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FUNERARY RITES AND THE CONCEPT OF ANCESTORS IN JAPAN

*A Challenge to the Christian Churches?**

Introduction

Ancestor worship, or *sozen sūhai*, is one of the favorite topics in some Japanese academic circles, but in ordinary speech the term is surprisingly rarely used, at least in comparison with the importance given to its content. Nowadays almost everybody would associate the term and also everything that goes with it to Buddhism which is understood to take care of the dead and the after-life. In fact, although Buddhism has been instrumental in the formation of an elaborate ritual concerned with the dead and of certain ideas about the fate of the departed, the veneration and respect paid to the ancestors have roots that go beyond Buddhist ritual or doctrine. As has been pointed out again and again the Japanese attitude toward ancestors partakes of that groundstream of Japan's religious consciousness which gives life to a great number of religious expressions without respect to their particular doctrinal presentation. But ancestor worship is more than just a religious phenomenon. It is part and parcel of a complex of beliefs, attitudes, obligations, social relations, etc., centered around the ancestors. In order to understand what the ancestors mean in religious terms we also have to keep in mind these other dimensions.

If the attitude towards the ancestors is of such basic importance, then there can hardly be any doubt that the Church in her effort to bring the Gospel to the Japanese cannot afford to disregard it. Here we have one of the core arenas where the encounter of Christians with Japanese ideas has to be negotiated. It is therefore not surprising that the Church, or better the Churches, have been confronted with the problem of how to deal with the ancestors. It is however surprising to note that very often the problem is seen mainly as one of (Christian) doctrine and rites, as if the other aspects of the question would have only minor relevance once a person has become a Christian. Certainly, the doctrinal aspects are of special importance to a Japanese Christian, while they hardly touch the non-Christian. We have

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to ask, however, whether this kind of doctrinal concern brings us to the bottom of the problem of the ancestors as a whole, especially if we endeavor to think about the treatment of the ancestors in a Japanese and at the same time Christian environment. In order to focus the problem I will start with a historical episode and then describe some of the implications of the Japanese concept

of ancestors. A discussion of the main features of funerary rites will provide a reasonably "thick description," to use Geertz's term, which would give us, if not exactly a definition, a feeling of what the ancestors are. After having laid this groundwork, I will then proceed to delineate some of the practical problems the Church has to face.

A Consideration of Christian Attitudes

In March 1867 a certain Mokichi had died in one of the hamlets of Urakami. He was a *Kirishitan*, but after his death people went to call the temple priest to perform the funeral as it was prescribed by law. However, the envoys purposely angered the priest on the way to the village so thoroughly that he finally turned back without having performed the funeral. So the *Kirishitan* proceeded to conduct their own, non-Buddhist funeral. So far the action of the *Kirishitan* could be seen as another instance in a long row of experiences and practices that had helped them to survive severe persecution. The severe attitude of the authorities had taught them means to avoid an open conflict and still be reasonably faithful to their convictions. If pressed to renounce their faith they would do it outwardly, but not in their heart. Afterwards they would recite the prayer of *konchirisan* (Port. *contrição*), of contrition in the secrecy of their houses in order to ask God forgiveness for what they could not avoid (Kataoka 1979: 203-207). Or if they had a funeral performed by the Buddhist priest, they would have people recite a prayer in another room to "efface the sutra" (the *o-kyōgeshi*), and take all items with some Buddhist implication out of the coffin after the priest had left.

Mokichi's funeral was different in that people did not even allow for the appearance of a Buddhist funeral. Since

such cases recurred in the same year several times, the village headman, willing to assume that it might be a question of animosity against the temple, questioned a certain Sampachi who also had refused a Buddhist funeral for his mother. He asked Sampachi, what other sect he would prefer. Sampachi's answer was straightforward enough. He and his fellow villagers did not prefer some other Buddhist sect, they wanted to be freed from all bonds with a Buddhist temple. When the headman demanded a list of all those who were of the same intention, he got not only the list, but also a declaration which stated that according to the belief they had received from their forefathers no other religion would be of any avail for the soul after death than the religion of the Lord of Heaven. It would therefore be a most dreadful thing to counteract the requirements of that religion (Morioka 1984: 73). This declaration was one of the main factors promoting the last persecution of 1867.

