti (1990:82) illustrates that

the living-dead are bilingual; they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until 'recently', and they speak the language of the spirits and of God ... they are the 'spirits' with which African peoples are most concerned: it is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men. They are still part of their human families, and people have personal memories of them.

With regard to southern Africa in particular, Berglum (1976: 122) states that, among amaZulu, one may become an ancestor even before death. Hence, death is not a precondition to becoming an ancestor; the living aged can also be regarded as ancestors. Ancestor-hood is a venerable stage in the life of a person who is acknowledged to have lived a morally good life, one which descendants should emulate. He or she has exemplified the virtues of humanness, of ubuntu.

Michael Nel, referring to the Zulu context, states that "community and continuity are key elements for understanding the ongoing importance of the ancestors for African families; even though dead, the ancestors remain an integral part of family relationships" (2007:8). Family relationships survive death: "Since the dead remain in communion with the family, family ties are not severed by their death". This is because the "continuity of family crosses generations ... is not limited to past generations and includes future generations also" (2007:58).

In this respect, communality has a bearing on continuity. The survival of the community depends on on-going ancestral support. The two are intricately intertwined in a web of reciprocal relationships. For WRM Ngobese, this relationship has a socio-moral dimension. He states that amaZulu believe that

New Frontiers in Contemporary Missiology

life continues even after death through the ancestors who are regarded as the heroes of the tribe or clan. They are venerated because of the exemplary life they lived here on earth. That is why they are ritually remembered and ritually brought back to look after the members of the family who are still here on earth (2009:100–101).

They are venerated due to their moral and ethical leadership. Their higher standard of moral behaviour elevates them to a stature and rank worthy of veneration. However, this status does not elevate them to the level of divinity – Ngobese notes that the “ancestors do not take the place of the Supreme Being or Mvelinqangi (the first Appearer)” (2009:100–101).

Meyer Fortes has stressed the juridical authority of the ancestors in the lives of their progenitors. In his view, this relates to the ordering of society in Africa:

Ancestors symbolize the continuity of the social structure, and the proper allocation at any given time, of the authority, and right they held and transmitted. Ancestral worship puts the final source of jural authority and right, or to use the more inclusive term, jurisdiction, on a pedestal, so to speak, where it is inviolable and unchallengeable, and thus able to mobilize the consent of all who must comply with it (1965:137).

The critical issue is authority in the ordering of the community in order to stabilise it. The ancestors mediate the authority necessary for maintaining balance and equilibrium in society and in the natural world. They are experienced as the ‘living presence’ that ensures the continuity of harmony between nature and humans. They rule and order as guardians through moral and spiritual authority. Their authority is not imposed but rather made available through customary etiquette.

Nürnbergger (2007:37) has argued that Africans’ experience of the authority of the ancestors in their lives in relation to weak Christian Christology has been the fundamental factor that continues them to draw them to

Chapter Two

reverence of ancestors. He asserts that “effective authority must be existentially present. The authority of the most proximate ancestors is present. Everything of existential importance is present” (2007:37). According to Nürnberger, “distance does not exist between the most proximate of the deceased and the living in terms of space and time, but only in terms of authority and power” (2007:37). For many people, ancestors are a reality to be given due acknowledgment as they provide for felt needs and are the benevolent guardians and protectors of people.

On a level deeper than Nürnberger’s thesis of authority, what underlies the veneration of the ancestors is the critical African theological principle of the quest for reconciliation between the cosmos and the ethereal. Behind the practice lies an important symbolic dimension, namely, the quest for integration of the spiritual world and the natural world.

Theologians distinguish two dimensions of relations, the vertical and horizontal. The former entails the relationship between God and humans and the latter that between humans and the created order. While Christianity stresses the vertical relationships between humans and God, behind the veneration of the ancestors lies the critical issue of the integration of the living and the living dead and nature (Meiring 2007:736).

