

Seeking Christian Enculturation Through Filial Piety Among Vietnamese Evangelicals

The logo for the Evangelical Missiological Society (ems) is displayed in orange lowercase letters within a dark blue circular background.

JONI FLYE

Vol 3:3 2023

Joni Flye served as a missionary among the Vietnamese, trained church planters in Cambodia, and continues to work among Vietnamese Evangelicals in several capacities.

Introduction

This research entails understanding enculturation, defined as “The aspects of the learning experience which mark off man from other creatures, and by means of which, initially, and in later life, he achieves competence in his culture” (Herskovits 1949, 39). The inculcation of non-material, internal traits are natural processes of enculturation by transmission that develop in a person from birth and onwards. Seeking out such possible cultural internal traits already existing within the patterns of culture may allow for the entry of the historical Christian message, if these traits continue to be accepted and practiced by Evangelicals within that culture. The doorway for enculturation begins with the study of the whole culture of Vietnamese Evangelicals (hereafter, VNEs), rather than simply studying their larger church tradition as it appears to foreigners with different cultural and ecclesiastical norms. Digging out what the average Christian really believes and actually does through qualitative research (ethnography) in conjunction with their believing or unbelieving family and lineage allows the researcher the means to see whether Christian enculturation, or the grounds for enculturation, exist. If some form of enculturation exists, it eliminates the need to find and/or develop foreign-devised inculturation methods which often fail, or are only slightly or partially successful.

This research points to a needed modification in Schreiter’s ethnographic model as defined in his book, *Constructing Local Theologies* (1985). It departs from his model in a significant way. The attempts to create inculturation within a mission community in Schreiter’s model supposedly lead to the construction of local theologies. He defines inculturation as, “A combination of the theological principle of incarnation with the social science concept of acculturation” (Schreiter 1985, 5). This research diverges from Schreiter’s goal of developing inculturation perceived as necessary for seeing the incarnation of the gospel message in cross-cultural missional communities, such as Vietnamese Evangelicalism. Schreiter’s stance of seeking an incarnation of the

Christian message within a particular setting (or describing what local theologies may have already developed) from the standpoint of inculturation is described among Christian communities who are now re-evaluating their Christian expressions, those which were originally imported through Western missionary efforts (Schreiter 1985, 1-6). I posit that this is too late: Christian conversions and resulting mission communities in many, if not all cases, have then been influenced or inculcated with Western forms of thought, Christian practice, doctrine, and belief. Determining whether Christian inculturation has formed in a given mission community in reality means looking at the forces of acculturation and its influence on the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the said community.

This research indicates that underlying patterns of culture show potential enculturation bridges which may be discovered from Vietnamese communities, and these cultural patterns allow for “finding Christ in a culture”, “for the purpose of evangelization and church development” and is, in fact, what Schreiter seeks through his definition of inculturation, which is to “hear... Christ...already present in a culture” (Schreiter 1985, 29). Schreiter argues for seeking this in three theological concepts: creation, redemption and community (1985, 40), as a means of introducing the unknown historical message of Jesus Christ. This research focuses on enculturation (seen in patterns of culture) within the creational concepts embedded within society and culture, including family and lineage. Vietnamese ancestral veneration rites¹, which are an integral part of Vietnamese culture, have long been an obstacle to conversion, as these practices are forbidden within Vietnamese Evangelicalism. The death anniversary of elders (a ceremony called the *Lễ Đám Giỗ*) of the family patriarch or matriarch, are performed yearly and are an integral expression of the trait of filial piety. This inculcated filial disposition is a collective *habitus* of virtually all Vietnamese persons.

Collective ethical dispositions form a collective *habitus*, defined as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them” (Bourdieu 1977, 78). These expressions (traits) are explicitly or implicitly incorporated into the specific Christian orthopraxy, lifestyle, speech and behaviors, for these are cultural traits acceptable to them. Contiguous

¹ The term “veneration” and not “worship” is deliberately chosen, as this research did not indicate “worship” of ancestors. For a full discussion, see Lim’s article, “Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration: A Historical Review”. *International Review of Frontier Missiology* 32:3/Fall:109–115

enculturated traits, carried over and accepted by local Christian communities, are potential bridges for the building of local theologies. Examining the rationale for seeking enculturation versus acculturation, and secondly, the examination of the filial *habitus* and its significance is a foundation for the development of local theology.

The Forces of Acculturation: Enough to bring about Christian Enculturation?

