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Ancestral Veneration, A Dialogical Imagination with Empires

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Life is by its very nature dialogical – M. Bakhtin

Dialogical Imagination as A Way of Understanding

The notion of dialogical imagination introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin is a creative hermeneutical process. According to Bakhtin, the hermeneutical process occurred within the circle of understanding which actively and continually encounters another understanding. Understanding is indeed textual, but also inter-contextual, where we can find the process of translation, because of the different contexts experienced. Hence, the process of understanding becomes historical, albeit contingent. Toward such a process of understanding, Michael Gardiner (1992, p.103) explains Bakhtin's position,

Bakhtin's position here therefore conforms to the hermeneutic demand for an on-going interpretive dialectic between the text and the relevant contexts or historical circumstances, a continual movement between the part and the whole (the famous 'hermeneutic circle'). Bakhtin insists that the knower and the known are inescapably linked in a meaningful, dialogic relationship, in an almost mystical co-mingling through the medium of the word (what he refers to as an 'interrelation and interaction of spirits').¹

The so-called 'facts' of the social world are not determined from the beginning but, at least, partially constructed through theoretical or conceptual categorization brought by a person (knower), in the act of interpretation. That, according to Bakhtin all forms of human interaction, cultural practices, and human reflective understanding of the process is always mediated by a dialogical relationship with others. If this dialogical relation is ignored from the existence of human beings, then it also ignores

¹ Michael Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique: M.M. Bakhtin and The Theory of Ideology*, (London: Routledge, 1992), h. 103.

the possibility of finding more actual and profound understandings. It thus impedes the understanding of living words and certain ideological powers to form a meaning, including the tension between truth and false, significant and insignificant words including the beauty or the ugliness that it represents. Human understanding, even humanity itself is determined by the ability of man and woman to produce the text, express the text, also do self-reflection through the text. In this case the text is interpreted as the object of study and reflection. Gardiner (1992, p.103) adds that “the integrity or ‘rights’ of both author (or text) and reader are maintained in the dialogic encounter; both equally share in the disclosure of meaning”. The investigation of these understandings can be done by the subjects independently and mutually binding through dialogue, either directly or metaphorically. Furthermore, Bakhtin states that the purpose of this dialogue is that there is no forced understanding to each subject in dialogue, but to enrich each other for a deeper understanding without imposing or impoverishing the understanding of others. As he states, “understanding as the transformation of the other’s into ‘one’s own/another’s’”.²

In line with Bakhtin's thought, Kwok Pui-lan coming from Asian context, uses the term dialogical imagination to express the complexity, multidimensional relationships, and different level of meaning that underlie present-day hermeneutical tasks in Asia. Further mentioned by Kwok, “dialogical imagination attempts to bridge the gaps of time and space, to create new horizons, and to connect the disparate elements of our lives into a meaningful whole. This task is dialogical, for it involves ongoing conversation among different religious and cultural traditions”.³ Specifically, Kwok is concerned with the dialogical imagination regarding the dilemma and contradiction arises between being Asian and Christian. That both Asian traditions and biblical traditions are both inherited by Asian Christians and need to be brought into the process of the dialogical imagination as partners of dialogue. Kwok Pui-Lan claims that she is influenced by the thought of Gordon Kaufman who understands theology as a human imaginative construct, as well as by Gadamer's concepts of fusion of horizons, in which two different worlds or horizons of history can meet in the human imagination.⁴ Dialogical imagination also takes into consideration human desire to imagine wholeness such as a united nation, an uncontaminated nation, and an intact, or, pure cultural tradition. This desire cannot be denied, because people are always in the midst of tension between choosing and not choosing, having the opportunity or not having the opportunity. Dealing with these

² Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, (Austin: Texas University Press, 1986), h. 168.

³ Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), h. 13.

⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, h. 39.

tensions, each one of us is in the position of negotiating all of our cultural differences. According to Kwok,

While such a desire may have the positive effect of resisting the fragmented and disjointed experience imposed by colonialism, it may also lead to the danger of reification of the past and the collapse of differences from within... I want to caution against the enormous power of that desire – the lure to shape things into one, unified, seemingly seamless whole.⁵

Thus, at the same time, dialogical imagination also provides challenges in terms of accepting the different voices of a reality. Regarding these emerging voices, the desire to dominate, ignore and even to eliminate other voices need to be uncovered. For ignoring inequality may lead each person to participate in perpetuating the agenda to dominate and reluctant to enter the process of continuous dialogue.