Thus, the horizontal dimension suggests that

the ancestors are still part of the community, humans must cherish their relationship with them as a way of maintaining God’s created order. Crafford (1996:15) believes that ... they are revered as members of the community having greater status and power, and may at times even be regarded as behaving arbitrarily and are argued with. The ancestors also represent the ideal community and serve as a model for their descendants of what their communities should be like (Meiring 2007:741).

In the context of Zulu traditional structures, Nel (2007:101) states that the ancestors “are venerated because of the exemplary life they lived here on earth. That is why they are

ritually remembered and ritually brought back to look after the members of the family who are still here on earth". In this respect, according to this view, ancestors are viewed in the same manner as 'saints' in the Roman Catholic tradition. They are not only revered but venerated. Ngobese asserts:

The ancestors do not take the place of the Supreme Being or Mvelinqangi (the first Appearer). Mvelinqangi is approached through them. This is a sign of respect according to the African world view (weltanschauung). A senior person is approached through those who are close to him or her. The ancestors either bless or curse (2009:100101).

The Tswana Methodist theologian and poet, Gabriel Setiloane, strongly suggests that the ancestors are present in the lives of their descendants; they bless and sometimes withhold blessings if the latter do not conduct themselves well. He states (1978:407):

Ah, ...yes ... it is true.
They are very present with us;
The dead are not dead; they are ever near us;
Approving and disapproving all our actions,
They chide us when we go wrong,
Bless us and sustain us for good deeds done,
For kindness shown, and strangers made to feel at home.
They increase our store and punish our pride.

For Setiloane, the ancestors live and interact with their descendants, sometimes blessing them, or disapproving of their behaviour and conduct. In this respect, their authority derives from their role as moral guides and custodians. They are acknowledged because of their 'authority of presence'. They are esteemed because they are experienced as being available in times of need.

Chapter Two

Buti Tlhagale, the Roman Catholic archbishop, has gone further. In 2000, he is reported to have urged his church to accord the ancestors a status similar to that of saints and suggested that they be venerated alongside the saints in the church liturgy:

A libation of blood – a ritual pouring as a symbolic sacrifice honoring the ancestors of black Africans – should be incorporated into local Catholic liturgies such as the Mass ... “Sacrifice to the ancestors continues to be a very common practice among Africans”, Archbishop Tlhagale said. “The slaughtering of an animal – cow or sheep – takes place wherever there is a funeral or a marriage feast, or in times of illness, unemployment, family feuds or the birth of a child. The practice should be considered within the context of inculturation, according to which local, indigenous culture and values are a means of presenting, reformulating, and living the Christian faith” (Bruyns 2000).

It would seem as though Tlhagale views ancestors in the same manner he does saints. Just as the saints are believed to play a role in the lives of Christians, so too are the ancestors in the lives of Africans. Seemingly, power is attributed to both saints and ancestors.

According to Aylward Shorter, ancestors and saints are venerated in the same liturgy in the Catholic Church:

A recent liturgical experiment is the new Christian funeral rite in [Zimbabwe], during which, not only are the Christian saints invoked at the graveside and bidden to welcome the departed soul into their company, but the dead man’s ancestors are also invoked by name for the same purpose (1977:126–127).

In this respect, saints and ancestors are considered on almost the same level. The fact that they are invoked together suggests that they have equal power and are both worthy of veneration. Certainly, the example of Zimbabwe is unique. To what extent must ancestors be considered saints? The

Zimbabwean instance seems to suggest a manner in which the church appears to have succeeded in teaching people to appreciate the Christian tradition from the point of view of African heritage. It suggests the 'success' of contextualisation. In terms of Bosch's (1980) definition of *missio Dei* as God crossing the frontiers of cultures and belief systems, it would appear that, in Zimbabwe, the liturgy has become a vehicle that mediates African values. Christian liturgical theology gives expression to the ancestral values of the encounter.