Missiological scholar, Lim (2015), while not speaking from within the scope of anthropology, acknowledges the forces of “natural accommodation” or, acculturation, which he hopes will gradually overcome pre-Christian enculturated traits as an explanation for the slow progress of the Christian gospel message both within and without the church:

Their [Chinese Christians] socio-religious worldview continues to be operative in helping them to understand and appropriate the new religious tradition...with regard to morality, they interpret and appropriate Christian moral teachings in a Chinese way, upholding filial piety and family harmony in the same manner as their former religion.. .This “natural accommodation” may be viewed as the actualization of Protestantism in a Chinese worldview. This actualization is not static; it will surely develop new innovations within the slowly changing boundaries of socio-religious traditions, especially in a day of postmodernism that encourages tolerance and accommodation towards new worldviews and other religious movements (2015, 113).

What Lim hopes will occur, through the slow “actualization” of Christianity has not occurred through previous missiological methods, contextualization, exegesis, and/or intentional attempts at inculturation, but through natural, cultural processes that are actually outward expressions of inward, collective *habitus*. The enculturated *habitus* continue to operate, often in conflict (both individually and collectively) with newer Christian belief systems. This “natural accommodation” is actually a slow, taught Western acculturation occurring within Christian communities which may take three to four generations to assimilate, or which may never be assimilated. This also indicates that there has not been voluntary appropriation by the new Christian community, but rather resistance. Innovations that produce enculturation are voluntarily welcomed and assimilated into a society, and spread into the culture. Lim concurs that this may be the

only way to overcome the barriers of ancestral veneration rites since other, overt attempts and methods have, to date, largely failed.

From Exegetical Approaches to an Ethnographical-Theological Approach: Seeking an Incarnational Model

Most scholarly research in the area of ancestral veneration has been undertaken in the theological arena, particularly within its subdivision of missiology, under the nomenclature “inculturation” or “contextualization” (Bevans 2002, 26). Academic work done in missiological disciplines by Western Evangelicals seldom adequately utilize anthropological or sociological sources.² Ethnographic approaches that begin from within the Christian community itself are nearly non-existent. Western theological systems have no categories for Asian spiritual and cultural expressions and exegetical interpretations (and those non-Western nationals trained in it), and thus have no means by which to resolve real life conflict ancestral veneration issues in Asian communities. Previous enculturated dispositions within the society to which Christian mission comes are often ignored, or considered unredeemable, as was often the case with an Evangelical mission in Vietnam, in spite of earnest and sincere missionary endeavors. However, new approaches to research on ancestral rites, beginning within social science disciplines, versus simply Western theological ones, are beginning to be recognized as a necessity, which Lim seems to acknowledge. There is emerging discourse among Evangelical scholars in regard to qualitative or quantitative research (Smith 1987; Phan 1996; Nguyen 2013; Koepping 2011).

Schreiter’s methods for developing local theologies must be adapted in another regard, that is, in developing true reflexivity as an essential component of qualitative research (Schreiter 1985, 28–29). Wigg-Stevenson defines an ethnographic-theological approach which allows reflexive responses from the researcher in building ethnographic models within theological discourses, and begins from primary theology obtained through field data (Scharen & Vigen 2011; Wigg-Stevenson 2013). Some missiological scholars have made significant studies in the area of ritual, but little or no qualitative research in the area of ancestral rituals (cf. Perry 1990; Farhadian 2005; Tan 2008; Vasantharao 2008; de Neui 2016). Ethnographic research allows primary voices a more adequate and accurate witness into VNE communities and provides an instrument for their communities, through insider approaches, to develop or advance local theologies (Schreiter 1985, 19).

²Hiebert’s concept of “critical contextualization” shows some exceptions to this lack (Hiebert 1987, 109–112).

Schreiter's contextual model for an ethnographic approach begins with cultural listening: "in ideal circumstances, the process of constructing local theologies begins with the study of a culture, rather than with possible translations of the larger church tradition in the local circumstance" (Schreiter 1985, 28-29, 39-74). While applauding this approach, Schreiter is bound to Roman Catholic traditions that dictate how institutional church traditions must be inculcated into new mission communities, thus ensuring that acculturation must take place in the first stage of mission. An enculturation model for research is not bound by such constraints, but encompasses an ethnographic inquiry into the larger, pre-Christian culture. This research includes the examination of Evangelical traditions in orthodoxy and orthopraxy pertinent to the cultural impact on VNE communities and the larger community. This includes primary source data, and examination of instances in which inculturation emerges in Vietnamese Evangelical orthopraxy. An enculturation model differs greatly from approaches or methodologies that artificially attempt to analyze or create inculturation within Vietnamese Christian communities, and needs anthropological disciplines at its source.