Kwok mentions that in dialogical imaginations there are two paths related to the sources in dialogue with Christian faith. First, the Asian stories used in order to reflect on the biblical text and the second is social biographies that is a key in interpreting the present reality and the message of the Bible. The path of social biography consists of aspiration from the people to whom the term "ordinary people" is labelled or people who are marginalized and dominated. Kim Yong Bock, as quoted by Pui-lan stated that social biography is not just a socio-cultural history, but consists of the dynamics of power within the community. This social biography consists of stories from "below" that invite an understanding of the biblical texts from the "bottom" as well. Furthermore, Kwok says, "social biography functions to integrate and interrelate the dimensions and components of the people's social and cultural experiences, especially in terms of the dramatic scenario of the people as the historical protagonists".⁶ An example is the re-interpretation by Cyris H.S. Moon through Korean social biography. He reveals how stories about the threats of the great countries around Korea and the loss of Korean identity during the Japanese occupation may explain the understandings developed in reading biblical narratives. Similarly, the social biography of the Jews can be used to enlighten the meaning of Korean stories. So that dialogical imagination can occur through the path of social biography.

Contesting Voices of Ancestral Veneration

⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, h. 39.

⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, h. 15.

The following are the various understandings of ancestral veneration including the dominant understanding, manifested by the prohibitions, written in the Bible, in relation to the practice of ancestral veneration. This dominant voice can be found in Leviticus 19:26-31; Leviticus 20:6,27; Isaiah 8:19; Deuteronomy 18:9-14; 1 Samuel 28. Against this dominant voice, the dialogical imagination will help to listen to and consider other voices that have not been heard or even concealed. In this case the practice of ancestral veneration which also appears in biblical texts such as in 1 Samuel 28; Deuteronomy 26:14; Jeremiah 16: 6-7. In addition, the view of Abraham as the common ancestor as well as recent archaeological findings also demand a dialogical understanding against the dominant voice.

The idea that the ancestors had the power over the living is embedded in their description as a transcendental being that represents and guards religious, ethical, and institutional values in community life. However, in the understanding of ancestral veneration we will find that the subject of ancestors and the deceased are mutually related, which often also causes a complete refusal to all forms of ancestor veneration.

The dominant voice that declares disengagement with all forms of ancestral veneration can be found, for example in Neville Curle's explanation. Having worked in Africa, Curle mentions that it is difficult for the church to perform its prophetic role in situations involving ancestors, kings and spirits (*tangomas*). There are certain fears as thought by Curle,

Firstly, the magic is non-existent, except within the beliefs of the people. Secondly, the rulers manipulate the beliefs of the people through indoctrination. And thirdly, the magic is real. Should the magic be real, then biblically it has one of two sources? On the one side of the spectrum, those who are swayed by African Indigenous Religion, would argue that it is god, working through the ancestors and their agents, the *tangoma*. On the other side, there are those who posit that the so-called ancestors are familiar spirits acting through spirit mediums, which is demonic. Therefore, I stand in agreement with Sup Bae, that the so-called magic is real and is demonic. As such, the Church should have no part in it.⁷

Curle insists that the position the church should take is not to get caught up in local beliefs that support an understanding of the dead ancestors relationships with the living ones. Curle agrees to Choon Sup Bae and P.J. van der Merwe who conducted a research on biblical texts and concluded that ancestral veneration is unacceptable. They say the Bible rejects any form of communication with the dead, as noted specifically in Leviticus 19:31 that writes, "do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God". Hartley, as quoted by Bae and

⁷ Neville Curle, *A Biblical Critique of The Veneration of The Ancestors and The Use of Magic as Practiced in the Kingdom of eSwatini*, *Conspectus* 2006 vol.22, h. 70.

van der Merwe, argues that such the prohibition is important for Christianity in Asia because Asian nations are accustomed to communicating with the dead through intermediaries. By doing so they reject the power of God.

On the other hand, Bae and van der Merwe recognizes that the concept of respecting the elders may undermine the biblical prohibition on ancestral veneration. Leviticus 19:32 is often used to support the custom: “you shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD”. For Bae and van der Merwe, this text does not mention that the aged means the dead ones, so it cannot be used to support ancestral veneration. Moreover, the previous verse refers to the prohibition of turning and seeking the spirits and spirits of fortune-tellers that denies any possibility for condoning ancestral veneration. Leviticus 19:32 speaks only of the living elder to whom the community should pay an honor. This argument is by no means solving the problem which is brought by the silence of the text regarding the category of the elder. In another word, the aged, or, elder is open to the possibility of including those who have passed away.