Morioka Kiyomi, discussing this incident, explains the turnabout in the attitude of the *Kirishitan* by the fact that they had come into contact with Bernard-Thadée Petitjean and the French new missionaries who had arrived in Nagasaki two years earlier. Petitjean had taught the *Kirishitan* that faith had to be confessed not only in one's heart but also through one's actions. Even if we grant that the villagers might have felt

instinctively the immediate advent of a political change which was to have great influence on their fate, such a turnabout in standpoint at that time and after only two years of renewed contact with a missionary is truly remarkable. I wish to stress however that, even in the time before that, people did not really have the intention to compromise with the temple, but were rather forced to do so in order to save their own life.

Having pointed out this uncompromising standpoint of the *Kirishitan* of 1867 Morioka goes on to compare it with the present attitude of the Catholic Church. He says: "When we compare this with the present affirmative stance of the Catholic Church towards the performance of the last rites by the temple priest, we find as great a difference as that between heaven and earth" (Morioka 1984: 85). It seems to me that Morioka's sympathy with an uncompromising standpoint towards other religions reflects the opinion of a good number of Christians who think that the two worlds, the Christian and the non-Christian, should be kept distinctly apart from each other in any event.

After the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church is making efforts towards serious understanding and appreciation of other peoples' religious feeling and experiences. As a matter of fact, the text to which Morioka refers in order to show the difference of present Catholic practice from that of the *Kirishitan*, is witness to this new attitude. It is found in a booklet of guidelines for Catholics in dealing with questions arising from veneration of the ancestors. I quote the passage:

"Question 14: I am the successor of the household (*ie*), but since both my ancestors and parents were Buddhists, in consideration of my brothers and sisters and other relatives I need to have a Buddhist priest perform the funeral at a Buddhist temple. Is that allowed?

Answer: Of course, it is allowed. It goes

against the virtue of charity to disregard other people's religion just because oneself is a Catholic. This is a point that always has to be kept in mind" (Christiaens 1980: 21-22).¹

This text is quite noteworthy for its straightforwardness. However, before I go on I would like to notice that to my understanding there is quite a considerable difference between the case of the *Kirishitan* and that of the successor in this text. The *Kirishitan* refused to have a Buddhist funeral performed for another fellow *Kirishitan*, but the person in the handbook asks what to do in the case of his non-Christian parents and ancestors. It is probably a moot thing to speculate what the *Kirishitan* might have done in such a situation, because considering their situation at 1867, they might not have had too many non-*Kirishitan* relatives anymore, so that such a problem would not arise. And if they had, it is difficult to imagine why they should have rejected a Buddhist funeral for a Buddhist relative.

In the recently published new handbook concerning the Catholics' attitude towards the ancestors and the dead the authors make a considerable effort to give also doctrinal or rational reasons why such and such action is possible for a Christian or not. The booklet being a guidebook for Catholics does not surprise by the fact that it lays some weight on solving the main problems by doctrinal reasoning. However, the reactions against a first announcement in the *Katorikku Shinbun*, The Catholic Weekly, in February 1983 seem to suggest that there are more aspects involved than only a doctrinal reinterpretation of rituals and attitudes. The title of that announcement said that the Church is preparing a document on Catholic "Ancestor Worship", *sozen sūhai*.² Before I consider the meaning of the reactions to this announcement in their context I have to explain the context, i.e. what the ancestors are and what their role is.

The Japanese Concept of the Ancestors

Traditionally speaking, it is of primary importance to a Japanese to belong to a "place," (*ba*) or a "frame" (*waku*). Such a frame provides protection and security and demands allegiance and loyalty in return. It is therefore a mutual relationship which is often expressed as *on*, "a (bestowal of) favor" and *hō-on*, a "returning of favor." In traditional society one of the classic *loci* for such a relationship is the household, the *ie*.³ The *ie* is a domestic unit that includes not only those living in the house at a given time, but also extends to the members of past and future generations. Once created, this unit extends ideally into countless generations providing the primary focus for a person's allegiance and his/her sense of belonging. An *ie* has, therefore, living as well as dead members. In a way the past generations represent the ideal form of an *ie* because their existence is beyond the ordinary vicissitudes of daily life. In reality, however, there is a threat to the very existence of the *ie*, that is the possibility of it lapsing altogether if it should happen that the bearer of a line dies without offspring.⁴ It is, therefore, the supreme obligation of the head of a household to provide a successor and therewith the guarantee of a future. This is necessary, because the ancestors depend on the services given by their offspring. In return they guarantee the *ie*'s well-being. Here we have the basics of ancestor worship. Many consider this kind of care for the dead to be the dominant groundstream of Japanese religion as such, conditioning all other religious expression. It has distinct features that make it into a "religion of the household," of a rather limited social group, and not into the religion of a whole people (Ooms 1967). Robert Smith has formulated this recently saying that ancestor worship is so much centered on one family or household that "as a con-

sequence, what is proper practice may usefully be defined as what one's household has always done" (Smith 1984: 100). It is therefore a very constricted and "land locked" religion. However, for the members of an *ie* it is imbued with a high degree of intimacy and a consciousness of mutual dependence between the living and the dead.

