

A matter of re-interpreting certain Biblical texts: response to Klaas Spronk

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Abstrak:

Tanggapan Singgih terhadap Spronk dilatarbelakangi oleh pengalaman ayahnya, yang meskipun mendapat didikan Gereformeerd yang melarang penghormatan kepada orang tua yang sudah meninggal dan berziarah ke kuburan, akhirnya toh melaksanakan hal itu. Pengalaman itu menjadikan jelas bagi Singgih bahwa larangan tsb bersumber pada pemahaman Barat-modern mengenai “nuclear family”, padahal pemahaman Timur-tradisional biasanya adalah “extended family”. Jadi meskipun diwacanakan sebagai teologi, sebenarnya lebih sosiologis daripada teologis! Paham terakhir ini tersebar luas di Indonesia Timur, dan meskipun secara resmi Gereja-Gereja di wilayah itu menentang penghormatan terhadap nenek moyang, diam-diam warga gereja tetap melaksanakannya dengan membuat pertemuan 3,7, 40 malam sesudah penguburan, dan setiap Natal dan Paskah orang berbondong-bondong berziarah ke kuburan untuk berkomunikasi dengan yang telah meninggal. Penghormatan terhadap nenek moyang dapat dipertimbangkan kembali seperti usul Mery Kolimon, namun diperlukan juga sikap konfrontatif di samping konfirmatif. Pada akhirnya Singgih memeriksa teks Perjanjian Lama, dan mengusulkan agar Yesaya 41:8, 51:2 dan 63:16 digolongkan ke dalam teks-teks mengenai agama kekerabatan, dan Abraham serta Yakub, nenek moyang Israel, ditafsir sebagai nenek moyang, yang meskipun sudah meninggal, ikut memperhatikan kemaslahatan Israel.

Kata-kata kunci:

Nuclear family-extended family-ancestor’s veneration-pilgrimage to cemeteries-kinship or familial religion

Introduction: Childhood memories

I am part of a big family. I have two brothers and three sisters, and when I was 17, my parents decided to adopt a baby-girl, so all in all, there were nine people at home in Makassar, in Eastern Indonesia. Almost everyday I met my relatives. Uncles, aunts, and cousins from either side of the family (my father had seven brothers and sisters; my mother had twenty: ten brothers and sisters added with ten step-brothers and step-sisters live in the same town. Half of the relatives from either side are Christians, the other half are Muslims. So we are part of an extended family, which relationship transcends religious affiliation. I think ancestor veneration is part of the extended-family system. Members of an extended-family include the living and the dead, and as the dead who precedes the living is giving protection to the living, the dead become more important than the living. At this moment I am unable to give you a social theory which may

support my inkling, but from my experience living within an extended family system, I hope you can have an idea of what I am talking about.

My parents belong to the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (Indonesian abbr: GPIB). This is the former *Indische Kerk*, which was a state church in the colonial times. In 1948 it became a self-supporting church, but the characteristics of a state church are still there to this day, with emphasis on the bureaucracy rather than church tenets. However, my father worked as an administrator for a *zendings* hospital after the second world war, and there he met subsequently with *zendings* medical doctors, who were mostly *Gereformeerden*. They had a great influence on my father and mother, and so one of their outlooks was evident, i.e. my parents never visited any cemetery. You make a distinction between respect for the dead and veneration of the dead. My parents did not care, even for mere respect for the dead. But this piece of *Gereformeerde* faith did not last long.

In the end of September 1965, at one of the days that were filled with frightening news of the death of six generals and rumour of an attempted coup, my grandmother from my father's side died after a short illness. When she was brought to a Muslim cemetery, my father and mother went with the throng. This was unexpected, and it was there that for the first time I saw my father weeping. Then we went home. In the people's culture, there is a custom to gather every 3, 7, 40, 100 and 1000 days to commemorate the dead. My parents never go to these meetings, even if it is disguised as a commemoration service, if the deceased belongs to the Christian faith. But after a month, my father began to show signs of uneasiness. He was restless, could not sleep well, became easily irritated etc. Clearly he was in a strong emotional stress. He was advised by his youngest sister to visit the grave of their mother. He went with his sister (not with my mother), and after that he was again his older self. After this event, as a family we regularly go to cemeteries at Easter and Christmas, and pay respect to the dead members of our big family.

