

# Five Issues on Confucian-Christian Dialogue

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**Abstract:** Based on professor Tian Wei's masterpiece, *Christianity and Confucianism: Two Models of Religious Existential Ethics*, five issues on Confucian-Christian Dialogue are especially discussed in this article: "Christian concept of God and Confucian concept of Heaven's Mandate" involves discussions on theology and anthropology, "Christian doctrine of original sin and Confucian doctrine of innate goodness, "Christian doctrine of salvation through God's grace and Confucian doctrine of self-cultivation through human effort" involves discussions on soteriology and ethics, "Christian concept of divine love and Confucian concept of benevolence" still fundamentally involves soteriology and ethics, and "Christian hope of eternal life and Confucian pursuit of immortality" fundamentally involves eschatology.

**Key words:** God, Heaven's Mandate, original sin, innate goodness, salvation, self-cultivation, divine love, benevolence, hope, immortality

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In her masterpiece, *Christianity and Confucianism: Two Models of Religious Existential Ethics*<sup>1</sup>, Professor Wei Tian, from Tsinghua University of Beijing, uses the Bible and the "Four Books" as core texts. On a metaphysical level, she integrates Christianity and Confucianism as two types of "models" with similarities and differences into the framework of "religious existential ethics." Through reinterpreting the following five topics, she explores the ultimate value survival order of human universality based on ultimacy and directedness: the Christian concept of God and the Confucian concept of Heaven's Mandate, the Christian doctrine of original sin and the Confucian doctrine of innate goodness, the Christian doctrine of salvation through grace and the Confucian doctrine of self-cultivation through effort, the Christian concept of divine love and the Confucian concept of benevolence, and the Christian hope for eternal life and the Confucian pursuit of immortality. From a Christian theological perspective, these five topics possess considerable systematicity. However, in the author's view, there are occasional unclear boundaries between them. They involve the following fundamental questions.

Firstly, Professor Tian's "Christian concept of God and Confucian concept of Heaven's Mandate" involves discussions on theology and anthropology.

Tian has done a good job, but many details should be made clear. The essence of the Christian concept of God lies in the Trinitarian belief of the Creator, the Son who redeems, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies. A genuine comparison and dialogue with Christian "theology" should

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1 Tian Wei, *Christianity and Confucianism: Two Models of Religious Existential Ethics*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2022. (田薇 Tian Wei, 《基督教与儒家——宗教性生存伦理的两种范型》 Jidujiao yu rujia ---- Zongjiaoxing shengcun lunli de liangzhong fanxing. 北京 Beijing:清华大学出版社Qinghua daxue chubanshe 2022. )

involve discussions on the personified “Sovereign” or “God” in pre-Confucian or ancient Chinese civilization, the anthropomorphized but vague “Heaven,” as well as non-personified concepts like “Heavenly Way,” “Heavenly Principles,” “Human Nature,” “Way,” “Principle,” and “Nature.” All these concepts are closed but different in many ways, a distinction needs to be made, otherwise, a real dialogue is impossible. In fact, the Confucian concept of “Heaven’s Mandate” bears more resemblance to the Christian “anthropology” rather than to God Himself.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, Professor Tian’s exploration of the “Christian doctrine of original sin and Confucian doctrine of innate goodness” concerns anthropology.

The essence of the Christian anthropology is that humans, originally created in the image and likeness of God, are inherently “good,” but due to “original sin,” humanity fell into a state of death and requires salvation. In Confucianism, the corresponding concept revolves around three issues:

1) The origin of humans. 2) The inquiries into whether human nature is neutral, good, or evil. 3) The concept of “Heaven’s Mandate,” which pertains to the Confucian doctrine that “Heaven’s mandate is called nature, following nature is called the Way, and cultivating the Way is called education”, and whether human virtues are in accordance with the Way so that they adapt to Heaven’s Mandate. The Christian doctrine of original sin and Confucian doctrine of innate goodness cannot be simply juxtaposed, since in Confucianism (also involves Daoism) the original nature of human beings may be describe bed as good, evil or neutral, and in Christianity there are different stages such as original good, original sin, totally corruption, salvation, righteousness and sanctification, and the final eternal good. Before analyzing and comparing the relationship between the two, it is necessary to address the aforementioned issues.

Thirdly, Professor Tian’s exploration of “Christian doctrine of salvation through God’s grace and Confucian doctrine of self-cultivation through human effort” involves discussions on soteriology and ethics.

The essence of the Christian doctrine of salvation lies in the belief that the “image and likeness of God” within humans has been so severely damaged by “original sin” that salvation can only be achieved by faith through “grace” (Jesus Christ).<sup>3</sup> However, the Confucian doctrine of self-cultivation through human effort fundamentally belongs to ethics and cannot truly transcend into the realm of “transcendence.” The distinction between *coram Deo* (in front of God) and *coram hominibus* (in front of human beings), *coram mundo* (in front of the world) and *ipse coram* (in front of oneself) has been usually ignored and unknown for most Chinese scholars, when they deal with the Christian-Confucian dialogue.