When pressed for an answer about the whereabouts of the ancestors or the departed, people might say that they have "gone to heaven." But the ordinary behavior of the same people tells quite a different story. For the first fifty days after a person's death it is said that the spirit still lingers on around the house, where the deceased had spent his life. A woman whose husband had died suddenly in his sleep told me once that every night until the forty-ninth day she felt how he would creep in under her quilt. Something like this is not at all an unusual story. But once this period is over and the departed is said to have gone away, then they can be addressed without much formality at the *butsudan*, the Buddhist ancestral altar in the house where the ancestral tablets are kept, or they may be visited at or invited from the grave. The departed, although living in another world, continue to be intimately related to the living members of the *ie*.⁵ They are esteemed as those who provided once for the now living, and so they are thought of as being still closely concerned with the well-being of the *ie* and its protection (Smith 1974: 127). On the other hand, they depend on the care of the living for their own comfort. In a traditional household the ancestors are offered food and drink in the same way as the members of the family. The family will eat only after the ancestors have received their portion. On certain days they are especially welcomed into

the house for a short period. In any case, they are thought of as being close and taking a keen interest in the events of the household.

However, not all of the departed are of the same status from the beginning. Those who died recently are still in need of certain ritual assistance in order to attain full ancestorhood. They are those whose memory is still alive among the living. They are often addressed as *hotoke*, buddha. The departed in this state

are still involved in an ongoing process of development towards ancestorhood. Ancestors in the full sense of the word on the other hand are in a state of serenity that knows no further development, at least for most of them. They are just remembered as "the ancestors," *sorei*, without particular names or any other characteristics. Their identity has been absorbed into a general category (Plath 1964: 302-303).

Funerary Rites: An Outline

There is no other ritual complex that expresses the relationship between the living and the dead, i.e., the ancestors, more emphatically than the funerary rites. In the following I will take up some of their main features, but I will concentrate mainly on the concept of ancestors and its social implications, because, as we have seen already, the two cannot be separated from each other.

Death is the first step on the road to ancestorhood and marks a radical change, but it does not separate the departed completely from the *ie*. The change that occurred finds vivid expression in a number of symbolic actions representing a clear inversion of everyday life. Soon after the person has expired, the body is washed and dressed, but the dress has to be sewn by as many women as possible and care is taken that it looks carelessly put together and that the ends of the pieces of cloth which are used do not fit together. The garment is then put on the body in such a way that it closes with that side on top which would be underneath on a living person. The body is then bedded into quilts like a sleeping person, but its head will be turned towards the north, a direction that is often painstakingly avoided when people go to sleep. Behind the pillow there is a small altar with some offerings but also a folding screen which has been put up upside

down.

The night before the burial a short ceremony is held by the priest, and the relatives of the deceased stay up late, exchanging memories about the dead. This is in fact the last time when the whole family, and only the family, is together with its deceased member. On the day of the burial the Buddhist priest comes again and prepares first two wooden tablets by inscribing them with the posthumous name of the departed. One of them will be taken by the funeral procession to the cemetery, the other will remain in the house until the forty-ninth day after death, when it, too, might be brought to the grave to be left to decay. Besides a wooden *tōba*, the token of a stupa, the priest inscribes another board with the names of seven Buddhas. This is brought to the grave on the seventh day after death has occurred and it designates the seven worlds of Buddhas the departed has to go through during the first forty-nine days after death. During that period, every week on the memorial day somebody, possibly the head of the family, visits the grave. With each elapsing week the deceased is increasingly purified until on the forty-ninth day, he/she loses any material connection with the place where he/she lived. In the house a special kind of altar has been built over the coffin. After the burial the main

parts of the altar are kept until the hundredth day when the immediate period of the funeral finally ends. After that the new tablet is put into the ordinary ancestor shelf.