Enculturation

Herskovits' work withstands postmodern criticism and demonstrates how humans integrate into their own societies. His position that humans interact to form culture, and his rejection of cultural determinism, is significant for understanding the similarities between enculturation, and the closely allied concept of the *habitus*, which formed the epistemological lens for seeking enculturation within this research (Bourdieu 1977). His explanations link closely with explanations of how humans are enculturated through *habitus*: "Culture is stable, yet culture is also dynamic, and manifests continuous and constant change...Culture fills and largely determines the course of our lives, yet rarely intrudes into conscious thought" (Herskovits 1948, 18).

Herskovits' definition of culture and enculturation and humans' receptivity to enculturation through unconscious conditioning are readily seen in explanations of how *habitus*, which works through mathematical operations of the brain, to produce a conditioning which makes our current world (environment, culture and society) seem normative without understanding why this is so (Lizardo 2004). These processes allow enculturation through transmission to seem natural and normal.

All humans are able, as well, to creatively respond to and change their social environment, which Herskovits calls “transmutative enculturation”:

Yet though culture is the instrument by which human beings adjust themselves to their total setting, it must never be conceived as reducing the individual to a passive or inert status in the process. Actually, the process of adjustment is circular and never-ending, it is a process of interaction between the individual and his group in terms of his enculturation to its pre-existing patterns. This adjustment is furthered by the creativeness which, as a fundamental expression of the restlessness of the individual in the face of the ways of his group, permits him to exercise various modes of self-expression, and thus, to extend the scope of his culture without breaking down its basic orientations (Herskovits 1949, 641).

Herskovits’ definition allows members of Vietnamese societies to “extend the scope of his culture” and through the creative processes of innovation to alter and expand collective *habitus* and to alter spiritual belief and practice from those of their lineage, forebears and general surrounding society. Note that Lim also, quite astutely, mentions innovation: “This actualization is not static; it will surely develop new innovations within the slowly changing boundaries of socio-religious traditions, especially in a day of postmodernism that encourages tolerance and accommodation...” (2015,13). Cultural practices which have been enculturated cannot be erased: innovation is required for these to become a legitimate part of Christian practice.

Christian Enculturation

Seeking out possible Christian enculturation, (transmutative enculturation) that may have permeated Vietnamese culture through Evangelical or Catholic communities or kinship units in VNE communities requires investigating those enculturated traits that Christian communities indicate have the potential to do so. The end result would be Christian practices within VNE orthopraxy which may have found their way, (become enculturated) into segments of Vietnamese culture. However, data from primary sources in this research did not indicate this (Wise 2020).

Examining cultural patterns (enculturation through transmission) through ethnography already extant within general society does give evidence to “hearing Christ already within the culture” which could provide a cultural bridge to the historical

message of Christianity upon its advent into Vietnamese culture. Specific forms of Vietnamese filiality, examined throughout the research are general cultural patterns that allow for the development of local theology. Filial piety, in spite of the forces of colonialism, modernity and the influence of Communist ideologies in a post-Marxist culture, has shown amazing resilience. It has been, since antiquity, a vibrant cultural expression and the central ethical disposition within all of Vietnamese society. Filial piety, it is believed, is drawn from or established by a Confucianist ethos, and is undisputedly regarded as its supreme value:

Through a close and critical analysis of the classical texts of the Analects (Lun Yu) and the Mencius (Ming Zi), however, it can be demonstrated that because Confucius and Mencius always take filial piety, or more generally speaking, consanguineous affection, as not only the foundation but also the supreme principle of human life (Liu 2003, 1).

Filiality, a central tenet of Confucian belief and ethos, has a strong sacramental component. Fingarette's work (1972) addresses this unclear duality. Adler summarizes Fingarette's conclusions, which concur with his own: "Confucianism is a non-theistic, diffused religious tradition that regards the secular realm of human relations as sacred" (Adler 2014,12). A significant amount of Christian scholarship concurs. Ching (1993) sheds light on both Confucianism and popular religions in China, (which are, in many cases, synonymous with religious and spiritual practice throughout Vietnam). She believes that Confucianism has always contained a "sense of the sacred" within its humanism, as well as in ancestral worship rites, (1993, 63–4) as does Chih's scholarship (1981).

