

Editorial Foreword

Does *Tian* Speak?

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Does *Tian* (Heaven) Speak? God, or Heaven, is without form and image. How can man know Him then? Ancient inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells reveal that people in the Shang Dynasty believed in *Shangdi* (Lord-on-high), from whom blessings and protection could be expected. He is a personal God like the one in Christian culture in this sense. However, since Shangdi does not speak, people at that time had to communicate with Him by the practice of divination. During the Chou Dynasty, *Shangdi* was seen somehow withdrawing himself to a form of natural law known as *Tian*/Heaven. *Tian* has a twofold character, which means He is both personal and non-personal. On one hand, we found in Confucian writings that God is personal. He listens to men's prayers, punishing evil and rewarding good deeds. For example, Confucius didn't pretend that he still held the position of an officer. He said to his student Tsze-lu: "... Long has the conduct of You been deceitful! By pretending to have ministers when I have them not, whom I impose upon? Should I impose upon Heaven?" (*Analects*, Book IX) He knew that Tsze-lu was not only deceiving people, but Heaven as well. If Heaven is no more than natural law, deceit would make no sense to Him at all. On the other hand, Heaven is just like natural law. Confucius said to Tzu-kung: "Does Heaven say anything? The four seasons run their course and all things are produced. Does Heaven say anything?" (*Analects*, Book XVII) Heaven says nothing. If Heaven does have personal characters, His will would be dwelling in the nature without any speech, and His words would be manifested through the natural law.

As *Tian* has neither form nor image, how can we know Him? In Christianity, God speaks! This is where the main difference between Eastern and Western thought lies. The fact that God does speak means that the word of God is a revelation to this world. He is transcendental. No one has ever seen Him; yet He takes the initiative to speak to men. Still, the communication between God and man remains a difficult theological issue on the agenda of ancient church fathers.

When we examine the thoughts of ancient Greek fathers ranging from Irenaeus to the Cappadocian fathers concerning the knowledge of God, three basic insights come to our mind: (1) God is unapproachable. His glory and nature are ineffable, and His name unutterable. Men cannot but call forth a deep sense of awe and utter reverence when standing before Him. (2) Only by God is God known, and only through God is God revealed. (3) The application of human language is limited to talks on God's acts only. Our speech therefore requires a fundamental shift in meaning. In order to let the Scripture speak for itself, we tend to interpret its metaphorical statements literally. It is in this sense that we present biblical messages in a way as close to our daily language as possible.^①

There are several articles in this issue that choose Augustine as the theme of their discussion. How can man know God? Augustine follows the traditions of church fathers in maintaining the transcendental nature of God, stipulating that God is unapproachable and ineffable. He suggests that men, however, can communicate with Him through faith. Augustine emphasizes that God is totally beyond men's sensual perception. We can never reach Him by mere reason. Faith is the means to bridge the gap between this world and celestial reality. Faith is also the essential channel through which men can come to know God.

In the understanding of Augustine, faith does not come from subjective projection. Faith has its own support which is beyond itself, and it is on which that faith relies. The evidential or rational ground of faith has its own way of penetrating beyond appearances into the objective orderly structure and controlling factor, that is, the word of God. Church Father Clement cited Isaiah 7:9 in this way, "If you do not believe, neither

^① T. F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 374-375.

will you understand.” Augustine emphasizes that we are not to understand before we believe, but to believe before we understand. He tries to connect faith with the cognition of truth. Faith aligns with the object of belief.^① Faith is the way to understand, while understanding is the result of faith. Augustine makes a distinction between rational cognition and intellectual cognition. According to him, the former deals with worldly or temporary matters and is called “knowledge”; the latter deals with eternal or divine matters and is called “wisdom.”^② As rational knowledge deals only with temporary things, it does not involve eternal truth. Augustine stresses that we should go beyond rational knowledge to intellectual knowledge. Faith is a form of intellectual cognition. It leads us from worldly knowledge to celestial knowledge. Human beings can talk about God because our faith and intellectual cognition are not separated but intrinsically related. “Everyone who believes thinks, but thinks in believing and believes in thinking.”^③ The act of believing, therefore, is itself an act of thinking as well as intellectual cognition.

Faith is objective, as have been mentioned. It is not subjective projection. Believing in God could be an act of objective response to Him by faith. For example, there is no need for airline passengers to watch with their own eyes the meticulous inspection and repairs carried out by maintenance workers before the flight. Their confidence in the airline company’s reputation allows them to trust in the workers’ professionalism. This belief is objective, even though one does not see the on-site maintenance in person. Faith is not to see something, but to trust in the reality of the system. In Christianity, it is God who reveals His action and word to this world. By faith we encounter God through His divine revelation.

^① *De Praedest. Sanct (On the Predestination of the Saints)*, 2.5. See Augustine, “On the Predestination of the Saints”, in *Nicene And Post-Nicene Fathers: First series, Volume v - St. Augustine: Anti-Palagerian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007), 499.

^② Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity”, XII, 2.2; 3.3, XIII. 1.2f, in *Nicene And Post-Nicene Fathers: First series, Volume v - St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007), 1-228.

^③ Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, 499.

Faith is also a commitment to reality. It is not an arbitrary behavior. According to early church fathers, the object of faith is the almighty and transcendental God. Faith is not detached from reason, while reason is directed by truth. It means that we can exercise our faith freely, but this faith must be rooted in the transcendental God. Faith itself is a kind of cognition. When a man and God encounter each other, faith leads reason to understand the word and action of God.

God is beyond our sensual perception. Early church fathers regard faith as an important channel in reaching out to God. Faith becomes the most important issue in Christian culture. Although Heaven does not speak, faith provides the way for men to respond to Him. In China, Confucians attempt to know the word and action of Heaven by observing natural law. These are two different kinds of religious sentiment.

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