A year after the day of death a first anniversary service is held. Similar celebrations will be had after 3, 7, 13, 17, 23, 27 and finally after 33 years. Because these celebrations involve quite a large financial expense, not everybody would be able to hold all of them, but the last, called *tomurai-age*, "the lifting of memorials," usually receives special attention. It marks the moment when the departed has finally become an ancestor in the full sense and therewith has definitely joined the group of an *ie*'s forebearers. After that the tablet is deposited in the temple or on the grave, and so even this last piece of individual identity is lost.

At this point whereas the person has disintegrated as an individual, he/she has become fully integrated into the larger entity of the *ie*, where he/she is in close communion with the living. Notwithstanding the radical change which has occurred, the ancestor or the collectivity of ancestors is an essential part of the *ie* and is even the source of its well-being. The ancestors are in a very real sense seen as the protectors of the household (Komatsu and Tatematsu 1984: 176). This finds a special expression when the ancestors merge with the agricultural deities that bestow the material daily livelihood upon the living.

Theoretically, every human being could become an ancestral spirit. Social conditions, however, determine whether a particular person will in fact become an ancestor or not. As Smith's study on ancestral tablets has shown, people do not always do what they say they do. And so it happens that they include also individuals in the ancestors' shelf who, according to the theory, would have no place there, because they do not fulfill the social condition of belonging to the *ie*. But in spite of this we can

say that membership, even membership of a special kind, in the *ie* is the precondition for becoming an ancestor one day. To be a member one has to be born or adopted into the *ie*, but in order to eventually become an ancestor, one has further to have a successor. Therefore, to marry can be seen as the basic condition or even as the first and necessary step on the way to final ancestorhood (Ooms 1967: 291).⁶

Any death affects not only the person that has died, but also the survivors. Speaking from my own field experience in a rural area of Northern Japan, I would like to distinguish three groups of persons who are affected each in a different way by the death of a villager.⁷ The first and central group is, of course, the family of the departed and its relatives. The family is really the nucleus and center of the rites, at least of most of them, but it plays a rather passive role especially in the early stages of the funerary process. It appears to be grouped with the departed in a kind of polluting relationship which excludes the family members from rituals for the *kami* and from certain community activities where a celebration for the *kami*⁸ would be involved. Contact with them is also polluting, particularly through the means of shared life. The family shares the food with its dead member, but others avoid eating something that has been cooked on the same fire as that of the family.

When the funeral procession is formed after the last rites in the house, for the first time the core group, the family, emerges from seclusion before the eyes of the outside world. At this moment it demonstrates the significant changes that have occurred in the alignment of its members by their relative position in the procession. But at the same time it also demonstrates the continuing unity of the *ie*. The members of the family form the center of the procession around the coffin. The head or the new head of the *ie* is the one to carry the tablet

of the deceased, which can be seen as the focal point where the worlds of the ancestors and of the living meet. This clearly underscores the new composition of the *ie* together with its continuity.

Continuity is not only demonstrated, it is also truly guaranteed by new births, and so the women of the family walk behind the coffin holding on to a long piece of white cloth which is attached to the coffin. Its name, "the rope of life," is a clear reference to the women as the bearers of life which they pass on in the line of the person that just has died. This is further underlined by what happens to this cloth once the party has arrived at the temple or the cemetery. Whereas nothing of all the other things that are used at the grave may be brought back into the house, this white "rope of life" can be claimed by a woman to take home. She would wrap it around her womb during the last weeks of pregnancy because it is believed that it will help to have a safe delivery.

Once the burial is over, the family is left alone and assumes its responsibility for the departed and for the grave. Before this two other groups play a very important and prominent role: the close neighbors and the hamlet community. Both groups operate on a principle of reciprocity, because it is understood that any help extended will be returned when the occasion arises. In fact, all the other visitors at the funeral who just pay their respects and give a contribution to be used for the needs of the bereaved family are treated according to this same principle. They all receive a small token present in return and their names and contributions are carefully registered on lists which will be kept and referred to when there is need to make an appropriate contribution in return.

The closer of the two groups are the neighbors who are something like an extension of the household. There is a Japanese expression which is quite often quoted by the villagers which says "Three houses in front and one on each

side." It means that no matter whether good or bad fortune strikes a house, these neighbors will also be affected by it. People in this group feel a specially strong obligation to go and extend a helping hand to each other. Together with the more distant relatives or the in-laws of the bereaved family they take care of the affairs in the house as attending to the guests, preparing and serving meals, etc.