Vietnamese Evangelicals' Justification for Expressing Filiality to Living Ancestors

VNE ecclesiology adheres to the practices centering on filiality toward parents, with little remembrance of ancestral lineage (as a reaction to perceived idolatrous ties and explications connected to the rites within Vietnamese culture), after the dramatic decision is made to break off the expression of and participation in ancestral veneration rites. Justifications for these expressions are based upon an inculturation created by the translators of the Vietnamese Bible.

The original Protestant version of the Vietnamese Bible was printed in its entirety in 1926. While detailed records are very sparse on the process involving its translation,

a Vietnamese team worked collaboratively with a team of missionaries, overseen mainly by Grace Cadman, who was trained in Greek and Hebrew. There is little doubt that it was the missionaries who made the final decisions on translation matters (Cadman 1925).

The translation team developed a unique term, *hiếu kính*, taken from the compound verb *hiếu thảo* (which is also a compound noun, as is the English noun, “filial piety”) as a translation for the English word, “honor”. “Honor” is used six times throughout the Old and New Testament, particularly in the fifth commandment. “Honor” is also used in Ex. 20:12, Deut. 5:16, Matt. 15:4, Matt. 15:5, Mark 10:19, and Luke 18:20. Each time the word “honor” is used, it is translated as *hiếu kính*, creating a dynamic equivalent (Kraft 1979, 264) thus, filiality (filial piety), carried a special connotation to the Vietnamese reader. The missionaries making translation decisions felt comfortable to follow a similar dynamic equivalence translation used in the Chinese Bible, or, chose this term because their Vietnamese helpers encouraged this usage. Pastor Nguyễn Hồng Chí shares the belief that

The concept of “hiếu” in this kind of culture not only means “honoring your parents” but also means “taking good care of your parents, following their path(s)... Therefore, they felt the need to combine “hiếu” and “kính” together in order to “marry” the Bible to the culture (Wise 2020,134).

It is notable that the newest version of the Vietnamese Bible, (*Bản Dịch Mới*) done by a team of Vietnamese pastors and leaders trained in Greek and Hebrew, published in 2001, continues the usage of *hiếu kính* (<http://nv bible.org/translation>).

The common term for filial piety, *hiếu thảo*, is used once, in 1 Timothy 5:4, referring to children and grandchildren of widows, and the proper devotion toward them by these members in terms of repaying (*hiếu thảo*) their parents and grandparents. It is significant that the term, “repaying” is used, which correlates linguistically with the two concepts of filiality and reciprocity, thanksgiving and repayment of one’s obligation (*biết ơn*), which are significant traits within filiality, as the “debt so immense that it cannot be repaid” (Jamieson 1993, 17).

This new transliteration of the term, *hiếu kính* for filial piety was used word-for-word in the translation of the fifth commandment, evidence that the translators saw a sacramental quality in the word choice and indicating that filiality is commanded by God Himself. The fifth commandment, of course, does not speak of the duty toward lineage no longer living. So, while VNEs take filial behavior (*hiếu kính*) very seriously, they have avoided discussing, in orthodoxy and orthopraxy, the issues surrounding

remembering, venerating/honoring, and respecting the dead. The dynamic equivalence of these two terms has aided in forming the re-structured concept of filiality among VNEs, and shows limited potential for a possible enculturation bridge and the development of local theology. However, outside the boundaries of this orthopraxy, it can be seen through field data that VNEs show evidence of filial behavior toward deceased lineage.

VNE Ecclesial Expressions of *Hiêu Kính Cha Mẹ* (Filial Piety toward One's Parents)

Primary data revealed church activities actively expressing filial behavior. The senior pastor of an independent Methodist church has an annual church service dedicated to showing filiality toward one's parents. During this service, he preached on how it is impossible for us, as Christians, to love one another until we learn to love our parents, for this is the source of love. He was seemingly unaware that he was drawing directly from Mencian thought: "The man of humaneness loves all, but he considers the effort to cultivate affection for his parents and the worthy to be the most urgent" (Confucius & Mencius 1861, 7A:46). He never mentioned parents or grandparents who had passed away, staying within the appropriate doctrinal confines of Vietnamese Evangelicalism. He discussed the history of the Jewish people within Scripture and their honoring of ancestors, which is why, he said, the Jewish race continues to be blessed by God. His sermon was an acculturation of Western theology and Jewish culture as a means of preserving Vietnamese filial values.