In the story about King Saul consulting a woman medium in En-Dor (1 Sam 28) one may find another evidence of a notion that may endorse ancestral veneration. R.J. Gehman notes that the interpretation of spirit coming out of the earth as Samuel can be justified because the text does not oppose the idea. Also that this kind of event may occur under any circumstance. It does not apply only in the situation of loneliness and anxiety that Saul might have experienced at the time. Against this kind of interpretation, people like Bae and van der Merwe insist that Saul never saw Samuel himself, but through the words of the medium. Even if the spirit was Samuel's, Bae and van der Merwe still argues,

The incident with Saul and the woman of Endor is an exception and the ultimate interpretation must be logical and aligned with the Scriptures as a whole. The fact that Samuel appeared to Saul must be seen as an exceptional manifestation of God's power in which God chose to rouse Samuel for His divine purpose.⁸

Also mentioned by Bae and van der Merwe, “most of the early church fathers believed that this was another manifestation of the battle against demonic powers and that the apparition of Samuel was none other than demonic trickery”.⁹ This notion was also maintained by Luther and Calvin.¹⁰ No

⁸ Choon Sup Bae & P.J. van der Merwe, *Ancestor Worship – is it biblical?*, h. 1314.

⁹ Choon Sup Bae & P.J. van der Merwe, *Ancestor Worship – is it biblical?*, h. 1312.

¹⁰ Choon Sup Bae & P.J. van der Merwe, *Ancestor Worship – is it biblical?*, h. 1312.

wonder if this becomes the dominant interpretation in Christianity despite the openness of the story to another possibility.

Reasons to support ancestral veneration have been proposed by theologians who have a great concern on contextual theology. One of them is an Indonesian theologian, Mery Kolimon. Being a minister in Timor, Eastern Nusa Tenggara, Kolimon often sees discrepancies between the teaching of the church regarding ancestor veneration and the actual practices of the church members. Kolimon's experience is similar with the experience of many ministers in all over the place in Indonesia, and perhaps in the whole Asia continent too. Timorese people, particularly the Meto tribe, have been living with a tradition that whenever they have a problem, especially, sickness, they will consult to traditional healers who then seek an assistance from the spirits, including, the spirit of ancestors. It is a custom that has been inherited since before the arrival of Christianity. When Christianity arrived in Timor, the source of healing underwent a transformation from ancestors to Jesus. The concept of healing which refers to the big figure of the past is still there, only the form is changed, now it is the Christian God. But, the teaching of the church does not get along well with this concept. As quoted by Klaas Spronk, Kolimon says, "Protestantism does not have any space for communication between human beings and their ancestors".¹¹ Kolimon proposes that Jesus should be understood through the understanding of healing ancestor according to the Meto. The aim of this effort is at least twofold. First, it can produce a more in-depth appropriation of Jesus by the Meto. Secondly, it can turn Christianity as superior religion which has been implanted by the missionaries in the colonial time into a more respectful and dialogical religion. According to Spronk, Kolimon's idea was well received by her opponents during her dissertation defence, except the point on receiving the concept of ancestor veneration. One of the opponents said that Kolimon's suggestion that Christianity should be able to accept ancestor worship is unacceptable.

As Old Testament scholar, Klaas Spronk tries to deal with the problem with his continuous research on whether the cult of the dead was present in ancient Israel. He started with his 1986 dissertation titled *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* in which, based on archeological data, he argued that the cult of the dead was indeed widespread in the ancient near east societies including the Israelite. Spronk said that at that time his argument was challenged by many

¹¹ Klaas Spronk, *The Ancestors in The Religion of Ancient Israel and in Christian Theology: A Contribution to the Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, (Yogyakarta, 2008), p. 2.

scholars mainly on the basis of the lack of strong archeological evidences. But, twenty years latter, things have changed. Several additional archeological findings and better understanding of ancient texts have strengthened Spronk's argument on the cult of the dead. One of the evidence is the architecture of the Ugarit graves. This is his description,

The rooms are spacious and vaulted. They were accessible via a stair case. In the walls are niches leaving room for, probably, lamps or perhaps cultic objects. An interesting indication of some kind of cultic activities concerning the dead is a tomb with a libation installation. In one room the excavators found four holes in the floor of the room above the tomb. They are interconnected with a conduit. The biggest hole is in fact a small canal leading through the roof of the tomb, ending above a vessel installed in the floor of the tomb. Apparently this was a way to care for the deceased without having to enter the tomb.

