Religious pollution is a common concept across the world's religions. It is sometimes referred to as impurity or uncleanness and other times as guilt or sin. A recent article in the Taipei Times of Taiwan revealed a different notion of religious pollution.

Looking forward to the Ghost Festival, a popular Chinese religious holiday, the paper reported that the Taiwanese Environmental Protection Agency was concerned about the air pollution caused by the ritual burning of approximately "280,000 tonnes (metric tons) of paper ghost money" nationwide.

The EPA asked people to bring the ghost money to one of the 18 incineration plants set up by local governments instead of burning it outdoors.

These practices stem from ancestor veneration, which has been part of Chinese religions for thousands of years. Quite early in their history, the Chinese developed an elaborate set of observances to show reverence to their dead ancestors, building on the respect people display to the living elders of their family. Ancestor worship later became part of Daoism and has been reinforced by Confucianism's emphasis on showing esteem to older family members.

When family elders pass away, they are represented with tablets placed into the family shrine. Offerings are set before the tablets to them in the belief that this would encourage the deceased to bring blessings to the family. Frequently, these offerings consist of gifts of flowers, fruit or other food, as well as incense burning. Another common offering type is the burning of joss paper.

The most common type of joss paper is imaginary money printed on cheap paper designed solely for the purpose of burning to the ancestors. It is believed that the money's spirit will join with the deceased and they can spend it for goods or luxuries in the afterlife. It is also known as ghost money, spirit money or hell money.

Ghost money is often printed in large denominations, such as 100,000 or 10 billion dollars, and may bear the image of Daoism's heavenly "Jade Emperor."

Rather than send money to ancestors, one can send the luxury items themselves. It is not uncommon to burn "luxury goods" made from joss paper and cardboard or from paper-mache. These items can range from clothing and computers to cars, houses and even servants.

Annual festivals such as the Ghost Festival and the Qing-Ming Festival feature the ritual remembrance of the dead spirits, both one's own ancestors and the spirits of those with no living relatives and who may therefore wander the world causing trouble. It has become customary to purchase and burn joss paper money and goods for them at this time. Temples often conduct rituals where people bring joss paper items and incinerate them together in a great bonfire.

As the size and number of the burnings has increased, so too has the pollution they cause. As an analogy, imagine the amount of smoke that would be generated if American churches burnt Christmas trees as part of Christmas celebrations.

To make matters worse, Chinese funerals include the burning of joss paper and many businesses burn joss papers on auspicious days twice a month.

It is no wonder that in highly populated areas such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, government agencies, temple boards, religious leaders, research scientists and private firms are working together to reduce joss paper pollution.

When citizens complained about the amount of smoke from these fires, governments turned to scientists to analyze the problem. They found that in addition to large amounts of particulate matter, joss-paper smoke contained polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and benzene, a known carcinogen.

Sensitive to religious concerns, officials sought ways to reduce the pollution. In response, some private companies produced temple-sized joss paper burners with scrubbers to remove particles and chemicals from the smoke. Many temples have installed these burners, which replace the quaint traditional burner and turn their back courtyards into something resembling the piping and duct-work of a small oil refinery.

Daoist leaders also have emphasized flowers and fruits as traditional gifts for the dead.

Buddhism has taken a theological tack. Some attack worship of the dead as superstition. Tzu Chi, the leader of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation, has argued that the belief in benefits from burning joss paper stem from false, concocted stories. Proponents of Pure Land Buddhism point out that the dead who inhabit Buddhism's heavenly "Pure Land" have everything supplied for them and thus need no money or goods from the living.

So while religious beliefs concerning joss-paper burning have led to the pollution problem, religious leaders and temple organizations are changing their rituals and challenging practices to remove the pollution.