This annual ceremony, called *Lễ Song Thân*, was done in conjunction with the Western holiday calendar of Mother's Day as a celebration of parents. The ceremony stressed one's duty toward parents as the highest expression of human love (versus the Western concept of romantic love). The filial expressions made by the church members were done in song, poem, and choral singing and brought forth an avalanche of emotion. Nearly everyone was in tears at some point during the service. The pastor said afterwards, "I was so moved I could hardly even preach". (Wise 2020, 139-140). This service is intended as a functional substitute for the ancestral rite of the *Lễ Đám Giỗ* that includes veneration of deceased patriarchal lineage along with a memorial meal of food offered upon the deceased's altar; these expressions are forbidden to VNEs. The *Lễ Song Thân*, however, does not include discussion of deceased lineage; these are virtually ignored. The oldest male member of this church told me sadly, in an interview, "I do not know where my parents are" for of course, they never had the chance to hear the gospel,

and he has no way to resolve this quandary (Wise, Personal Journal 6, 2016). There are no ritual practices which speak to these issues due to prohibitions taught in Vietnamese Evangelical churches.

Continued Expression of Filial Piety toward the Deceased by VNEs

Despite the prohibitions surrounding any expression toward the deceased, many VNEs included expressions of filiality to deceased parents and grandparents. A middle-aged male church planter, Mr. Đen, who planted a small indigenous house church in Kratie, Cambodia, decided to have a Christian memorial ceremony (*Lễ Kỳ Niệm*) for his parents, who passed away long ago and never heard the gospel message in their lifetime. While little used by VNEs, this ceremony is a functional substitute for the *Lễ Đám Giỗ* ritual done for deceased parents and grandparents. Mr. Đen told me, “We prayed to God, and asked Him to forgive them. We don’t know if God will answer, but we can ask.” He then told me, with tears in his eyes, “My parents never heard the gospel message, so what can I do? I must do something” (Wise 2020, 149). His motivation is increased due not only to his family’s loss during wartime, and the fact that he is not sure of their place in the afterlife, but the intrinsic need for an expression of filiality. He and his family, not under the auspices of an institutional church setting, felt freer to pursue expressions of Christian filiality ancestral veneration. The *Lễ Kỳ Niệm* ceremony, designed by Mr. Đen from the Evangelical Church of Vietnam doctrinal manual, was, in effect, a form of intercession for the family’s deceased parents toward God which expressed respect, love and remembrance to his deceased parents and was clearly an expression brought about by the inculcated trait of filiality. This attempt, through improvisation and innovation of an enculturated ancestral practice, was certainly an attempt to bridge Vietnamese cultural expressions with the historical Christian message.

Mrs. Mai, a devout Christian, was widowed soon after she and her husband became Christians more than fifteen years ago. Every year she has the *Lễ Kỳ Niệm* at her home on the day of her husband’s death. This ceremony does not include ancestral veneration rites, but is a shared meal, with a prayer over the food and reading a Scripture as a remembrance of her husband. Her husband’s non-Christian relatives faithfully attend. Mrs. Mai’s husband had a Christian funeral service and has a burial spot in a Catholic cemetery, but her Christian children visit their father’s grave on the Grave Sweeping Day in April, although participation in these rituals is technically forbidden to VNEs. They continue to express filial behavior toward their father on this day, although this holiday is considered to be unholy, filled with superstition, and possibly demonic practices which include communication with the dead (Wise 2020, 107,130).

In cases in which young Christians either had not heard of or simply ignored the forbidding of the practice of ancestral veneration, they simply continued the *Lễ Đám Giỗ* practices of general society. Mrs. Diễm, as a baptized believer for ten years, continued to have her grown children practice the *Lễ Đám Giỗ* veneration rite in memory of their father (in opposition to the prohibition taught at the Evangelical Church of Vietnam) for, she told me, "my children will not remember and respect their father if they don't do this" (Wise 2020, 116). Her greatest concern was that her children would continue to express remembrance, obligation and respect to her husband. The oldest woman in a Vietnamese house church in Kratie, Cambodia, told me, "we need ancestral rites, these are important, we should remember our family who have died" (Wise, 2020, 116). She continues to prepare the *Lễ Đám Giỗ* every year for her husband's non-Christian family, but comes to house-church faithfully every Sunday, taking the Lord's Supper without any feeling of guilt. The powerful trait of filiality continues to guide her behavior, in spite of Christian teaching to the contrary.