The caring of the dead by the living is clear from the architecture of the grave. But, for Spronk it is not enough to argue that the cult of the dead was practiced. To prove for the existence of the cult Spronk adds with textual evidence that relates to the cult. The text is the liturgy of the living king and his deceased. About it, Spronk says,

This text describes a funerary ritual in which all deceased members of the dynasty are invoked. They are named Rephaim, that is: 'healers', indicating their function and next to this called by their names. They are all invited with the help of the sungod Shapash, who knows the way into and out of the netherworld. In order to prevent that one of them is missed also the unnamed spirits receive an invitation, so that no one can become angry for being forgotten. Then they receive sacrifices and asked to give their blessing to the living king and queen.¹²

Another more spectacular archeological finding that just was excavated in 2002 is a long chamber below the royal palace in the ancient city of Qatna. This chamber has been interpreted by the experts as a place to perform banquets involving the living and the dead. Spronk says, "although we cannot be 100% certain about their interpretation, the archaeological facts do point in this direction, illustrating what we find in texts about the veneration of the dead as gods. Similar indications are also found more to the east, in Emar, where there is evidence of a funerary cult as part of the domestic cult. This funerary element appears to be typical of the private religion in this area."¹³

Although those findings were not directly about Israelite society, they still can be used as an insight for the Israelite culture. Recent studies on the religions of Israel revealed that they shared many similar traits with other religions in the area. Israel was in fact just one among many peoples who lived and struggled together for a better living in ancient Palestine. The old view that Israelite

¹² Klaas Spronk, *The Ancestors in The Religion of Ancient Israel and in Christian Theology*, p. 4.

¹³ Klaas Spronk, *The Ancestors in The Religion of Ancient Israel and in Christian Theology*, h. 4.

religion was different from the others is no longer defensible. So, if the other peoples performed the cult of the dead we may assume that the Israelite too practiced the cult. The problem is how we should understand biblical texts which may run counter to the fact that the cult of the dead was indeed practised by the Israelite. To answer this Spronk shows some biblical texts that actually testify the present of the cult of the dead. Most clearly is Deuteronomy 24:16: "I have not eaten any of the sacred portion while I was in mourning, nor have I removed any of it while I was unclean, nor have I offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the LORD my God; I have done everything you commanded me." This text has created a debate among the commentators. A few of them say that it is clear that the verse is against the practice of bringing offering for the dead. But, the others argue that the speaker refrained from giving the offering only when he is still in mourning. When the time of mourning is over he probably would do the offering for the dead. Having realized about the debate Spronk says, "this text at least indicates that the people of Israel were familiar with some kind of cult of the dead." In the meantime, there are other texts which also show that the people of Israel knew about the cult of the dead. They are Jeremiah 16:6-8; Psalm 16; 2 Kings 21:18, 26; Isaiah 66:17; 1 Samuel 28. It is even more remarkable when we look into the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Spronk finds that these stories were an alternative for the Israelite to transform the ancestral veneration to Baal with reference to Elijah and Elisha. In the Ugarit texts Baal is called the first of Rephaim, the deified spirits of the dead. He is the one who returns from the netherworld. Baal had the power over nature such as rain. He also was asked to help curing sickness, even resurrecting the dead. These are things which we find in the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Spronk says, "in his fight against Baal and his cult the prophets Elijah and Elisha time and again enter the domain of Baal, as if to show that the God of Israel can defeat Baal on his own terrain and with his own weapons."¹⁴

In response to Spronk, E.G. Singgih justifies that the dominant characteristic of the Old Testament is anti ancestral veneration. This stand reflects the view of "Yahweh alone" group which later became the dominant group in society. Singgih then proposes that what is important is the act of continuing reinterpretation of the texts. He refers to Isaiah 41:8; 51:2; and 63:16 which are often interpreted with the orientation to Yahweh's salvific action to Abraham which brings effect to the salvation of Abraham's descendants. In this interpretation the focus is on Yahweh, rather than Abraham. It is Yahweh who does the salvation. Nevertheless, Singgih says, "I do not want to deny Yahwe's ultimate role in saving Israel, but he is saving them through their ancestor Abraham. Israel is going

¹⁴ Klaas Spronk, *The Ancestors in The Religion of Ancient Israel and in Christian Theology*, h. 4

to be saved *because* they are descendants of Abraham".¹⁵ So the role of ancestor is very significant in the salvation of the descendants. But, Isaiah 63:16 may look problematic when interpreted in such the way of thinking.