While, in general, there has been a positive attitude towards ancestors from some missionary-instituted churches, the Pentecostal and Zionist churches have in the main been negative or indifferent. In his research, Anderson found that, in general, "the majority of the members of Christian churches reject ancestor veneration" (1991:81); more specifically, in "many Pentecostal-type churches contact with the ancestors is rejected, while for others there is a far more tolerant and ambivalent attitude to the ancestor cult" (1991:87).

The rejection of ancestral veneration in the Pentecostal churches is significant because these churches, unlike the Western missionary-instituted churches, are not particularly ritualistic. Their emphasis on the Holy Spirit seems to preclude involvement with the notion of the spirits of ancestors. Preoccupied as they are with the experience of the Holy Spirit, it would seem that these churches view the practice of venerating another spirit as rivalling their own teachings. Here, it would seem that emphasis on the Holy Spirit fills the vacuum that would otherwise be experienced by those in other churches who venerate the ancestors (Anderson 1991:81).

On the basis of research undertaken on the Zionist Christian Church (ZCC), Lukhaimane (1980:51) states that the ZCC "did not restrict its members from making sacrifices to their ancestors". It would seem that there is some leeway with regard to this issue, with some members wholeheartedly objecting and others accommodating ancestral veneration. According to Lukhaimane (1980), some ZCC members believed that it was important to undertake ritual sacrifice.

Chapter Two

The ZCC's reluctance to restrict its members from venerating the ancestors is probably because, unlike in the Pentecostal churches, the ZCC has incorporated some aspects of African cultures. On the whole, the ZCC seems to be more positive about African culture than do the Pentecostals.

Becken argues that ancestor veneration is not exclusively a black custom in southern Africa. It has also long been prevalent among whites (1993:335). For example, in some of church buildings, there are memorials for deceased men and women and commemorative plaques and tablets for soldiers who were killed on the battlefield (Becken 1993:335). In addition, when a dear one has departed, they place flowers on the grave, and they have a tea party or even a meal. They spend a considerable amount of money on buying a tombstone, in some cases, of marble. Occasionally, they visit the graves of their departed dear ones to place flowers there (1993:335). In Western culture, a gift of flowers to one's relative or to a friend signifies a deeper relationship; in Africa, the shedding of blood is a great symbol of family communion.

Operating from a sense of racial and cultural superiority, white people have disregarded a similar custom within their own community, and they had learned in their studies that "the ancestor cult is the central feature of African religion, the heart of the African spirit world" (Anderson 1993:29). When Africans revered their ancestors, though in their own way, missionaries condemned this as non-Christian, some even referring to it as "ancestor worship" (Becken 1993:336). From this perspective, it had to be suppressed or entirely uprooted. It had to be demonised (Anderson 1993:31) as having to do with the devil, idols, and evil spirits (1993:32), demons (1993:33) and angels of Satan (1993:35).

Conclusions – Implications: Jesus in the African Christian Family

The preceding discussion has highlighted four points. First, it demonstrates the fact that the veneration of ancestors is practised, or tolerated, in some Christian traditions, while

in others it is totally rejected. Likewise, it shows that some Hebraic traditions are open to the practice while others are opposed to it. In short, there appears to be no consensus on this issue. Second, the fact that some Christian traditions (denominations) seem to tolerate the veneration of ancestors highlights the significance of this issue as one that influences African Christian spirituality. This underscores the importance of taking the southern African context and, more specifically, African culture, more seriously.

The fact that other traditions try to engage with this practice would also suggest that they are involved in cross-cultural mission – in David Bosch’s phrase, “God crossing the frontiers of culture” (1980:17). Third, the discussion highlights the significance of the African cultural-religious notions of the ‘continuity of life’ and ‘communality’, which constitute the bedrock of African spirituality. More profoundly, the practice of the veneration of ancestors seems to underscore the critical importance of the principles of reciprocity and interdependence.

