The Cult of Ancestors: A Focal Point for Prayers in African Traditional Communities

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Introduction

The spiritual world of Africa peoples is very densely populated with spiritual beings; spirits and the living- dead (Mbiti, 1960). Africans believe in the Supreme Being who is believed to be the creator of the universe and all therein, in addition, Africans believe in other spiritual forces that are believed to have powers, often times, for specific purposes. Among these spiritual beings is the belief in ancestors. Some scholars of African Traditional religion classified the belief system of the Africans into four types: The supreme God, the sky god, the mother earth and other divinities (Parinder, 1967). Mbiti (1975:36) echoed that "every African people recognized God according to some cosmologies. However, there are beside Him, other divinities and spiritual beings, some of which are closely associated with Him" (p.36). Ezeanya (1972) in Ezenweke (2004) discovered that "It is generally observed that when Africans pray, they invoke the Supreme Being (God), spirits, and sky god and 'agbala' divinities. Each is believed to be powerful and capable of protecting man" (p.14).

It is often said that West Africa is the home of many divinities (Idowu, 1973). Basden (1966) had earlier avowed that "scattered here and there throughout the Igbo country, more particularly on the eastern side of the Niger are certain local deities alleged to possess supernatural powers" (p.66). Metuh (1981) reiterated that "the belief in many deities and the ancestral cults has been observed and has overshadowed the worship of God" (p.134).

It may sound surprising that till date, there seem to be no consensus opinion among scholars of African traditional religion on some theological issues relating to the nature of African Traditional Religion (A.T.R). Some of these theological questions centered on whether the adherents of African traditional religion pray and if they do, who are the recipients of these prayers (Ekwunife, 2007).These and many other theological questions such as the place of the cult of the ancestors in African prayers seem not to have received a generally accepted answer among scholars in this and related areas. More so, there seem not to be sufficient studies in this prevailing orthodoxy, which has created serious knowledge gap in the literature. This gap yawns for study, especially within the Sub-Sahara Africa where the increasing mixture of faiths calls for the retrieval of African matrix.

Conversely, it is believed, that the result of this study, which was carried out in Anambra State of Nigeria, will emit some light to some of these theological problems

facing the nature of African traditional religion. The problems, which the study addressed, were therefore:

    (a) To ascertain the position of the cult of ancestors in African prayers.

    (b) To identify the focal recipient/addressee in African traditional prayer.

The study was guided by two (2) research questions as follows:

    (1).What is the position of the cult of ancestors in African prayers.

    (2).Who is the focal recipient/addressee in African traditional prayer.

The method used for the study was an evaluative survey, using primary and secondly sources and the instruments used for data collection were a set of interview guide. We shall discuss the subject of this paper under the following sub-headings:

- Concept of prayer.
- Prayer in African communities.
- The cult of ancestors in African communities.
- The focal recipient in African traditional prayers.
- The cult of ancestors within other religions.
- Principal findings.
- Conclusion.

What is Prayer?

Microsoft Encarta dictionary (2008) defined prayer as "a spoken or unspoken address to God, a deity, or a saint. It may express praise, thanksgiving, confession, or a request for something such as help or somebody's well-being". (n.d)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) described prayer as "the raising of ones mind and heart to God or the requesting of things from God" (585). Ekwunife (2007) defined prayer as:

> a spiritual means through which a religious man interiorly and externally communicate with God and all super-sensible beings of His invisible world. It can be described as a spiritual outreach of the temporal religious man to the transcendent Being and His agents …In prayer, the religious man not affirms the reality of the supra-sensible world, but also expresses a faith-conviction that a temporal world is not meaningful without Transcendence…Prayer is therefore, that spiritual air which energizes, sustains, enlivens and direct man's temporal journey to eternity (pp.6-7)

There are various definitions of prayer and in many cases, it is rather described and in some other cases, the description is influenced by ones religious affiliation. In all, prayer portrays ones dependency on a more superior and supernatural beings. In prayers too, ones incapability, powerlessness and helplessness are acknowledged.