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2 Qinghe Xiao, “Matteo Ricci and the New Horizon of the Intellectual World in late Ming: A Response to Prof. XIE Wenyu’s Article “The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven and the Differences in Concerns between Chinese and Western Thinking”, *International Journal of Sino-Western Studies*, no. 25 (2023), pp.156-167.

3 Paulos Huang, tr. by Ying Yang, “K. H. Ting’s One-Sided Interpretation of Xin (信) as a verb”, *International Journal of Sino-Western Studies*, no. 25 (2023), pp. 7-17.

1) Although Mou Zongsan proposed the concept of “internal transcendence”<sup>4</sup>, most Confucian scholars have, however, not thoroughly analyzed the ontological and cosmological aspects of Confucianism, and when they try to clarify the similarities between the anthropomorphized “Sovereign” or “God” in pre-Confucian or ancient Chinese civilization and the Creator “God” in Christianity, they have not realized the distinction between Heaven (or God) and natural law / moral law. Without noticing the above distinction, it would be challenging to identify the concept of “transcendence” in the ontological sense within the Confucian tradition, as similar to natural law or moral law rather than to God Himself.

2) Concepts such as “Heaven’s Way,” “Heaven’s Mandate,” and “Innate Consciousness” in Confucianism are essentially similar to the Christian concepts of “natural law” and “moral law.” They fall within the category of existential creation after ontological and cosmological considerations (the Creator and creation), belonging to the physical level. Even if they involve invisible aspects, they are still “created”, because the created realm includes both the visible and the invisible worlds. From the perspective of Christianity, “natural law” and “moral law” fundamentally cannot enter the category of “transcendence” but merely represent “creative principles” manifested within existence (or the created realm)<sup>5</sup>. The “creativity” inherent in concepts, such as “birth, transformation, and evolution”, is considered to be the source and essence of all things in the universe, rather than emphasizing the fundamental difference between the “God the Creator” and the “created realm” as emphasized in Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

3) Only after distinguishing the essential dualistic rupture between the Creator God and the created realm in Christianity and the monistic continuity between the giver of life and the recipient of life in Confucianism can we see that when faced with the transcendent, Christianity emphasizes that humans can only be redeemed through grace (Jesus Christ), while Confucianism (especially after the Qin and Han Dynasties) fundamentally lacks a transcendent entity different from this world. In the Confucian tradition after the Qin and Han Dynasties, the visible physical realm and the invisible realm are essentially monist continuous and unified<sup>7</sup>. Confucian scholars

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4 Mou Zongsan: *On the Doctrine of Universal Goodness*. Taipei: Taiwan Student Bookstore, 1985, pp. 20-50.

5 Paulos Huang, “The Future History of Knowledge and Power Interaction in the Perspective of Artificial Intelligence: An Analysis from the Religious and Humanistic Perspective of Martin Luther”, *Journal of Xiangtan University*, 2022, Issue 1, pp. 36-43.

6 Paulos Huang, “Creation and Life in Christianity and Confucianism: A Comprehensive Evaluation of Process Theology by Kaufman, Nanle Mountain, Du Weiming, and Others”, *Seeking Truth Journal*, No. 4, Vol. 38, July 2011, pp. 1-9.

7 Please note: In the Christian tradition, the metaphysical and the physical can both be considered as the created realm by the Creator God, divided into the invisible and the visible aspects. However, in the ancient Confucian or ancient Chinese civilization tradition, the invisible metaphysical realm may correspond to the transcendent realm associated with “emperor” or “god,” while the visible physical realm corresponds to it. However, in the Confucian tradition after the changes during the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, especially after the changes during the Qin and Han Dynasties, the visible and the invisible worlds are merely differences in form and are essentially the same, so they may not necessarily be described as the distinction between the metaphysical and the physical anymore. Additionally, in ancient Greek and subsequent philosophical traditions, the term “metaphysical” often refers not only to the invisible domain but also equates to the transcendent and the Creator God in Christianity. These various uses need to be distinguished.

often believe that through personal cultivation and effort, one can achieve the unity of heaven and humanity on their own.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Christianity, particularly represented by Protestantism such as Lutheranism, emphasizes that human self-effort can only achieve relative goodness in the natural world (*coram mundo*), in relation to others (*coram hominibus*), and in relation to oneself (*ipse coram*), but it cannot attain the possibility of absolute goodness and divinization (*coram Deo*).<sup>9</sup> This is a strong continuation to the disputation between bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and the priest Pelagius (c. 354-418). Augustine has been accepted as orthodox in both Roman Catholic and Lutheran, Reformed and St. Anglican churches, and Pelagianism has been condemned as heresy in Christian church and has become the ancestor of anthropocentricist liberal humanism.

Fourthly, Professor Tian's exploration of "Christian concept of divine love and Confucian concept of benevolence" still fundamentally involves soteriology and ethics.