The last group, finally, is taken from the hamlet. It is involved in a more formally established manner, because it is a funerary association which has the responsibility of organizing the funeral as such. They see to it that the relatives are duly informed about the death and the time of the funeral, that the grave is prepared and the procession organized. They also carry the coffin and a number of items that go with any funeral procession. It is a voluntary group, but in a small hamlet every household is represented and can therefore count on the group's assistance when need arises. The contribution of both groups to the funeral is fulfilled with the end of the funeral proper, but often the neighbors make regular visits to the new grave on the weekly memorial days until the forty-ninth day.

Here we witness a network of mutual cooperation which is active in a double sense. It first emphasizes the unity and continuity of the *ie* group in spite of a momentary crisis. Second, it reaffirms the *ie*'s role as part of a lateral, and not too formal, organization, the hamlet, which itself shows characteristics similar to those of the *ie*, although on a different level. This means that the hamlet, too, is a group that extends through time and is formed by a shared locality. In contrast to the *ie*, it is not organized by a single line, but like it, the hamlet operates, at least ideally speaking, through the loyal mutual cooperation of the different *ie* groups.

All the rites mentioned so far can be performed only once for any particular

individual. There are, however, further rites which recur regularly and after certain fixed periods. It is convenient to distinguish two types: one that is repeated every year, and one that is performed only once in several years. The first type involves mainly the immediate family and those born from the current head. These are the celebrations of *higan*, the Spring and Autumn Equinox, and of *bon*, the mid-summer Festival of the Dead. Visits to the graves and special attention given to the ancestral altar are the main features of these celebrations. The regular memorials are of the second type. Such celebrations have a more formal character and bring together quite a large group of relatives. These ceremonies involve a rite performed by the priest at the ancestral altar, then a visit to the grave and a common meal. The official (or theological) purpose of this ceremony is to turn over the merits of the rites to the dead to help him to advance further on the road to full ancestorhood. But the participants do not appear always to have a clear idea about this religious aspect. But they certainly want to renew their closeness to a particular departed person and through the departed also to their relatives whom they otherwise almost might forget. I was told repeatedly that the meaning of these celebrations, after all, is to bring together the offspring of the one who is remembered. They are, therefore, reunions of more or less distant relatives, the degree of distance depending on how far the departed is advanced towards the last stages of the process. Reunions for a person who has died long ago tend to become increasingly formal and once the last memorial has been held, connections among dis-

tant relatives of that ancestor's generation may easily be allowed to fall into oblivion. The moment the deceased becomes a full ancestor, there occurs a double sort of oblivion: the oblivion of the ancestor's own individuality, and the oblivion of the relatives who forget to trace their line to him. After a time during which his offspring and those of his siblings form a larger group of relatives expanding beyond the single *ie*, the departed comes finally back, so to say, to where everything started at birth, *viz.*, the *ie*. As long as personal traits are remembered they provide enough reason to hold together quite a large group of individuals, but the degree of intimacy binding the group together decreases with the increase in distance to the remembered person.

Taking all of this into consideration, we can conclude that the ancestors in Japan are more than just a concept in the minds of people. They take on a new kind of reality in the social group of those living members forming one household in succession to the ancestors. The care for the ancestors involves, therefore, not only a spiritual or religious attitude, it also demands for the fulfillment of social obligations which are strongly felt, even if one changes his religious conviction or has no particular convictions at all. In this sense ancestor veneration or worship means dedication to the *ie*. Therefore, the successor turned Christian in the short text quoted above is still expected to do what is his duty as a successor to the *ie*. Furthermore, the Japanese Civil Code stipulates that the successor has care of the ancestors and the ritual objects going with this without making any reference to a particular religious conviction.⁹

The Reaction of the Church to the Ancestors

How does the Church react to this situation in her effort to bring the Gospel to the Japanese? Let me start with

a quote from a study made by the priest of an urban parish. He asked a hundred parishioners about the day when they

would remember their dead. Only two gave All Souls' Day, most of them said it would be *bon* or *higan*. Then he comments on the findings in the following manner: "Of the one hundred Catholics, almost half of them, forty-seven, have Buddhist services and twenty-eight have Catholic services performed and some twenty-five do nothing for their dead. Since one quarter do nothing for their dead, one wonders whether something in Christianity is responsible for the negligence towards the dead in a country where respect for the dead is so much a part of their cultural heritage" (Doerner 1977: 174).