Non-Filiality as Sinful Behavior

Filial duties toward living parents are endorsed by VNEs as seriously as filial duties by those in general society. Mrs. Phương told the story of a young man who broke off relations with his father when he became a Christian. He later repented, and their relationship was restored. His behavior was unfilial, she told me, and this required change on his part. His sinful behavior, she believed, resulted in separation from his father, and while she did not believe that he should perform ancestral veneration rites, she placed the blame for the break solely upon the son for his non-filial behavior, rather than upon the non-believing father. Her interpretation of this dispute gives evidence of Mrs. Phương's own filial disposition (Wise, 2020, 136).

Expressions of Filiality among VNEs in *Lễ Đám Giỗ* Rituals

All pastors and leaders who contributed to this research, except one, acknowledged that they attend, at least on occasion, the *Lễ Đám Giỗ* of non-Christian relatives, especially if the ceremony is for immediate family. In many cases it is almost impossible not to, if one does not want to be lacking in filial piety (*bất hiếu*). Nguyễn notes, "Filial piety, as expressed in ancestor worship, is...an integral part of being a moral person in Vietnamese culture" (Nguyễn 2013, 181). Lack of presence at the *Lễ Đám Giỗ* is seen as such a violation of filial piety that VNEs rarely break with the status quo, implicitly giving credence to filiality as a Christian virtue.

VNE presence at the death-day memorial of the *Lễ Đám Giỗ*, even while not eating food offered on the ancestral altar, was in many cases an acceptable level of participation of the extended non-Christian family. The only real reason for non-attendance was for those who, because of distance, could acceptably excuse themselves. Leaders unanimously expressed reluctance to participate, but most attended. This same reluctance was not in evidence among average VNE members. In fact, some of them told me that these occasions are a warm family reunion. Some would avoid eating from certain trays, if possible (very difficult) and others would request a separate tray that came directly from the kitchen (this required some pre-ceremony negotiation). At times, a leader might not attend, but would send his wife as a representative to work in the kitchen.

One female leader and wife of an associate pastor of the largest denomination in Vietnam, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, told me without hesitation that, “Christians should go to the *Lễ Đám Giỗ*. They should not eat the food, but they should compromise a little, otherwise how will their relatives want to hear the gospel?” (Wise 2020, 113). This is almost an about-face from past decades when many Christians were forbidden to go, or it was so frowned upon that many did not want to risk being seen as participating in rites considered idolatrous. Mr. Bửu, born and raised an Evangelical, at 66 years old, changed his opinion on attendance of *Lễ Đám Giỗ* rites, though he had been forbidden to go as a child. “We should not eat the food, but we should go,” he stated (Wise 2020, 108). Over time, many VNEs have come to recognize the power of collective filial dispositions which express moral goodness in honoring one’s parents and the moral value of filiality. These sympathetic attitudes were also expressed by VNEs born into Evangelicalism.

Interpreting Vietnamese Evangelical Filial Theology

Nearly all VNEs contributing to this research, including members of the more conservative Evangelical churches in Vietnam, acknowledged that they continued to embrace some non-Christian practices from which they carefully parse and edit out unsavory practices considered to be idolatrous. VNE orthopraxy has attempted to reshape the traditional view of filial piety by cleansing out anything including caring for, remembering, and (at least symbolically) communicating with the deceased through indoctrination in Sunday school and through sermons. However, primary field data showed that they still participate to a high degree in all traditional filial-based rituals, which can include Buddhist funerals, grave visitations, the yearly *Lễ Đám Giỗ* (minus

lighting incense and eating offered food) visiting grandparents' and parents' graves at Lunar New Year, and on the Grave Sweeping Day. A small percentage of this is due to pressure from non-believing family members (versus societal pressure), but much of it was simply because of the inculcated disposition or enculturated trait of filiality that permeates all aspects of cultural life in Vietnam. VNEs desire to perform these ritual or non-ritualized activities because the filial disposition demands it, as evidenced by statements such as, "it seems the good thing to do", "we must be wise", "it would be offensive not to", "it would hurt someone's feelings", and that they did not see any sinful behavior attached to it, if they could edit out unacceptable actions. A collective filial *habitus* dictates the need for continued participation within the parameters allowed within Vietnamese Evangelical doctrine, and an expansion of those parameters. Vietnamese Evangelicals, in spite of adverse forces of acculturation, navigate around this and continue to express filiality as a part of their Christian morality.