According to Luther, Christian divine love (agape) is a benevolence created on objects that are unlovable, ugly, evil, or empty. This is a love of giving (such as the creation and sustenance by God the Father, the redemption by Jesus Christ from death to life, and the sanctification by the Holy Spirit from evil to good). It is entirely opposite to human love, which seeks and obtains goodness from objects that are lovable, good, beautiful, or virtuous. This is a love of seeking. While Confucian benevolence is often understood as the pursuit of goodness through practice, although the concept of "benevolence of giving" can also be found in ancient Confucianism<sup>10</sup>. Without noticing the distinction between the two kinds of love, many scholars have made and will continue to make mistakes in Christian-Confucian dialogue.

Fifthly, Professor Tian's exploration of "Christian hope of eternal life and Confucian pursuit of immortality" fundamentally involves eschatology.

In Christian eschatology, there is a distinction between the metaphysical and the physical realms, characterized by a strongly personalized affection. In contrast, the Confucian pursuit of immortality lacks such a distinction between the metaphysical and the physical; rather, it only involves a distinction in form. Furthermore, there is no personalized affection in the Confucian pursuit of immortality, and many of its humanistic traits can ultimately be reduced to a non-personalized naturalistic perspective.

8 Paulos Huang Huang, "Is 'Unity of Heaven and Humanity' Unique to Chinese Studies? - An Analysis from the Perspective of Western Studies", in *Huaxia Cultural Forum*, Semi-Annual Issue, No. 1, Changchun: Jilin University, 2018, pp. 313-325.

9 Michael Puett, *To Become a God. Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*, 2004, Harvard University Press, p. 145. Lossky, Vladimir, translated by Yang Deyou, 1997. *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2001, pp. 52-53.

10 Tuomo Mannermaa, translated by Paulos Huang, "Two Kinds of Love", in *Collected Works of Mandoma*, Shanghai: Sanlian Publishers, 2018. In comparison to Anders Nygren's 1930 classic *Agape and Eros*, Mandoma offers new developments, such as exploring in what sense God needs human love and what it means for humans to love God. It also delves into whether it's possible for humans to love others as themselves. Without distinguishing between "God's love" and "human love," it would be difficult to truly clarify the above questions.

In summary, five Issues on Confucian-Christian Dialogue arisen from Professor Wei TIAN's masterpiece are as follows:

1) The Nature of God and Heaven's Mandate: Professor Tian's exploration delves into the core texts of Christianity and Confucianism, discussing the metaphysical aspects of God and Heaven's Mandate. However, there may be some ambiguity regarding the distinction between the nature of the Christian God and the personified concept of "Heaven" in Confucianism. 2) The Doctrine of Salvation and Self-Cultivation: Tian's analysis touches upon the doctrines of salvation and self-cultivation in Christianity and Confucianism. While Christianity emphasizes salvation through grace, Confucianism focuses on self-cultivation. However, the comparison between these two concepts might require further elucidation. 3) The Concept of Love: Tian explores the Christian concept of divine love (agape) and the Confucian concept of benevolence (*ren* 仁). While Christianity emphasizes agape as a form of giving, Confucianism's *ren* is often understood as a pursuit of goodness through practice. However, a deeper examination might reveal similarities or distinctions in their understanding of love. 4) The Hope of Eternal Life and the Pursuit of Immortality: The exploration of eternal life in Christianity and the pursuit of immortality in Confucianism touches upon eschatological themes. While Christianity distinguishes between metaphysical and physical realms, Confucianism lacks such a distinction. This raises questions about the nature of their respective hopes for the afterlife. 5) Clarity and Systematicity: While Tian's work is highly valuable and systematic, there may be instances where clarity is lacking, especially across disciplinary boundaries. Further clarification might be needed to address ontological and cosmological differences between Christianity and Confucianism, which significantly impact their understanding of various theological and ethical issues.

Professor Tian's masterpiece is rare in its systematicity and holds significant value among works of similar themes. However, from the perspective of philosophical theology, there may be occasional lack of clarity across boundaries. The author, therefore, humbly suggests revisions as above. It seems necessary to specifically explore the differences between the "creation" and "generation" theories of Christianity and Confucianism from the standpoint of ontology or cosmology. This is because they have substantial implications for understanding the similarities and differences between Confucianism and Christianity in various aspects. Without understanding this, many issues related to anthropology, soteriology, ethics, or eschatology may remain unclear.

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中文题目：

## 关于儒基对话的五个问题

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**提要：**本文以田薇教授的著作《基督教与儒家——宗教性生存伦理的两种范型》为基础，重点讨论儒家对话的五个问题：“基督教的上帝观与儒家的天命观”涉及神学和人类学的讨论，“基督教的原罪论和儒家的性本善论”、“基督教的藉上帝恩典的救恩论和儒家的修身论”涉及救恩论和伦理学的讨论，“基督教的神圣之爱观和儒家的仁爱观”从根本上仍然涉及救世论和伦理学，而“基督教的永生希望和儒家的长生追求”从根本上涉及末世论

**关键词：**神、天命、原罪、内在之善、救赎、修身、神圣之爱、仁慈、希望、永生