Prayer in African Communities

Prayers in African traditional communities usually take various forms. This may differ from place to place but certain patterns may seem general in most cases. Mbiti (1969) echoed that:

> African traditional prayers generally include praise, thanksgiving, a declaration of the state of affairs in which the prayers are offered, and requests. Such prayers always have concrete intentions and people do not 'beat about the bush' when saying their prayers. They request such things as: good

health, healing, protection from danger, safety in traveling or some other undertaking, security, prosperity, preservation of life, peace and various benefits for individuals. For the community at large, prayer may ask for rain, peace, the cessation of epidemics and dangers to the nation, success in war or raids, the acceptance of sacrifices and offerings, and fertility for people, animals and crops. (Pp.55-56).

The Suku (Congo) have no term that can be translated as 'ancestor'. The dead members of their lineage are referred to as *bambuta*. Literally, *bambuta* means the 'big ones', the 'old ones', those older than oneself; collectively, the term refers to the ruling elders of a lineage. A *mbuta* (singular) is literally anyone who is older than ego. A *mbuta* is any older adult, older siblings as well as those of the generations above. In jural contexts, where authority is vested overwhelmingly in the males, the term is effectively narrowed to all male seniors. Before the hunting season begins every Suku secures hunting luck by obtaining that the lineage wishes him well, that he continues to be under its protection. The reassurance can in principle be obtained verbally from any elder; more appropriately, it is obtained from anyone in the generation above. There is a pattern in asking for luck: one beseeches, one complains, one reproves, one asks forgiveness. On his part, the older man signifies his goodwill by giving the junior some *pemba* (white clay); he also uses the occasion to remind the young man of his obligations to the old, to scold him lightly for his past misdemeanors, and to ask his forgiveness for past misfortunes. The manner of addressing the living elder is the same as the one used in addressing the dead. Everyone goes to his elder. The old people go to their elders; but since these are dead, they are to be found at the grave or at the cross-roads at night.

The patterns of communication to ancestors in many African societies share some similarities with the pattern of communication to God in some world religions. For instance, a typical pattern of ancestral worship looks like a copy of many psalms in Christian religion.

The Cult of Ancestors in African Communities.

For a better understanding of the cult of ancestors in African communities, a brief insight into the concept of death and burial rites is deemed necessary. Death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person's deeper relationship with all of creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death. This is why every person who dies must be given a "correct" funeral, supported by a number of religious ceremonies. If this is not done, the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable to "live" properly after death and therefore a danger to those who remain alive. It might be argued that "proper" death rites are more a guarantee of protection for the living than to secure a safe passage for the dying. It is believed that the dead have power over the living. (Temple, 1969)

People usually take care and cherish their ancestors in order to be protected, to thank or to be forgiven. We usually take care of their tombs or give gifts and offerings such as honey, fruits, rum, and usual tools; and we place them near the ancestor's tomb.

Ancestor cults and ancestor worship loom large in the anthropological image of sub-Saharan Africa. Comparatively viewed, African ancestor worship has a remarkably uniform structural framework. The spirit world is believed to be a radically different world, it is also a carbon copy of the countries where [the ancestors] lived in this life (Mbiti, 1970). Ancestors are vested with mystical powers and authority. They retain a functional role in the world of the living, specifically in the life of their living kinsmen; indeed, African kin-groups are often described as communities of both the living and the dead. Ancestors are intimately involved with the welfare of their kin-group but they are not linked in the same way to every member of that group. The linkage is structured through the elders of the kin-group, whom are the representatives of the ancestors and the mediators between them and the kin-group. (Fortes, 1965).

The ancestors are seen as retaining their role in the affairs of their kin-group and only of their kin-group. They are appropriated with 'sacrifices'. They are seen as dispensing both favours and misfortune; they are often accused of being capricious and of failing in their responsibilities, but, at the same time, their actions are related to possible lapses on the part of the living and are seen as legitimately punitive. This comparatively, conforms to the psalmist pattern of prayer.