For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name.

As the father, God here is contrasted with Abraham. For Singgih, this text expresses a view of a certain group among the Israelite who no longer satisfied with their identity as Abraham's descendant and anything in relation with Israel. Therefore, God is posed as the father in place of Abraham. But, that way of thinking does not deny that an ancestor like Abraham at one point was regarded as some kind of divine. At least, the text makes a comparison between God and Abraham as a redeemer. Based on this, Singgih then argues that it is possible to reinterpret the role of ancestors as those who still have a significant influence in the life of their descendants.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that the problem of ancestral veneration is far from being settled. Scholars are still disagreeing whether the Bible condones the ancestral veneration, or, the other way around, it prohibits the practice. In the context of the church, the problem is even bigger. Those who want to rethink and reinterpret the biblical texts so that the ancestral veneration can be given a space are in strong opposition with those who consider the view as liberal, syncretic, even false. However, when we take a close look at the daily life of the members of the church, we may find that the ancestral veneration is still alive. I myself live in Chinese Christian family. My grandparents and parents are buried in Chinese-Christian cemetery. In Indonesia, the cemetery for the Chinese and Christians shares the same space. Only in a few places the Muslims are buried in the same location as the Chinese and the Christians. The shape of the Chinese tombs whether they are Christian, or, Confucius, or, Buddhist are not very different. Of course, the difference is still noticeable, but, not that strong. It is also usual for the Chinese Christians to go to the cemetery and pray in front of the tombs of their ancestors. Honoring the ancestors is still very important for the Chinese Christians. Even the belief that the spirits of the ancestor are still around and will do something when the descendants are in need of help. I often hear people tell their experiences of meeting with their ancestors in dream, or, even, when they are awake. It often happens when the ancestors want to

¹⁵ Klaas Spronk, *The Ancestors in The Religion of Ancient Israel and in Christian Theology*, h. 5.

convey a certain message for their children. When I look around, I also notice that my fellow country men and women too have the same experience. Most people in Indonesia still keep the belief that their dead ancestors are still with them in one way or another. I therefore believe that the ancestral veneration is very basic nature of human being. It can be found in most, if not all societies.

Nevertheless, the contesting voice against the ancestral veneration is equally pervasive. Not only Christian teaching (I do not want to limit this only as Western way of thinking) which fiercely attack the ancestral veneration, a similar tone can also be heard from the secular people, especially those who are informed by scientific thinking. For those people maintaining ancestral veneration is outdated. In Indonesia, Chinese people have suffered from discrimination for a long time. The New Order government prohibited the Chinese to express their culture publicly. The Chinese could not have Chinese schools. The use of Chinese attributes was criticized even mocked. Most Chinese children were given western names as the use of Chinese names was not allowed. The Chinese lived in fear because when they tried to protest they could easily be accused as communist, or, disloyal to the country which in turn may provoke a riot against them. Looking from this bitter experience to the tradition, especially, ancestral veneration, I want to say that the prohibition on such the tradition is equal to defacing the Chinese.

But, as a way to deal with this controversy, I would like to propose a Bakhtian way of dialogical imagination. Earlier I explain that dialogical imagination is hermeneutic process. It is a process of making oneself exist. But, the existence does not take place in form of a single out of several choices. It is rather a dialogical process which always oscillates from one pole to another, one position to another. Through this dialogue one can find his / her self. The significance of dialogue is even more obvious nowadays when the followers of religions, at least half of them, become more radical. Perhaps you agree with me that the apt definition of radicalism is deafening to other voices, therefore, to dialogue. It is a betrayal not just to the other voices which have been ousted, but, also to the very nature of being human. Since being human is always dialogical. When we loose our natural desire to dialogue, we loose our humanity. I hope our meeting can bring us to this awareness, or, that it celebrates our dialogically.

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