Knowing nothing about the social background of these Catholics it is difficult to assess the author's judgement of "negligence." On the other hand, his conclusion cannot entirely be dismissed as just too pessimistic or misled. It might in fact be a result of the Church's influence or reflect a presumably Christian standpoint towards non-Christian or also towards Christian dead.

We know that this problem has a long history in the Catholic Church. Personally, I find it quite significant that Japan was instrumental in bringing about a certain opening in the Church's attitude in the so-called *Question of Rites*. Directly or indirectly the new pronouncements on the question in the thirties of this century are related to Japan. Based on a Japanese Government declaration the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith instructed the Apostolic Delegate in Tokyo that Christians could take part in rites at the shrine or funerals provided that they made it clear that they understand such rites to be only of a civil nature. As one of the reasons for this decision the Congregation refers to an evolution in time and customs which had the result to divest the rites of their original religious contents (Sylloge 1939: 539-540). Permission to participate was given with the understanding that these rites had lost their religious significance. In a second instruction given in 1939 a

similar interpretation is expressed again and the obligation of an oath for the priests abrogated (AAS 1940: 24-26). However, the reminder of Benedict XIV's interdiction of 1742 was upheld, including the prohibition to discuss the question. I will return to this problem later. Suffice it for the moment to say that we do not lack examples where formerly religious rites ended up as purely civil ceremonies. On the other hand there is also the danger of reading into unfamiliar concepts or behavior a meaning which is taken to be there just because they happen to have certain similarities with Christian concepts or behavior.¹⁰ Strictly speaking the documents mentioned have non-Christian rites in mind and do not address the possibility of creating similar rites in Christian ritual, which might take into account the importance which attitude towards ancestors may also have for Christians.

After Vatican II the problem was felt anew and attempts have been made to help Christians in deciding what to do in particular cases, or to find a Christian expression for remembering the ancestors. Father Christiaens' booklet and the latest publication by the Episcopal Commission for Non-Christian Religions reflect this new attitude. Both documents are composed with a pastoral purpose in mind. They are not meant to be doctrinal declarations (Episcopal Commission 1985: 3). The Commission's document refers to the Mystical Body of Christ as the basis which unites the living and the dead. A Christian's love for his forebears can find expression in prayers for the dead, and the saints may intervene with God for the sake of the faithful, but it is made clear that they do not have any special power by themselves. The document also states explicitly that to remember and venerate the dead does not mean that they are worshiped as God, *kami*, is worshiped.¹¹ Then it goes on to refer to God's intention to save all mankind,

which would include also those who in fact did not personally embrace Christian faith. This last explanation is given in a section about "communion with the ancestors in Japan," and it says that, based on faith in God's saving intention, it is necessary to express one's love towards the ancestors. It is, however, quite noteworthy that the word "ancestor" is used in this part of the document, whereas it is not used in the first part where the Christian attitude is explained. There the document speaks about "communion with the dead." This indicates a significant shift of emphasis from a particular group's ancestor to the community of all the living with all dead in Christ. A similar idea pervades the rites in the Ritual for funerals, which centers on the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection in which the Christian partakes in virtue of being immersed in Christ through Baptism. Consequently, emphasis is given to Christian hope in the face of death. The Ritual would allow for the use of local customs as long as they do not contradict this spirit of the Gospel. Compared with what I have said about the ancestors there can be no doubt that all this signifies quite a fundamental difference from the ordinary Japanese concept of the ancestors and the obligations toward them.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the first announcement in the Catholic Weekly about the Episcopal Commission preparing a document on *sozen sūhai*, "ancestor worship," met with strong reactions from some Christians and some non-Christians alike. For both groups the term "ancestor worship" used by an official group of the Catholic Church was a stumbling block. Christians seem to have understood the term more in the traditional Japanese sense and so they felt that the Church was engaged in abandoning her treasured values. They had embraced the Christian faith to get away from all this, and did not understand what the Church was up to. On