Many African burial rites begin with the sending away of the departed with a request that they do not bring trouble to the living, and they end with a plea for the strengthening of life on the earth and all that favors it.(Mbiti,1969)

The African religion's scholar, Placide Tempels (1969) describes every misfortune that Africans encounter as a diminution of vital force. Illness and death result from some outside agent, a person, thing, or circumstance that weakens people because the agent contains a greater life force. Death does not alter or end the life or the personality of an individual, but only causes a change in its conditions. This is expressed in the concept of "ancestors," people who have died but who continue to "live" in the community and communicate with their families. (Temple, 1969)

The presence and manifestation of ancestors in the family, clan and community is in various forms. EATWOT Members,(2000) corroborated this view when they succinctly stated that:

> Ancestors continue to interact with the living through dreams, appearances, visions, sounds, and incarnations through animals such as: birds, butterflies, bees, snakes, lions, etc. Sometimes messages are received from them through diviners, mediums, medicine persons or priests.(Ancestors, Cult Of, para.1)

The ancestors, or the living-dead, are believed to be disembodied spirits of people who lived upright lives here on earth, died 'good' and natural death, that is at ripe old age, and received the acknowledged funerary rites. They could be men or women. But more over often than not, male ancestors are prominent since patrilineage is the dominant system of family and social integration in most traditional African societies. For matrilineal groups like the Ashanti of Ghana and the Ndembu of Zambia, both male and female ancestors are duly acknowledged. With the completion of prescribed funeral rites, a deceased person is believed to transform into an ancestor. (Ejizu, 2006).

Ancestors perform many roles; these roles may be summarized as follows:

a) Unifying families and people, caring for each other, empowering, blessing, rewarding and inspiring.
b) Protecting families and clans from diseases, evil, enemies, even in war.
c) Mediating between people and the Divinity.
d) Enforcing discipline–in case of the breaking social values.
e) Facilitating holistic healing. (Mbiti, 1965)

Efforts are directed to ensure unity with the community and with the ancestors since one actually exists if the bond of relationship is not broken. Mbiti (1990) established that:

> In traditional Africa, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual… The individual can only say: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man (p.)

The ancestors are believed to be those who have died, who exist in some usually undefined and unknown place to which the living have no access. There they look after their descendants' welfare, and expect their cooperation in return. They have power to both help and harm their wards; they are only there to help them and protect them. They only passively bring harm, by withdrawing their protection when their instructions have not been carried out. Ancestors reveal themselves mostly through dreams, but also less frequently through (day) visions and through diviners. One respondent from South Africa, in an interesting example of 'cultural schizophrenia', said that when the ancestors appeared to him in dreams it was 'as clear as television', and not like an 'ordinary dream'. (Anderson, 1993)

At the Annual Conference of the Southern African Missiological Society, it was remarked that one respondent revealed how she had a dream in 1986. In that dream, she noticed she was pregnant and someone took her to a big stone (probably a gravestone) on which was written the name 'Isaac'. The following day she enquired from an older family member, who told her that Isaac was her grandfather who had died many years ago. That she became pregnant a month later and gave birth to a baby boy whom she called Isaac. She then prayed and thanked the ancestors for their gift of the child. The child thereby, following traditional custom, received the 'ancestor spirit' of the deceased ancestor Isaac (Anderson, 1993).

However, he (Anderson) added that ancestors can be angered, and thereby can bring calamity to their descendants, especially when their instructions are not carried out. Because they are 'parents', they have the responsibility to discipline their 'children' when they are disobedient. In the same study, another respondent narrated how his cousin was knocked down by a motor vehicle, the family visited a diviner to discover the reason for this disaster. They were told that the cousin had not carried out the 'rules' of the ancestors as revealed in a dream, and that this was why the accident had occurred. Similarly, another informant said that a diviner had told his brother that the ancestors

wanted to kill him for failing to carry out their instructions. That he was indeed thereafter knocked down by a car and killed.

Furthermore, it was generally agreed by many of the respondents that the ancestors were responsible for the violence that had swept South Africa because, they were angry that they were being neglected or ignored by the young people. Several other respondents referred to the visit of Mr Nelson Mandela to his ancestral home in the Transkei after he was released from prison in 1990, believing that he had supposedly paid homage to his ancestors was the reason why things were going so well for him, and his 'power' was increasing. One respondent said that when Mr Nelson Mandela was released from prison, that he went back to his birth place to tell the ancestors that he was released from prison, and was now on a mission to liberate his country. That all the blessings and the changes which are coming to them through him are because the ancestors are backing him and helping him (Anderson, 1993).

