

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES
BETWEEN THE LORD OF HEAVEN TEACHING [CHRISTIANITY] AND
THE TEACHING OF THE CONFUCIAN SCHOLARS**
By Zhang Xingyao

Introduction

Beginning in the late sixteenth century, Portuguese merchants began coming to trade in southern China, bringing Jesuit priests along with them. Jesuits, notably the Italian Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), aimed to convert members of the scholar-official elite who, they hoped, would then assist in spreading their religion among the people. While welcomed by the late Ming and early Qing emperors for their expertise in areas such as astronomy, calendar-making, cannon and other firearms, and mathematics, the Jesuits made relatively few converts among the general populace. By the late seventeenth century, Christianity faced growing opposition among the officials and from the imperial government. Nonetheless, the Jesuits had succeeded in making significant converts among eminent Confucians, and there were small circles of elite Christian men who desired not merely to be Christians, but to make Christianity Chinese by exploring the differences and similarities of Christian doctrine and Confucian philosophy.

The following document was written by Zhang Xingyao (1633-c. 1715) between 1702 and 1715.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Complete document follows this section)

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**An Examination of the Similarities and Differences
Between the Lord of Heaven Teaching [Christianity]
and the Teaching of the Confucian Scholars**
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It is clear in the China of my day that the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu) [of the Western missionaries] is the same as the Lord-on-High (Shangdi) [of Chinese antiquity]. ...

... From the time the Buddha's books entered China, a teaching spread that was altogether deviant. The followers of Laozi promoted this teaching, and thereafter the minds of the people in China lost their ability to question anything. People all degenerated into a condition of merely acquiescing in what they were told, and the Buddha said, "In Heaven above and Earth below, I alone am worthy of honor." The ability to discern the Lord-of-Heaven degenerated ... Consequently, the Three Mainstays [of ruler-minister, parent-child, and husband-wife] and the Five Constraints [of Humaneness, Rightness, Ritual Decorum, Wisdom, and Trustworthiness]

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became hated and there was no effort to urge these on mankind. These people have all gone to hell without end and the followers of Confucius are not able to save them, because Confucius can neither reward nor punish nor judge the living and the dead.

... Heaven and Earth naturally possess correct principles, already present in Confucian teaching, but, with some things still not completely understood by Confucian teaching, it would not do to be without the added benefit of the teachings of the Lord of Heaven.

Questions:

1. How does Zhang bring Christianity and Confucianism together?
2. Compare Zhang's writing with Han Yu's essay on the Bone of the Buddha. In what ways are the two similar? What might account for the similarity?
3. How might Western missionaries respond to Zhang's analysis of the relationship between Christian beliefs and Chinese beliefs?

Complete Document

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It is clear in the China of my day that the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu) [of the Western missionaries] is the same as the Lord-on-High (Shangdi) [of Chinese antiquity]. Since the time of the Yellow Emperor (a legendary figure dated from 2697 B.C.), officials worked together to make sacrifices to the Lord-on-High. Thereafter the words in the classics were all there for anyone to see. Thus Xue disseminated the Five Teachings [of paternal rightness, maternal compassion, friendship of an elder brother, respect of a younger brother, and filial piety of a child], and false teachings did not develop. Sagely wisdom thrived; social customs were pure and beautiful. How could things have been better?

From the time the Buddha's books entered China, a teaching spread that was altogether deviant. The followers of Laozi promoted this teaching, and thereafter the minds of the people in China lost their ability to question anything. People all degenerated into a condition of merely acquiescing in what they were told, and the Buddha said, "In Heaven above and Earth below, I alone am worthy of honor." The ability to discern the Lord-of-Heaven degenerated, and it became a great and arrogant demon whom mankind no longer studied, followed, and

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honored. Consequently, the Three Mainstays [of ruler-minister, parent-child, and husband-wife] and the Five Constants [of Humaneness, Rightness, Ritual Decorum, Wisdom, and Trustworthiness] became hated and there was no effort to urge these on mankind. These people have all gone to hell without end and the followers of Confucius are not able to save them, because Confucius can neither reward nor punish nor judge the living and the dead.

I had known nothing of Buddhist texts, but once during a period of mourning someone said to me, "If you want to understand the meaning of life and death, why don't you take the essential Buddhist texts and meditate upon them?" Then I took up and looked through the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, and other [Buddhist] books, reading their most important passages. As a result I concluded: If these are their theories, none of them have any real meaning. I could believe what the two great Confucian scholars Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi said about the Buddhist *sūtras* being replete with half-truths, licentiousness, heterodoxy, and escape from the world. As to the teachings of the Two Heterodoxies (Daoism and Buddhism), how is it that they continue to last for even a day in these flourishing [enlightened] times?

The Western scholars came ninety thousand *li* to honor the will of the Lord of Heaven and to save the world, with many benefits to us in the Central Kingdom. Their principles are correct, their people are men of worth. How can people be inattentive to their teachings, and thus throw away the eternal life of their spiritual natures [immortal souls]. My friend, Master Zhu, styled Jinan, showed me the books of the Lord of Heaven Teaching. I had not yet finished reading them when my mind became filled with doubts about the Buddha. Then I understood that Heaven and Earth naturally possess correct principles, already present in Confucian teaching, but, with some things still not completely understood by Confucian teaching, it would not do to be without the added benefit of the teachings of the Lord of Heaven.

Therefore I have collected the books of the Lord of Heaven Teaching, explained them in the over two thousand pages of the work *Clearly Distinguishing the Lord of Heaven Teaching* [from Heterodoxy] (*Tianzhujiao mingpian*), and thus exposed the falsehoods of Buddhism and Daoism. My notes on the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance Topically Arranged* (*Tongjian jishi benmo*),¹ filling over 1,700 pages, are so compendious and profuse that it has not been possible to get them cut and printed. However, the [Lord of Heaven Teaching] can be understood and grasped in terms of the three aspects of (1) what harmonizes with the Confucian Teaching, (2) what supplements the Confucian Teaching and finally, (3) what transcends the Confucian Teaching. The title of this work is "An inquiry into the similarities and differences between the Heavenly Lord's Teaching and the Teaching of the Confucian Scholars." ...

Anyone today who is enlightened should comprehend my words and understand that the Lord of Heaven [of the Western missionaries] is the Lord-on-High [of Chinese antiquity] and that

¹ Based on Yuan Shu's rearrangement of Sima Guang's *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance*.

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what I have written embodies his compassion to save the world. He knows me and brings retribution upon me. Let everyone hear me out.

Explanatory note written in the fifty-fourth year of the Kangxi emperor (1715) by the eighty-three-year-old elder Zhang Xingyao, styled Master Ziren.