CHAPTER THREE

CONFUCIAN IDEAS OF THE SAVIOUR IN CHRISTIANITY:
THE ASSIMILATION OF GOD TO THE CHINESE CONCEPTS
OF SHANGDI AND TIAN

If one wishes to know how Confucians understand the Christian doctrine of salvation, he must first find out how Confucians understand the notion of the Saviour. Does God exist? Is God the Saviour? Does He have anything to do with Chinese people?

In order to answer whether God exists, many Christian missionaries in the 16th century in China focused their arguments on the assimilation between the Christian concept of God and the Chinese concept of *Shangdi* 上帝 (Sovereign on High) and *Tian* 天 (Heaven). The term “assimilation” here means that the Christian concept of God and the Chinese concepts of *Shangdi* (Sovereign on High) and *Tian* (Heaven) are same. Ricci was the first famous missionary who started to stress such assimilation. Later, many Protestant Christians followed this assimilation and adopted *Shangdi* as the official term to translate the Christian concept of God. Catholic and Protestant Christians have dealt with the issue of assimilation, often involving the following five Chinese concepts: *Shangdi* (Sovereign on High), *Tian* (Heaven), *Taiji* (the Great Ultimate), *Li* 理 (Principle) and *Dao* 道 (Way). The two concepts *Shangdi* and *Tian* are most employed when the assimilation is discussed.

1 In his personal letter to me, professor Lauren Pfister said: “In the third chapter devoted to “Confucian ideas of the Saviour in Christianity”, there is only one mention of the person of Jesus Christ. Your discussion almost completely focuses on the concept of God (whether it is *Tian* or *Shangdi*, and whether this is equivalent or consonant with the Jewish/Christian concept of the supreme being). In essence, it does not address the saving action of the divine in any substantial way, and so the chapter title is very misleading.” I have discussed this issue in the footnote to 1. Introduction, 1.1. Aim 1) God is the one who saves people through Jesus Christ the Savior.

2 Generally speaking God saves human beings through Jesus Christ, who is the Saviour. In this chapter I will not discuss much about Christ but will focus on the concept of God. In Chapter Five when the means of salvation is analyzed I will focus on justification by faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, I do not mean here in this chapter that God rather than Jesus Christ is the Saviour.
This assimilation has raised many questions among Christian missionaries and Confucians. Many Confucians have considered that if Shangdi and the God of the Roman Catholic Christians are equivalent, then there is no problem for considering the existence of God; otherwise, to them there is no God.

What does the term “exist” mean in the dialogue? It means whether there is God or not. There are many arguments for the existence of God, for example, the \textit{a priori} approach\textsuperscript{3}, the \textit{a posteriori} approach\textsuperscript{4} and the existence approach\textsuperscript{5}. There are also many arguments against the existence

\textsuperscript{3} The \textit{a priori} ontological approach argues from a conception of God as a being so perfect that his nonexistence is inconceivable. This made famous by St. Anselm (1033–1109) in the eleventh century and defended in another form by Descartes, holds that it would be logically contradictory to deny God’s existence. St. Anselm began by defining God as “that [being] than which nothing greater can be conceived.” If God existed only in the mind, He then would not be the greatest conceivable being, for we could imagine another being that is greater because it would exist both in the mind and in reality, and that being would then be God. Therefore, to imagine God as existing only in the mind but not in reality leads to a logical contradiction; this proves the existence of God both in the mind and in reality.

\textsuperscript{4} The \textit{a posteriori} approach is usually represented by St. Thomas Aquinas. In the \textit{Summa Theologica} (Ia, 2.3) he gives five proofs, or “five ways”, by which God’s existence can be demonstrated philosophically: 1) the “unmoved mover” argument. We know that there is motion in the world; whatever is in motion is moved by another thing; this other thing also must be moved by something; to avoid an infinite regression, we must posit a “first mover,” which is God. 2) The “nothing is caused by itself” argument. For example, a table is brought into being by a carpenter, who is caused by his parents. Again, we cannot go on to infinity, so there must be a first cause, which is God. 3) The cosmological argument. All physical things, even mountains, boulders, and rivers, come into being and go out of existence, no matter how long they last. Therefore, since time is infinite, there must be some time at which none of these things existed. But if there were nothing at that point in time, how could there be anything at all now, since nothing cannot cause anything? Thus, there must always have been at least one necessary thing that is eternal, which is God. 4) Objects in the world have differing degrees of qualities such as goodness. But speaking of more or less goodness makes sense only by comparison with what is the maximum goodness, which is God. 5) The teleological argument (argument from design). Things in the world move toward goals, just as the arrow does not move toward its goal except by the archer’s directing it. Thus, there must be an intelligent designer who directs all things to their goals, and this is God. Aquinas, la, q. 2, aa.2–3. See also Allen 1985, 137.

\textsuperscript{5} There approach asserts direct experience of God by way of personal revelation. This is not really an argument in the usual sense, however, because one does not usually \textit{argue} for the existence something that can be directly experienced. Through natural theology (\textit{analogia entis}) and revelation as mediated by the Church human beings can realize that God exists but that God himself is not a being. Therefore, for Catholics, the essence of God is \textit{esse} (= to be); thus, God is \textit{existare} (= being) who gives every \textit{ens} (= a being) its \textit{esse} (= to be).