The fact that some Christians have a dual allegiance may suggest that they view Jesus and ancestors as functioning in a similar cosmological order and framework. Thus, in their view, the ancestors have the ‘authority of the presence’ in a manner similar to which Christ does. The underlying assumption is that the ancestors do not function outside the cosmological framework of the glorified Christ. They are perceived as being ‘divinities’ that have achieved a spiritual status that appears to qualify them for ‘veneration’, that is, to be ‘revered’, though not to be ‘worshipped’ as God is. They are a model, an example of good living for an African.

Finally, with regard to the Christian traditions that appear to affirm ancestral veneration, it would seem that ancestors are viewed as ‘reflectors’ of light whose source is Jesus. The ancestors may manifest something of the character of Jesus as the Word made flesh. The biblical notion of Jesus as “Light” and “Life” (John 1:1–18) is appropriate here. Those who simultaneously have allegiance to Jesus and

Chapter Two

ancestors may view Jesus as operating on the African cultural-religious principle of the vital force, as the causal agent which ontologically explains the *modus operandi* of the ancestors. As the source, or origin of Life, Jesus embodies the vital force, the cosmological principle on the basis of which the ancestors function.

In this cosmological framework, there appears to be a correlational relationship between Jesus and ancestors. It is as if Jesus were the window through which one can see the ancestors, while the ancestors 'reflect' something of the characteristics of Jesus. This is significant from the point of view of the biblical tradition that portrays Jesus as the 'Light' and 'Life', the 'Word', who, within the African framework, correlates with the vital force, the unity of Life, and the Law of Harmony. In this respect, Jesus as the Light operates within the framework of the vital force.

Reference list

- Allen J. 2006. *Rabble-rouser for peace: The authorized biography of Desmond Tutu*. London: Rider.
- Anderson AH. 1991. *Moya: The Holy Spirit in African context*. Pretoria: Unisa.
- Anderson AH. 1993. African Pentecostalism and the ancestor cult: Confrontation or compromise? *Missionalia*, 21(1):26–39.
- Andriolo KR. 1973. A structural analysis of genealogy and worldview in the Old Testament. *American Anthropologist* (New Series), 75(5):1657–1669. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1973.75.5.02a00280>
- Anglican Church of Southern Africa. 2005. An appeal for understanding of cultural diversity. In: *Southern Anglican*, 7:8–11.
- Bae CS. 2007. Ancestor Worship and the Challenges It Poses to the Christian Mission and Ministry. PhD thesis. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.

- Barclay K & Koefoed NJ. 2020. Family, memory, and identity: An introduction. *Journal of Family History*, 46(1):3–12. [Retrieved 14 November 2023] <https://doi.org/10.1177/0363199020967297>
- Becken J. 1993. Beware of the ancestor cult! A challenge to missiological research in South Africa. *Missionalia*, 21(3):333–339.
- Bogopa D. 2010. Health and ancestors: The case of South Africa and beyond. *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 10(1):1–7. [Retrieved 14 November 2023] <https://doi.org/10.2989/IPJP.2010.10.1.8.1080>
- Bosch DJ. 1980. *Witness to the world: The Christian mission in theological perspective*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.
- Bosch DJ. 2011. *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Bruyns N. 2000. *Let Africans honor ancestors with blood libations in Mass, says bishop*. [Retrieved 10 June 2022] <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/aprilweb-only/46.0a.html>
- Butler J. 2015. Remembrance of the ancestors in contemporary paganism: Lineage, identity, and cultural belonging in the Irish context. *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions*, 2(1):94–118.
- Crafford D. 1996. African traditional religions. In: PGJ Meiring (ed). *A world of religions: A South African perspective*. Pretoria: Kagiso Publishers. 1–26.
- Ezenweke EO. 2008. The cult of ancestors: A focal point for prayers in African traditional communities. *Unizik Journal of Religion and Human Relations*, 1(1).
- Fast HH. 1991 African Perceptions of the Missionaries and their Message: Wesleyans at Mount Coke and Butterworth, 1825–3. Master's dissertation. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.