Summation: An Analysis of Vietnamese Evangelical Filiality

Within the scope of this research, as well as drawing from background knowledge of VNE communities inside Vietnam, none of the data showed evidence of transmutative (Christian) enculturation within the Vietnamese culture at large. The re-expression of filiality as *hiếu kính cha mẹ*, (being filial towards one's living parents), ended up being a narrowing of cultural expression, rather than an expansion of such, for it did not allow any remembrance or veneration of the deceased. It was more common for VNEs to continue to express traditional traits of filiality within the Vietnamese culture at large, rather than designing expressions for new, redeemed, or, sacralized forms of filiality toward the deceased because of the fear of accidentally performing actions that could be termed idolatrous. Very little innovation was seen, however VNEs found ways of expressing filiality toward deceased parents and grandparents through acceptable practices which went beyond the acculturated forms regulated by the dictated practices of "*hiếu kính cha mẹ*".

VNEs have quietly found ways to express their filial disposition toward the deceased, and in many cases, in its ultimate expression, as a memorial to Jesus Himself in the Lord's Supper, the *Lễ Tiệc Thánh*. The presentation of the Lord's Supper in VNE churches appears to be solely a Western presentation. Research, however, indicated that some VNEs saw the Lord's Supper as a filial duty and as an expression of filiality toward God Himself (Wise, 2020). Since VNEs remain filial pietists, it should be no

surprise if they make an intrinsic connection between partaking of a memorial meal requested by Jesus before His death, in which He said “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Some Vietnamese Evangelicals readily made the transition of filial duty toward ancestors and re-pointed that duty toward God Himself. One Vietnamese Evangelical contributor stated, “I think that He is the source that is given to us” (Wise, 2020,193). This is the term also commonly used in Vietnamese society when remembering ancestral lineage who gave one life.

As discussed, traditional filiality contains a sacramental quality recognized by general Vietnamese society. Not only an important moral duty, the trait contains ontological connotations, and the offense created if a member withdraws from this rite is evidence that it is certainly different from other general practices within society. The missionary translators of the original Vietnamese Bible recognized this difference, and not only affirmed the ontological connotation, but actually distinguished it and elevated it to a higher level than that of general society through their word choice of *hiếu kính*, as a duty toward God Himself. This establishes at least limited grounds for the building of local theology, for it reaffirmed the sacred quality attached to filiality. The term has also been accepted in the publication of the *Kinh Thánh Mới*, a new translation of the Bible done solely by Vietnamese scholars.

Within the inculturation of the dynamic equivalence term, *hiếu kính cha mẹ*, there lies a starting point, or, a “seed theology”, for development of a local theology as Vietnamese Evangelical communities begin to reflect upon their interpretations of filiality along with a wholehearted embracing of this pre-Christian enculturated trait, which functions “incognito”, in Vietnamese Evangelical practice. This is what Schreiter termed, “finding Christ within the culture” (Schreiter 1985, 29) and could lend itself to a starting point for Vietnamese scholars and leaders to build a corresponding orthopraxy, as long as some form of remembrance and/or veneration of the deceased lineage is incorporated. Primary data indicates that Vietnamese Evangelicals are already expressing the cultural sacral trait of filiality in various, and mutually acceptable ways toward the deceased. Linking the authority of Scripture behind the dynamic equivalence term, *hiếu kính cha mẹ* alongside the voices of primary data gives credence to not only the need, but to the validity of veneration for deceased lineage. This may, through the process of improvisation and innovation, become acceptable for Vietnamese Evangelicalism. Vietnamese Evangelicalism continues to practice forms of veneration for their deceased lineage, which are personally tolerable to them, and simultaneously adhere to orthodox Evangelical doctrines, which contain a high view of Scriptural authority in all spiritual practice. No genuine innovation (transmutative

enculturation) is yet seen, for no integration of cultural practices has occurred among VNEs; fact, their parsed-out practices indicate a narrowing of societal cultural practices. This datum indicates not only the need, but the possibility of new Evangelical orthopraxy built upon local theologies with integrated filial practices if there is inclusion of the veneration of deceased lineage in some form. The enculturated trait of filiality as practiced by Vietnamese Evangelicals would be unacknowledged if one is simply seeking to create a contextualized method (such as functional substitutes) through inculturation of Christian practices, for inculturation is an incomplete tool. Seeing that VNEs continue as filial pietists (as *habitus* dictates) requires a more comprehensive enculturation model. Enculturated traits contain the potential for transmutative Christian enculturation through innovation. If these traits are discovered, reflected upon and accessed by a given Christian community, they may allow for the development of local, (incarnational) theologies, and for the entry of the historical Christian message into unreached cultures and societies.