the other hand, non-Christians saw a different kind of danger. Some feared that such an approach by the Church could be used by those forces who are trying to revive a kind of State Shinto and bring back the pre-War situation with the emperor's line as the ultimate ancestral line of all Japanese. Others, e.g. on the Shinto side, saw it not as an attempt at spiritual rapprochement or as a revision of the essence of Christianity, but rather as "a discussion only about whether one can or cannot 'change qualitatively' the mentality of ancestor veneration itself so as to make it conformable to the essence of Christianity" (Swyngedouw 1983:362). They felt that a treasured concept was being used as a cover to introduce silently a new meaning. I do not think that they were entirely mistaken in their assumption, because I see the pronouncement as an instance of an attitude employing a "transformation model" for its approach to the problem (Tracy 1977:97). From these reactions it is evident that the Church's position is not without problems, but I feel that it is the only attitude allowing for creative flexibility, under the condition that the implications of such a transformation are reckoned with. We have to see that cultural meanings are involved here, which, although quite stable, are not permanently fixed. They can undergo changes, as a result of changes in the environment or of the impact of a new ideology, philosophy or religion. It is however, important to keep in mind that such a rearrangement of meanings and interpretations is rarely a completely one-way affair, for it may affect all partners although in different degrees.

This aspect has been addressed by Nishiyama in a study about the effects of indigenization on the believers' faith in a largely Christian village. Focussing on the importance of an ancestral cult and the presence or absence of an ancestral altar in Christian families, he finds that 38.5% of the Christians

remember their dead with a feeling of respect, but do not pray to them as to *kami* or buddhas for divine protection. He concludes that the Christians "succeeded to a fairly high degree in extricating themselves from the traditional ancestral cult" (Nishiyama 1985: 52), and is inclined to see it as an instance of change in the ancestral cult. These Christians did not have an ancestral altar. However, he also found that 26.3% of the Christians confronted the ancestors with a "feeling of praying to the *kami* or the buddhas for protection" (Nishi-

yama 1985: 53). Since these were those Christians who possessed an ancestral altar, he interprets their attitude as a "substantive change in the Christianity of this community" caused by the ancestral cult. It might be questioned whether such a conclusion can be legitimately reached by sociological methods, but the answers of the villagers cannot be brushed off as completely irrelevant. Their case shows, at least in adumbrations, that a process of transformation works in two directions.

Conclusion

If the Church wants to give directions within such a framework, they can be given only when a serious effort is made to understand what the ancestors are, not only in religious but also in social terms. To such a purpose, it seems to me, it is vital that the Church trusts her faithful and enlists their help. I do not mean to say that responsibility can simply be tossed on other shoulders, but I do think that openness means trust in the responsible actions of those who embrace the faith, the Japanese Christians. In fact, the Roman documents I have mentioned consider it invariably necessary to have the Christians come to their own responsible decisions. It is as Offner concludes his contribution to a recent discussion on ancestor worship, "while Western Christians may give their sympathetic counsel regarding these domestic memorial rites as outsiders, it is finally the Japanese Christians themselves who must determine whether or not their motivations and actions are in keeping with or in violation of scriptural truth and the spirit of Christ" (Offner 1983: 34).

As we have seen there are many more things involved in ancestor worship than just problems of doctrine and its expression in a particular rite. As Morioka has observed very succinctly, to remem-

ber the ancestors constitutes a stream of thought that flows through all Japanese from of old. It is the religious foundation for the common people (Ogawa *et al.* 1981: 23). In other words, it is the main stream of folk religion, which does not offer a system of rationally organized ideas about the ancestors, but a satisfying solution about the problem of life and death, supported by beliefs and customs which respond to a deep seated longing of the people. Thus, it does not come as a surprise any more when one reads that modernization in Japan has consequences mainly on a highly intellectual level but does not reach the deeper consciousness of the people, which supports the traditional community (Ogawa *et al.* 1981: 25). I think that this "deeper consciousness" is the area where the principle of reciprocity mentioned above comes into play. Of course, the new situations in the cities may eventually bring about changes in the composition of families and ultimately in the form of ancestor worship. The idea of the household as a continuing entity through time may indeed lose its importance and ancestor worship may decline as far as it is connected with the *ie*. The question, however, is whether the ancestors are essentially linked to the structure of the *ie*

and therefore would necessarily have to share its fate. The feeling of closeness to the ancestors, supported by the conviction that they grant protection and that therefore one has to be loyal to them lies deeper than any particular social form which may provide the frame within which those feelings come into play. I think that Japanese ancestor worship is primarily rooted in the "ethos" of Japanese culture, which is characterized by reciprocity and loyalty, attitudes that find expression in relationships of receiving and returning favors. It is quite conceivable that this ethos of Japanese culture is not fatefully

connected with the existence or non-existence of an *ie*-organization in the narrow sense of this word. Therefore, even if the family would end up as a unit of people who may choose freely for whom of their forebears they might wish to care, it could still be an expression of that obligation which the living feel towards some of the departed from whom they have received special favors. For that reason I think that a change in the organization of the family does not have to bring along a change in the basic attitude towards the ancestors and consequently would not necessitate the disappearance of ancestor worship.

