
Klaus Nürnberger here addresses the issue of ancestors in African culture and their compatibility with Christian faith. This study deserves a wide readership since he uses the ancestors as a springboard to a wide-ranging discussion of the relationship between tradition, modernity, and the Gospel.

The first four chapters set the groundwork. After an introduction in chapter 1, chapter 2 addresses the phenomenon of the ancestors. Nürnberger provides a detailed analysis, but is at pains to point out that his study focuses on the ancestor traditions of southern Africa only. In Chapter 3 he provides a detailed analysis of the scriptures and what they say about traditions such as ancestor veneration, both in cult and eschatological terms. There is an oddity in terminology in this chapter: “enculturation” (usually a sociological term for the learning of a culture) is used instead of the more common “inculturation” for the incarnating of the gospel in a new culture or context (96–105).

One further quibble in this chapter might be that Nürnberger synthesizes the different Pauline reflections on the resurrection to produce a pattern that suits his thesis. His view that post-mortem existence involves a delay between death and the day of Yahweh strengthens his case that the ancestors are not a force able to intervene in this realm, but it may gloss over different views from St. Paul, particularly in 2 Corinthians 5.

His view that the ancestors cannot intervene leads him to be critical of doctrines such as the communion of the saints. This is enhanced by his tendency to identify the saints as mediators between Christ and humanity who obscure the direct relationship possible between Christ and believers. This criticism would not be so pointed if the saints are viewed, as some traditions do, as intercessors rather than mediators. It is very different to ask the saints to pray for you, as another person might do, than to imagine them functioning as mediators between believers and God. Yet Nürnberger’s thesis here is ruthlessly consistent: if ancestors have no influence then neither have saints, and so such beliefs must be put aside.

Chapter 4 sees Nürnberger address the issues through post-biblical theological writings, particularly those of the Reformation. This effectively means the lens of Martin Luther. He criticizes much traditional theology for reifying or making abstractions out of God-talk, seeing it as metaphorical rather than essentialist. Luther’s approach is praised for getting rid of dross, and for basing faith in spiritual experience rather than abstracted constructs. Nürnberger notes that much Lutheran tradition has departed from Luther’s example. Yet I wonder – and this is by no means meant to be disrespectful, given this study’s depth, learning, and passion – how much of Nürnberger’s thesis has been read into Luther.

Chapter 5 examines the impact of modernity on modern African cultures and leads into discussions in Chapters 6 and 7 of possible ways ahead for theology. Nürnberger is particularly good on the contrasts between the mindsets of tradition, modernity, and post-modernity. These last two chapters are a *tour-de-force*, a feisty and fiery plea for an engaged theology that works for the transformation of individuals and society by a critical, yet accepting, application of the Gospel and its values to life and society. Here is a manifesto with fire in its belly, driven by an incredible humanity that finds its inspiration in the example of Jesus, one full of politics and passion, and fuelled with a ferocious desire for justice.
Whatever view one takes of Nürnberger’s theological model, especially his dislike of abstraction and his privileging of a Lutheran method, this is a book worth reading for the sheer fire and passion the author brings to his vision of Christian spirituality and faith as a vehicle for social change, transformation, and liberation.

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