Chapter Two

- Fortes M. 1965. Some reflections on ancestor worship in Africa. In: M Fortes & G Dieterlen (eds). *African systems of thought*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press. 122–142.
- Gonzalez JL. 2010. *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1: The early church to the dawn of the Reformation*. Boston, MA: HarperCollins.
- Gluckman M. 1937. Mortuary customs and the belief in survival after death among the south-eastern Bantu. *Bantu Studies*, 11:117–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02561751.1937.9676046>
- Kane R. 2018. *The wisdom of the African Christian practice of reverencing the dead*. [Retrieved 15 June 2021] <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/wisdom-african-christian-practice-reverencing-dead>
- Kopytoff, I. 1971. *Ancestors as elders in Africa*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1159423>
- Lukhaimane EK. 1980. The Zion Christian Church of Ignatius (Engenas) Lekganyane, 1924 to 1948: An African Experiment with Christianity. Master's dissertation. Pietersburg: University of the North.
- Maluleke TS. 1997. Will Jesus ever be the same again: What are the Africans doing to Him? *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*, 11(1):13–27.
- Mbiti JS. 1969. *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Mbiti JS. 1990. *African religions and philosophy*. 2nd edition. London: Heinemann African Writers' Series.
- Meiring A. 2007. As below, so above: A perspective on African theology. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 63(2):733–750. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v63i2.220>
- Molobi V. 2005. Ancestral veneration at the core of African spiritual renewal among the AICS in South Africa. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 31(1): 111–126.

New Frontiers in Contemporary Missiology

- Nel MJ. 2007. *The Ancestors and Zulu Family Transitions: A Bowen Theory and the Practical Theological Interpretation*. PhD thesis. Pretoria: Unisa.
- Ngobese WRM. 2009. *The Continuity of Life in African Religion with Reference to Marriage and Death among the Zulu People*. Master's dissertation. Pretoria: Unisa.
- Ntombana L. 2015. The trajectories of Christianity and African ritual practices: The public silence and dilemma of the mainline or mission churches. *Acta Theologica*, 35(2):104–119. <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v35i2.7>
- Nürnberg K. 2007. Ancestor veneration in the Church of Christ? *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, (November) 129:54–69.
- Nyamiti C. 1984. *Christ as our Ancestor: Christology from an African perspective*. Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press.
- Nyamiti C. 2011. *Ancestor veneration in Africa*. [Retrieved 14 November 2023] <https://cultureafrico.blogspot.com/2011/02/ancestor-veneration-in-africa.html>
- Roman Catholic Church Archdiocese of Cape Town. 2016. *African ancestor beliefs and the Catholic communion of saints: Concord or conflict?* [Retrieved 14 November 2023] <https://www.scross.co.za/2010/07/african-ancestor-beliefs/>
- Setiloane G. 1978. How the traditional world-view persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana. In: E Fasholé-Luke, R Gray, A Hastings & G Tasie (eds). *Christianity in independent Africa*. Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press. 402–412.
- Shorter A. 1977. *African Christian theology: Adaptation or incarnation?* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Vahakangas M. 1997. *Genuinely Catholic, Authentically African? The Encounter between Neo-Thomism and African Thinking in Charles' Nyamiti's Methodology*. PhD thesis. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.

Chapter Two

- Van der Walt BJ. 2003. *Understanding and rebuilding Africa*. Potchefstroom: ICCA.
- Wanamaker C. 1997. Jesus the ancestor: Reading the story of Jesus from an African Christian perspective. *Scriptura*, 63:281–298. <https://doi.org/10.7833/62-0-622>
- Wimberly H & Savishinsky JS. 1979. Ancestor memorialism: A comparison of Jews and Japanese. In: WH Newell (ed). *Ancestors*. Berlin & New York: De Gruyter Mouton. 241–260. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110805314.241>