Because there was still a remnant of the *Gereformeerde* faith in my parents, we were not allowed to communicate with the dead. But I always watched with interest when my step-grandmother from my mother's side started *to talk* to my dead grandfather, introducing us as his grandchildren who are paying their respect to him and bringing him some cookies and drinks (mostly iced-water!), beside the traditional flowers, and asking his blessing for her, her children and her grandchildren. This practice was done by all other visitors to the cemetery (and, in fact, by the whole country regardless of their religions. Every presidential candidate goes to their parents' grave to ask favour before election time). When it was time that we, the children had to take our parents to the grave (my father in 1988, my mother in 2006) we were doing it without any qualms.

Ancestor Veneration as source for Contextual Theology

In Eastern Indonesia the dead ones are not really dead. They were brought to their graves, but then they start another life, a different way of being. Sometimes they are

regarded as identical with the divine, sometimes they are the ones who mediate between human mortals and God, the immortal one. In the Mollucans, God or Jesus is called *tete manis*, which means “sweet grandpa”. It is a practice which is taken from the primal kinship religion of the tribes. But I suspect there is also Dutch influence. *Tete manis* is derived from the phrase “onze lieve Heer”, which was taken over during colonial times. In the Torajaland, God is called *Puang Matua*, “de oude Heer”. When the tribes in Eastern Indonesia became Christians, they of course started to relate their ancestors with Christ. So what Mery Kolimon referred to in her dissertation (you referred to hers in your paper) is the common struggle of Christians in Eastern Indonesia.

The problem is that the ethnic churches (GPM, GMIM, GMIT, The Toraja Church) are officially against ancestor venerations. They regard themselves as guardians of the faith, which is handed down to them by the Protestant missionaries. These missionaries are regarded almost in a par with the biblical apostles. These churches usually have an anniversary day to remember when the first missionaries put their foot on the land. They are the bearer of truth and light to Eastern Indonesia, which formerly lived in the dark. The churches that grew out of the work of these missionaries regarded themselves as the core of a new breed of people, the new Israel, in contrast to their former lives in the kinship religions. In principle there is no continuity between the new and the old. As a logical consequence, the link between people and their ancestors have to be cut off. This attitude, in my opinion, is silently resisted by the majority. Formally they follow what the church officials stated, but informally they go their own way.

But because they form the majority, the post-missionary church officials never try to impose this attitude on the people by force. One form of compromise is to hold commemoration services following the old ritual of the dead, to meet every 3, 7, 40, 100 and 1000 days after the death of the beloved one. In this service the emphasis is on comforting those who are bereaved, but sometimes an empty chair is set aside so that the spirit of the dead can also follow the service. Every Easter and Christmas cemeteries are packed with people. Officially they are paying respect for the dead; unofficially they are continuing the tradition of communicating with the dead. So if you ask for a change in policy in your paper, the question is *who* has to change? The people have been doing ancestor veneration all the time...

Speaking in sociological terms, the missionary policy tries to break the system of extended family and changed it with a new system, the nuclear family. It shows the bias of the western educated missionaries, which tend to look down on the extended family, and behind it, is of course individualism against collectivism. I think what Mery Kolimon and others are doing is remedial; they try to defend collectivism against the onslaught of individualism, which is continued in the present days by modernism. But when we are talking in academic terms, there are always pluses and minuses. The extended family and the ancestor veneration also have their dark side. First, it fosters ethnicism, and the result is superiority feeling which could be expressed in violence against others who do not belong to the clan/tribe/ethnic group. Second, it concentrates on the dead. This concentration could become so obsessive, that burial feasts are often regarded more important than wedding feasts, and the result is pauperization: people are left with huge

debts, which have to be paid by the coming generations. Struggle to uphold the quality of present life is neglected as people try to make the second stage of their ancestors' life happier than before.

Third, it preserves patriarchy. I wonder how Mery Kolimon tackles this problem as a feminist. The ancestor is always a male, the father. When I face hardship and difficulty, sometimes I have a dream that my father comes down to comfort me with his presence. It is my father, not Jesus (as God). So in my understanding the ancestors are not God, but mediators between mortal humans and God. But I wonder why it is never my mother who comes down... Fourth, it stifles individual initiative. One of the factors that caused urbanization in Indonesia (people moving from the Eastern part to the Western part of the country) is that an extended family system does not appreciate individual merits. So I think the work of the missionaries is not all negative, and a real contextual theology should strive to hold a balance between the *extra nos* and the *intra nos*, between the Christ of Asia who are with us through our ancestors, and the Christ of Israel who comes to us from outside (brought by the missionaries).

