

Is ancestor veneration the most universal of all world religions? : a critique of modernist cosmological bias / Thomas Reuter

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Abstrak

Research by anthropologists engaged with the Comparative Austronesia Project (Australian National University) has amassed an enormous data set for ethnological comparison between the religions of Austronesian-speaking societies, a language group to which nearly all Indonesian societies also belong. Comparative analysis reveals that ancestor veneration is a key-shared feature among Austronesian religious cosmologies; a feature that also resonates strongly with the ancestor-focused religions characteristic of East Asia. Characteristically, the religions of Austronesian-speaking societies focus on the core idea of a sacred time and place of ancestral origin and the continuous flow of life that is issuing forth from this source. Present-day individuals connect with the place and time of origin through ritual acts of retracing a historical path of migration to its source. What can this seemingly exotic notion of a flow of life reveal about the human condition writ large? Is it merely a curiosity of the ethnographic record of this region, a traditional religious insight forgotten even by many of the people whose traditional religion this is, but who have come under the influence of so-called world religions? Or is there something of great importance to be learnt from the Austronesian approach to life? Such questions have remained unasked until now, I argue, because a systematic cosmological bias within western thought has largely prevented us from taking Ancestor Religion and other forms of “traditional knowledge” seriously as an alternative truth claim. While I have discussed elsewhere the significance of Ancestor Religion in reference to my own research in highland Bali, I will attempt in this paper to remove this bias by its roots. I do so by contrasting two modes of thought: the “incremental dualism” of precedence characteristic of Austronesian cultures and their Ancestor Religions, and the “transcendental dualism” of mind and matter that has been a central theme within the cultural history of Western European thought. I argue for a deeper appreciation of Ancestor Religion as the oldest and most pervasive of all world religions.