Notes

1 In the new edition by the Episcopal Commission this corresponds to question 11, p. 20. Although the text is practically taken over from the older booklet, only the *muron*, "of course" at the beginning of the answer is left out. Did the authors anticipate stronger reactions?

2 This is a direct translation of the term which appeared in the weekly. Christians tend to prefer the term "ancestor veneration," *sozen sūkei*, arguing that worship is due only to God. In this connection it is interesting to note that contrary to the announcement in the paper the booklet of the Episcopal Commission does not use the term *sozen sūhai* (except as a quote) or *sozen sūkei*. On the other hand, in an interview with *Mainichi Shinbun* Bishop Tanaka uses the term *sozen sūhai* as does his interviewer. The Bishop makes it clear that this is not the same as what is given to God, and the general presentation of the booklet's content leaves no doubt that there is a fundamental difference. And yet I am quite a bit intrigued by this. It might be reading too much into the interview, but I wonder if the use of this term here would signal an instance where the quite natural feelings of a Japanese towards the ancestors were expressed equally naturally. Could it be seen as an example for the fact that "ancestor worship" is not first connected with a particular doctrine, and that doctrine enters only later as a sort of dis-

claimer? (Tahara 1985:4)

Others have proposed the term "ancestral rites," claiming that it would include the idea of having the rites performed "for the benefit of the dead." I shall use "ancestor worship" as an anthropological term describing a complex which includes religious as well as social aspects (Berentsen 1983: 3-4; Swyngedouw 1983: 364).

3 *Ie* can mean the house as well as the people living in it. In this paper the term is used to include both, the locality and the inhabitants. I shall use this word to underline the aspect of continuity the Japanese term implies. In the cities and under modern employment conditions the family is undergoing a number of significant changes. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the idea of the *ie* are being made use of in schools or companies. "Traditional" means, therefore, not only that part of the society that still strongly keeps the old customs but includes also those where new forms are molded in analogy to older ones.

4 Concern about such a possibility could be felt clearly when people learned that I was single in spite of being the only son in our family. They were relieved again when they heard that a younger sister of mine had *de facto* become the successor. See also note no. 6.

5 In a recent opinion poll 59% of the interviewed said that they strongly felt close to the

ancestors. Broken down into age groups the numbers reveal that the feeling of closeness increases with advancing age. On the other hand old people believe less in the existence of a "soul," *reikon*, after death. The belief in the existence of *hotoke* increases however with an increase in age. *Hotoke* is the common term for a recently deceased person. It is possible that older people did not understand the term "soul" very well, an experience I had repeatedly during my field work, but the poll is not clear about this (NHK 1984:11; 44-46).

6 This does not mean that the successor has to be an offspring from the household head's marriage. Adoption was, and still is, used as a convenient means to make up for the absence of natural or desired offspring. See also note no. 4.

7 The same would apply to other rural areas. In the cities some of the community's duties have been taken over by professional undertakers and at times by the employer of the deceased.

8 The term *kami* is used for a variety of superhuman beings in Japanese religious tradi-

tion, but here it stands mainly for the Japanese deities as being distinct from Buddhas or from the Christian God. A problem arises because the term is used for God in Christian language. In this paper it is used only for Japanese deities.

9 The post-War Civil Code did abolish the *ie* organization in the form of the pre-War Family System. Nevertheless, the authors of the Civil Code could not decide, even after long discussions, to do away with the traditional form of inheritance for the ritual items harbored by the household (Takeda 1976: 188-193).

10 For the situation in Africa Ela has brought out the difficulties and dangers of an approach inspired by Western ideas. His observations are well worth being considered also in a Japanese context (Ela 1977: 38-43).

11 The text, produced for Catholics, uses the word *kami* which here has to be understood in the Catholic sense of God, but somebody with a feeling for the situation where an ancestor can become a *kami* at times, clearly senses the difficulty. See also note no. 8.

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