The ancestor cult is the central feature of African religion, the heart of the African spirit world. It is not an outmoded belief which is dying out in South Africa's urban areas. The veneration of ancestors is still widely practised in the black townships of South Africa as in many parts of Africa, although the incident of veneration of the ancestor cult among Indigenous church members is not as high today as it was thirty years ago. Wherever the subject of ancestors is approached, there was usually lively discussion. For a great many urban black people the ancestors are a reality, to be given due acknowledgement and to whom recourse is had for the provision of felt needs. (Anderson, 1993)

The Focal Recipient of Prayers in African Traditional Communities.
Who do Africans address their prayers to? The background that forms this theological question may be summed up in line with Ekwunife (2007:44) that the pendulum seems to be oscillating between three positions; overt denials, middle-way positions and affirmative positions. He (Ekwunife) went further to explain that:

> the overt denial scholars with an assumed evolutionary theory of the 28th and mid 20th centuries could not countenance religious thoughts and practices being associated with African traditional religious mentality. Thus, in their view, the lofty abstract nature of God cannot be attained in any way by the untutored Africans….The middle-way positions is based on the theory of the remote God or lazy God or inactive God who, after the creation of the visible world left His control to the African multiple deities, or divinities, ancestors,, spirits, spiritual powers and men….The affirmative positions are held by scholars who affirmed with concrete proof that traditional Africans relate and commune with God as the adherent of other world religion do (pp.44-45).

The overt denial position was originated in the words of Emil Lud Wig a white missionary, who, Ezenweke (2004) noted to have ignorantly described the Africans in these words: How can these untutored Africans conceive God? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing.

The thrust of this paper lies much on the middle-way position. Thus, who is the focal recipient of African traditional prayers? Is God a remote God or lazy God or inactive

God who, after the creation of the visible world left His control to the African ancestors and other spirits? What is the place of ancestors in African traditional prayers? We shall handle this by first of all, identifying the utmost concern of an African and then move to whom they address their prayers to.

The utmost concern of many African communities is coexistence with and the strengthening of vital force or vital relationship in the world and universe. Hence, the emphasis is on fecundity and life, and the identification between being and power or vital force. Nyamiti (2006) substantiated and accentuated that:

> The craving for power, safety, protection and life is the driving force in the African religion. This craving originates not so much from logical reflection, but from a feeling of incapacity and an obstinate desire to overcome it. Many individual needs are believed to be satisfied by dynamism and spiritism. Amulets and talisman are vehicles of vital energy. This ethic is based on the belief that every act and custom which strikes at the vital force or at the growth and hierarchy of man is bad. What is ontologically and morally and juridical just is that which maintains and increases the vital energy This vital force is usually increased and protected by being in union with ones ancestors (p.)

One of the most important aspects of Akan (Ghana) religion is the reverence of the ancestors. They are always held in deep reverence or even worshipped. The ancestors are the dead forbears' of the family. However, death does not necessarily confer ancestorship on a person. To be considered an ancestor, they must have lived an exemplary life, and have done much to enhance the prestige of the family, clan, or tribe. It is believed that the ancestors are spiritual beings with the power to bring good fortune to the living, or if dissatisfied, show their displeasure by causing ill fortune, sickness etc… Prayers and sacrifices are most often offered to them to solicit their blessings and avert their curses (Rutledge, 1997)

Among the spirits, God is the highest. He is the ultimate controller of natural forces and human destiny. He dwells far away in the sky, or in some important places such as mountains. He is often approached through intermediaries such as the ancestors … an ancestor is believed to enjoy a sacred super-human status with special magico-religious powers that can be beneficial or even harmful to his earthly kin. Such super-human condition is expressed in various ways. Thus, for instance, both bodily and spiritual qualities are ascribed to the ancestors: invisibility or visibility in human but unusual form, capacity to enter into and possess human individuals or brute animals, capacity to consume food or drinks, special nearness to the Supreme Being, capacity to exist anywhere — although the ancestors are believed to have localities of preference (e.g. shrines, particular trees or bushes, grave-yards, etc.). …they are said to manifest their anger by sending to their descendants bodily or spiritual calamities. Their anger is usually appeased through prayer and ritual offerings or oblations. …An ancestor is, therefore, expected to be faithful to his earthly kin, who expect from him a favourable response or reward for their prayers and ritual donations to him when recourse to the ancestors fails to procure the desired effects, the living normally turn to the Supreme Being as a last resort. (Njamiti, 2006)

Mbiti (1990) illustrated that:

> The living-dead are bilingual; they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until 'recently', and they speak the language of the spirits and of God ...They are the 'spirits' with which African peoples are most concerned: it is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men. They are still part of their human families, and people have personal memories of them. (p.82).