***Joni Flye** served as a missionary among the Vietnamese from 1993-2004, and continues to work among Vietnamese Evangelicals in several capacities. She has also worked to train the Vietnamese ethnic minority and Stieng minority people in Cambodia as church planters.*

***Email:** joanmwise@gmail.com*

Bibliography

- Arms of Hope. 2002. *Kinh Thánh Bản Dịch Mới*. [New Vietnamese Bible] Singapore.
- Adler, J. 2014. "Confucianism as a Religious Tradition: Linguistic and Methodological Problems" *Presented to the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, National Taiwan University (Taipei) and the Department of Philosophy, Tunghai University (Taichung)*.
- Bevans, S B. 2002. *Models of Contextual Theology*. Revised and expanded ed. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cadman, William. 1925. "Personal Letter to the Translation Committee" C & MA National Archives, accessed 7/23/2019.
- Chih, A. 1981. *Chinese Humanism: A Religion Beyond Religion*. Taipei: Chia Feng Printing Enterprise Co.
- Ching, J. 1993. *Chinese Religions*. New York, NY: Orbis Books.
- Confucius & Mencius, Legge, J, trans. 1861. *The Works of Mencius*. London: Trübner and Co.
- Fingarette, H. 1972. *Confucius the Secular as Sacred*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Hiebert, P. G. "Critical contextualization." *International bulletin of missionary research* 11, no. 3 (1987): 104-112.
- Herskovits, M.J. 1948. *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology*. New York, NY: A.A. Knopf.
- Hesselgrave, D. J & Rommen, E. 1989. *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.
- Jamieson, N. L. 1995. *Understanding Vietnam* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Koepping, Elizabeth. 2007. "On the Need for Nice Forebears: Ancestral Reverence Among Lutherans, Anglicans and Others", 197-227. *The Asia Journal of Theology* 21/2.
- Lee, J. Y. 1985. "A New Testament Appraisal of Ancestor Practices" in Ro. B.R., ed. *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*. Taipei: Asia Theological Association.
- Lim, D.S. 2015. "Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration: A Historical Review". *International Review of Frontier Missiology* 32:3/Fall:109–115.

- Liu, Qingping. 2003. "Filiality versus Sociality and Individuality: On Confucianism as 'Consanguinitism' ". *Philosophy East and West* 53/2:234–250.
- Lizardo, Omar. 2004. "The Cognitive Origins of Bourdieu's Habitus" *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*. 34/4:375–401.
- Lowe, C. 2001. *Honoring God and Family: A Christian Response to Idol Food in Chinese Popular Religion*. Bangalore: Theological Book Trust and Evangelism and Missions Information Service (EMSI).
- Mauss, Marcel. 1970. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Cohen and West.
- Nguyen, Q.H.L. 2013. "Tin Lành: The Bible and the Construction of an Evangelical Vietnamese Christian Identity (1975-2007)". Doctoral Thesis. Claremont CA: Claremont Graduate University.
- Phan, Henry. 1996. "The Development of a Model for Training Vietnamese Christians to Respond to Family Members who are Involved in Ancestor Worship Practices". Master's Thesis. Seattle, WA: Golden Gate Seminary.
- Ro, Bo R., ed. 1985. *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices* Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association.
- Scharen, Christian & Vigen, Ann Marie. 2011. *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Schreiter, Robert J. 1985. *Constructing Local Theologies*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Smith, Henry N. 1987. "Chinese Ancestor Practices and Christianity: Toward a Viable Contextualization of Christian Ethics in a Hong Kong Setting". Fort Worth TX: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.
- Social Science Research Council Summer Seminar. 1954. "Acculturation: An Exploratory Formulation". *American Anthropologist* 56:973–1000.
- Wigg-Stevenson, Natalie. 2013. "Reflexive Theology". *Practical Matters* Spring/6:1–19.
- Wise, Joan. 2020. "Seeking Christian Enculturation among Vietnamese Evangelicals". Doctoral Thesis. London: Middlesex University.