The texts of the Old Testament (OT)

At last I come to the texts of the OT. I am grateful for your information about the prominent place of the cult of the dead based on archaeological findings in Syria and West Mesopotamia, and also on your interpretation of certain Ugaritic texts. In general I agree that the context of Ancient Israel was also similar to these findings, and thus indirectly we can postulate that people in Ancient Israel also follow the same custom. On the other hand, the texts of the OT give contrary evidence: many of them are against the cult of the dead, as you have showed in your paper. Following certain trends in the study of the OT, we can say that the texts function as polemic against the context, produced by "Yahweh-only" group/s, which eventually become dominant in the society. Later on this/these group/s controlled the canon, and thus it can be said that anti ancestor veneration is one of the characteristics of the OT.

But you are right in stating that the cult of the dead is "a hidden heritage" in Ancient Israel. What is a polemic if it is not against a certain phenomenon which is *practiced* by members of the society. Even if the battle is won, it may be asked whether people cease practicing the cult of the dead. If they are pushed out of society, the practice could go on outside the society. If something keeps going on, later on there will be people inside the society who sympathize to some extent with this practice. Maybe I am influenced by contemporary events in Eastern Indonesia. When theological institutions in Eastern Indonesia were asked by ATESEA (Association of Theological Education in South-East Asia) to give some new ideas on how the curriculum of their doctoral program could become contextual, the heads of these theological institutions (the elite!) responded with a statement which among others, emphasize ancestors' veneration as one

of the contents of the context, and sympathetic inter-action between this context and Christian faith.¹

This sympathetic attitude may also be the case why in the OT there could exist two strands (or more) which are antithetical to one another. You have interpreted the story of Elijah and Elisha (in 2 Kings) in a different way than others. After their death, Elijah and Elisha become members of the heavenly host of God (p. 7). I can accept this interpretation, but then I add an explanation *why* could this kind of text (which is incompatible with the outlook of the OT) survive to this day. My explanation is not without its weakness, I admit. Others can say that it survives because it is not interpreted in the direction which is followed by Spronk, or that he is not interpreting the text, but *re-interpreting* the text!

Conclusion: but why not re-interpreting?

Your paper has aroused my curiosity to look at certain texts in a different way. I think intercultural reading of the Bible is very promising in the context of Indonesia. If a certain perspective can be build through which we read the texts of the OT (I tried to build this perspective above), then we are on the track of what Jeffrey Kuan termed as “cultural interpretation of the Bible”.² This perspective makes me not satisfied with the interpretation of certain texts in the Isaianic corpus, namely references to the patriarch Abraham in Is 41:8 (actually an oracle to Jacob as a descendant of Abraham); 51:2 (twice, and also with Sara), and 63:16 (with Israel). The common interpretation is to see these references to Abraham as a way of strengthening the conviction of Israel that Yahweh is helping them just as he has helped their patriarch in the past. Yahweh is loyal to his promise to Abraham. The emphasis is on Yahweh and not on Abraham. I do not want to deny Yahweh’s ultimate role in saving Israel, but he is saving them through their ancestor Abraham. Israel is going to be saved *because* they are descendants of Abraham.

Is 63:16 is problematic, because there Yahweh as Father is contrasted with Abraham. RSV: “For thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us...” It is interesting that both Indonesian versions of the Bible, TB-LAI and BIMK, put it in the interrogative form: “Art thou not our Father? Abraham is ignorant about us and Israel does not recognize us” (Indonesian: “Bukankah Engkau Bapa kami? Abraham tidak tahu apa-apa tentang kami, dan Israel tidak mengenal kami”). Who is speaking here? Certainly not Israel. Probably they are a certain group of people, who regarded themselves as servants of God.³ Perhaps we can say that these servants of God are no longer satisfied with their identity with Abraham and Israel, and place their

¹ See Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, “Critical Asian Principle: A Contextual-Theological Evaluation”, in Sientje Merentek-Abram – Wati Longchar, *Partnership in Training God’s Servants for Asia*, essays in honor of Marvin D. Hoff, Dorhat-Assam, ATESEA-FTSEA, 2006, p. 150.

² See Jeffrey Kuan, “Asian Biblical Interpretation”, in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, John H. Hayes [ed.], A-J, Nashville: Abingdon Press, pp. 70-77.

³ See W.A.M. Beuken’s inaugural speech, *Abraham weet van ons niet (Jesaja 63:16)*, Nijkerk, Callenbach, 1986.

identity with God as their father. But to call God as a father, imply kinship, and such indicates the characteristics of an ancestors' based religion. They have moved from looking at Abraham as their ancestor, and look at God as their ancestor. But this move is still done within the borders of an ancestor religion, and not necessarily out of it. To see the patriarchs of Israel as *dead* ancestors, but still powerful to save or to help (by the grace of God) in their afterlife is what I call re-interpretation.

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