The informants in this study, of who are supposedly Christians have varied opinions regarding the focal recipient of African traditional prayers. While some are inclined to the cult of ancestors, many seem to reject it. It is surprising that a well known educated politician vehemently in line with other respondents attested to the role of ancestors in their achievements. From the above, one may conclude without serious contradiction that the cult of ancestors seems to be closer to the affairs of their living relations and so, Africans seem to call them or resort to them more frequently in their prayers. This may have informed the opinion of the middle-way positions of a remote God or lazy God or inactive God who, after the creation of the visible world left His control to the African multiple deities, or divinities, ancestors, spirits, spiritual powers and men. The observed situation may be understood in other ways rather than on the ground that is remote or lazy. The fact that children usually gather around their mother is insufficient to perceive a father as a lazy or remote father. However, one fact that is obvious is the frequent prayers to the ancestors.

The Cult of Ancestors in Other Religions

The incidence of the belief in the cult of ancestors and that of praying to them is a universal phenomenon. If is not only witnessed in African traditional religion but in other world religions. The belief in the continuing presence of the dead and their and influence on the living has been, in different forms, a feature of Jewish belief from earliest times. This has led to venerating the ancestral dead, and even cults dedicated to them. The Bible itself refers to such practices as ensuring the dead are gathered together with the clan on ancestral land (Gen. 50:24-25), caring for the dead spirits (Deut. 26:14; Is. 57:6), and consulting them for occult knowledge (Deut. 18:11; Is. 8:19-22; 19:3; I Sam. 28:3-25). It is clear that ancient Israel venerated its dead (Deut. 10:15). Many scholars also believe that the Children of Israel inherited a cult of the ancestral dead, possibly even deified dead, and that it remained a popular belief among Israelites despite the opposition of the Prophets. References in the Bible to the *ob*, (a familiar spirit apparently derived from the same Hebrew root as "father") has been considered part of that covert tradition. Other scholars argue that a cult of the beneficent dead was introduced by influence of the Assyrians, who were obsessed with necromancy, in the 8th-7th Centuries BCE. From this perspective, all seemingly earlier references found in the Bible are actually anachronisms introduced by later editors. (Dennis, 2004)

Other evidences abound in the bible on the consultation of the spirit of an ancestor. For instance, the first book of Samuel, chapter 28:4-25 documents how Saul, though

a biblical figure, contrary to the proscription of the Torah, consulted the ancestral dead (spirit of prophet Samuel)for guidance. Dennis (2004) went on to remark that:

> With the prophetic verse Jer. 31:15-16 serving as *locus classicus*, "A cry is heard in Ramah, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeps for her children, she refuses to be comforted...," the Sages of Talmudic times believed that the ancestors were aware of what transpired on earth and would plead before God on behalf of their descendants. In time this idea of the influence of the beneficent dead expanded into the doctrine of zachot avot (the merit of the ancestors), which became canonized in the daily liturgy with the *Avot prayer* ("You remember the faithfulness of our ancestors and therefore bring redemption to their children's children..."). Under the influence of Christian and Muslim saint veneration, the doctrine of *zachut avot* eventually evolved into a more direct veneration of the meritorious dead, with practices such as praying to them for their intercession in personal matters of import. The purported graves of many Biblical (Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem), Rabbinic (Simon bar Yochai in Meron), Medieval (Meir Baal Nes in Tiberia), and modern (Nachman of Bratzlav) luminaries have become the focus of pilgrimages and prayers for divine intervention among the Charedim (the Ultra-Orthodox) (Electronic version).

