

REVIEW

SHANGDI: THE CHINESE DEUS

This is an informative and thought-provoking article that addresses age-old questions about the extent to which Christian missions should make use of existing religious and cultural material in proselytizing non-Christian societies. Specifically, the article focuses on the history of terminology used by Christian missionaries to China to refer to the Christian God and discusses the theological significance of these different terms. As described in the introduction, the "term question" gave rise to four terms for God in Chinese missions: "Shangdi" by Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits, "arhat" by the ancient Nestorians, "Dousi" by the Jesuits, and "Shen" by later Protestant missionaries to China. Of these four terms, only one (Dousi) was a neologism: the other three were borrowed from Chinese usage to be assigned new meaning in connection to the Christian God. Although Dousi was the verbal equivalent of a blank slate, which could be defined as perfectly congruous to the Christian doctrine of God, using a new word presented obstacles to Christianity's indigenization in China since the Chinese would be likely to view it as a foreign import with no inherent relationship to China. Dousi soon fell by the wayside in the terminology debate, giving way to the three terms for God borrowed from the Chinese tradition.

The key difference between these three terms is the degree to which they carry theological baggage from religious traditions other than Christianity. The Nestorian arhat was the most extreme in this regard because of its close ties to Buddhism: the word, indeed, refers to one who has reached nirvana (a theological concept which cannot be harmonized with Christian theology). As the author explains, this heavy borrowing from Buddhism resulted in Christianity being widely thought of in China as a Buddhist sect rather than a distinct religion. Shangdi, by contrast, was native to ancient Chinese culture, but its meaning was congruent enough with Christian understandings of God to serve as a translation of the Latin "Deus".

Indeed, Shangdi in the classical Chinese sources was "a personal entity whom people in ancient China worshipped, praised, gave thanks to, and served." The attributes of Shangdi and their similarity to the Christian doctrine of God led Matteo Ricci to believe that Christian missionaries, far from being foreign to China, were in fact restoring a monotheism that was native to China but had been lost due to its witnesses being martyred. The last Chinese divine name, Shen, was applied by later Protestant missionaries to China, who denounced the use of Shangdi as idolatrous and even implying polytheism. Instead, missionaries such as the Anglican William Boone proposed Shen as a divine name, understanding it to refer "to supernatural beings in general rather than one particular deity." This lack of specificity in Shen made it more semantically malleable than previously used divine names, allowing the missionaries to apply it to the Christian God without importing any association to earlier Chinese religion, especially polytheistic forms. But this advantage could also be a downside, for using Shen as a name for a specific god rather than gods in general risks undermining Christianity by casting it as a foreign import with no history in China.

Ultimately, the author concludes that it would be ill-advised to insist on choosing between Shen and Shangdi: both words are used in Chinese translations of the Bible and are recognized by Chinese Christians as referring to the Christian God. In the West, both the Latin and Greek theological traditions have argued that names predicated of God must not be understood as fully expressing or encompassing the divine names, hence the many divine names given in Scripture are appropriate to help us overcome linguistic boundaries that might otherwise limit our understanding of God. Thus, rather than coming to a conclusion on which of the four names most properly fits the Chinese Deus, the author advocates a more organic approach that allows different names for God to be used within different cultural and linguistic contexts: "it is hoped that the reader sees that the dissemination of the Christian faith has always been an interaction between multiple different, at times conflicting, cultural contexts, and that the purist insistence on one particular name for God is almost always misguided because translations are informed by these human contexts." While the article turns out to be more descriptive than deliberative, it provides a historical precedent for naming God in a non-biblical culture which is valuable not only to contemporary theological reflection but also to today's Christian missions and the translation projects that support and accompany them.