Anderson(1992a) also revealed the opinion of a well informed member of the Apostolic Faith Mission, and a sincere Christian that:

> I personally do not venerate the ancestors, but I believe that ancestors are there. Ancestors do exist; they are people who have fallen asleep. Before I was saved I used to venerate them; and I know what they can do in the life of a person. You really can become a slave of the ancestors. Even the Bible acknowledges that there are 'gods' and that we should not worship any other gods but our Father in heaven. They do have the power to help or harm you - that I saw when I was not yet saved... when I did what I was instructed, such as slaughtering a goat, then I saw things definitely improving. They have the power to harm you if you do not follow their instructions; and they have the power to help you if you follow them.... I believe that if people knew the power of the gospel they would not have anything to do with the ancestors. But because they are bound by the devil they are still in darkness. They go up and down buying goats, slaughtering cows - and nothing seems to come right. So if only people could know the power of the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ, they could be set free... now that they are still in darkness they must do as the devil commands them (p.77).

Lukhaimane (1980) said that:

The ZCC 'did not restrict its members from making sacrifices to their ancestors'. This comment was valid for some of the ZCC members we encountered, who felt that it was important to make ritual killings. A ZCC minister said that as the ancestors were mediators between people and God, they had to be obeyed. We should pray to the ancestors so that they could speak to God on our behalf, he said. He also said that the ancestral spirit that operated in a person could through baptism and prayer be converted into what he called a 'church spirit', or the Spirit of God. This is how he answered our question 'What are ancestors?' Ancestors are people who have died - but this does not mean that they have ceased to exist. They still continue living in another world. Now they have more power than we have. They can see all things that are happening to us, because they are working very closely with God.... They are able to pray to God on our behalf, and the things we ask of them they present to God. I believe that they are people very much concerned about us and our lives. (p.51)

Anderson (1991) discovered that:

> For many Pentecostal-type churches contact with the ancestors is rejected, while for others there is a far more tolerant and ambivalent attitude to the ancestor cult. Our research shows that the majority of the members of Christian churches reject ancestor veneration.(p.81)

The above view is in line with the views of many of my Nigerian Christian informants in the present study. It may be noted that one hardly finds anyone that is an adherent of A.T.R yet, many of them (Nigerian Indigenous Christians) were on the view that Ancestors do appear to Christians, but they usually reject such appearances on the ground that ancestors are believed to be demonic spirits which need to be bound and exorcised. This view conformed to Daneel (1987) that:

> …The spirit is branded a demon ... its claims on the patient - especially if these involve ancestor worship - are rejected and the spirit is exorcised. Here the Holy Spirit and the ancestor spirit are usually diametrically opposed and it is a matter of confrontation rather than identification. (p.261)

On the other hand, many African highly educated and westernized Christian theologians speak of their passionate desire to be linked with their dead and of their own inner struggle. Tswana theologian and poet Gabriel M. Setiloanem , in Fashole-Luke (1978), speaks for many African Christians:

> Ah, . . . yes . . . it is true.
> They are very present with us
> The dead are not dead; they are ever near us;
> Approving and disapproving all our actions,
> They chide us when we go wrong,

Bless us and sustain us for good deeds done,
For kindness shown, and strangers made to feel at home.
They increase our store, and punish our pride
 (pp. 407).

Conclusion

Prayer is a multi dimensional phenomenon. It reflects one dependency on a higher beings and an indispensable aspect of an African man. The belief in the existence and dependency on ancestors is widely held in Africa and in most cases, prayers are addressed to them. However, Africans believe in the existence of the Supreme Being (God) who is the creator of the universe and all therein. It is surprisingly noted that some African Christians believe in the power of their ancestors and still pray to them for assistance and went on to support that for the Christian faith to have any real effect in African life, it must accept and address the spirit world. We Africans cannot ignore the dead; a Christianity that has no place for them speaks in alien tones. Until Christianity can penetrate the spirit world, it will for a long time remain on the surface. (Mbiti,1977)As theologian S. E. Serote in Becken (1973) insists,

 Christian Africa must have a Christian ancestry. In developing a Christian theology that speaks to the African understanding of ancestors, these theologians are confident that their insights will enrich worldwide Christianity.

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