

# Always Something Missing

## Giving without Intention among Sino-Taiwanese Protestants and Others

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### Abstract

What does it take to experience grace? I argue that for followers of the Chinese Christian reformers Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, in China, Taiwan, and the United States, grace is experienced as an intended gift with a *missing* motivating intention. For a group in which God's intentions are rigorously mapped out, experiencing God's grace is thus no simple feat. In particular, I show how the experience of grace occurs in moments of apparent wrongdoing when reward is least comprehensible. As this wrongdoing becomes institutionalised as an ideal mode of grace, however, it paradoxically becomes less grace-ful in practice. Therefore, grace here is an inherently transgressive, destabilising, contradictory phenomenon. Extrapolating beyond Nee and Lee's followers, I suggest that at a time of grateful secularism, of givenness without a Giver, blessedness without a Blesser, grace is more abundant than ever. But that with this grace comes gratitude, an emotion often resistant to social change.

**Keywords:** death, deification, excess, gifts, phenomenology, semiotic ideologies, theology

One of the biggest success stories of the anthropology of Christianity has been the identification and description of a distinctive 'linguistic' (Robbins 2001) and more generally 'semiotic' 'ideology' (Keane 2002) which characterises many Protestant and other Christian approaches to language, action, and things (Robbins 2014: S168). Most broadly, this ideology holds that the significance, often thought of as the 'meaning' (Tomlinson and Engleke 2006), of an act, gift, statement, or material item lies in the intention which motivates it. Of course, this generalisation has not been without its critics and refiners. Aside from findings demonstrating that this approach—often referred to as 'sincerity'—is not found whole cloth or at all (Haeri 2017; Breen 2021) in several Christian communities, even ethnographers of mainline Protestant groups that subscribe to this intention-centric approach to



communication have suggested that it is an understanding that is active only in certain contexts (cf. Luehrmann 2017).

Relating to language use, for instance, Jon Bialecki (2011) depicts this 'language ideology' as it arises in a middle-class Californian home visited by a renowned Charismatic prophet. If Webb Keane (2002) argues that language is assumed by Dutch Calvinists in Indonesia to be legitimate only if isomorphic with an interior intention, such that words involved in conversion will only gain you salvation if they are 'sincere', Bialecki suggests that often words spoken within key Christian rituals are only legitimate and powerful when they are understood *not* to originate from within the speaker, that is, when the speaker's words are non-intentional. The failure of the visiting prophet to excite the congregants when he was not a medium of another's voice (God's) but a sincere speaker, demonstrates the contradictory relation between the ideology of sincere, intention-motivated speech and the dynamics of religious experience.

In this article, I extend this argument to suggest that even God himself may fail to excite believers where his actions are too clearly motivated by a prior set of intentions. If, as Julian Pitt-Rivers (2011: 431) writes, 'grace is a mystery', such a situation demystifies grace. If Christian charisma, as the human mediation of God's grace, occurs where it is not the charismatic figure's intention which motivates their speech and action, God's grace in practice, I show, is beholden to a similar structural condition. By tracing the shifting, intertwined conceptualisations and practices of grace amongst followers of the Chinese Christian reformers Watchman Nee (1903–1972) and Witness Lee (1905–1997) in China, Taiwan, and the United States, this article aims to clarify the role of intentions in the giving of grace, or rather the constitutive lack thereof, from the perspective of the experience of the reception of grace.

Grace, I argue, is not only that 'something extra' which mediates 'the ideal and the real, the sacred and profane, culture and society' (2011: 448) as Pitt-Rivers wrote. It stands apart from similarly mediative concepts such as 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 2008 [1912]), 'energy' (Adams 1975) or 'desire' (Sangren 2000). It is also more specific than an animating life force such as *mana* or *baraka* (Pitt-Rivers 2011:442), and neither does it necessarily produce reciprocity like *hau* (Mauss 2002). Nor is it only that which exceeds the calculations, and commensurations of a world of exchange, as Hans Steinmüller suggests in this issue. Beyond these attributes, grace is defined as much by what it *lacks* as what it possesses. It lacks an observable intention, I argue, but possesses experienceable intentionality.

What is the difference between intention and intentionality? Following John Searle (1983), Alessandro Duranti, in *The Anthropology of Intentions*, explains the two concepts, which to some extent demarcate the difference between Anglo-American analytical philosophy and phenomenology-inspired 'continental' philosophy. While the concept of 'intention...coincides with the folk psychological sense of "intention" and the common use of the English noun *intention*', intentionality infers only 'directedness', Duranti writes (2015: 25). Capitalising 'Intentionality' to differentiate it from 'intention', 'intentions in the ordinary sense',

explains Duranti, citing Searle, ‘are “just one form of Intentionality along with belief, hope, fear, desire, and lots of others”’ (Searle 1983: 3 cited in Duranti 2015: 25). This depiction of Intentionality as encompassing various forms of directedness—belief, hope, fear, and so on, as well as intention—is a depiction from the perspective of the Intending agent, that is, the believer, the person ‘with an intention to do/say’. In this article, I want to explore the Intendedness of grace from the perspective of those receiving it. This form of Intention is best described, I think, using theological phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion’s (2017: 49) term ‘givenness’. The directionality, the Intentionality, of grace is characterised by the sense of its givenness.

Grace, more specifically, I suggest, both for the Christians I discuss and for many non-Christians too, is present when an act or item comes with a sense of givenness but without the sense of a motivating intention behind it. Although this definition of grace may seem generalising, it is not essentialist. If grace has certain structural requirements, it also does very different things from one context to the next. Defining grace as givenness without a given intention works for secular contexts in which grace occurs apparently without being given by a Giver, as well as those in which God’s grace is directly sought after. Gracefulness for example, is a mode of expression which possesses the quality of a gift. But there is also the sense that a grace-ful act doesn’t come in two steps: the intention to act, and the carrying out of that intention. Gracefulness is a gifted doing without thinking. The direct expression of a discernible intention would be tactless, mundane, too comprehensible—in a word, graceless. Disgrace might even be considered to arise when intention is laid bare, when gift is revealed as machination. This article will show that in contexts where God’s intentions are very clearly known, receiving his grace, as I have defined it, can be a destabilising, transgressive, and often contradictory process. Givenness without intentions, it follows, is much easier to experience where grace does not emanate from any being with intentions. With a grace which is ungiven by anyone in particular, however, the limits of grace as transgression, I will conclude, are exposed.

### **‘The Nature of Grace’: The Ambivalent Role of Grace in a Non-ambivalent Ministry**

Today, adherents of Watchman Nee and his spiritual protégé Witness Lee’s Christian ministry number anywhere from two hundred thousand to two million (according to adherents’ own estimates). They form a highly integrated, worldwide group which holds regular regional, national, and international conferences (or ‘feasts’<sup>1</sup>), alongside, in many places, almost daily meetings in homes and halls (Yi 2016). In 2015 and 2016, an estimated 128,000 of these adherents lived in Taiwan. The highest concentration lived in the Old Taipei neighbourhood of Jingmei, where I conducted fieldwork during this period. Since the coronavirus pandemic I have found myself speaking regularly again with members of this group, which mostly refers to itself simply as ‘the church’ but which has been referred to by others using a multitude of names, including ‘the Local Churches’, ‘the Little Flock’, and ‘Assembly

Hall. I have, for instance, been reading Watchman Nee's digitised book *The Gospel of God* (2021) with members of my nearest branch of Nee and Lee's following. The book is compiled from notes his followers took in the spring of 1937 during a series of 'messages' Nee gave in Shanghai.

Recently, we read a chapter of Nee's entitled 'The Nature of Grace'. There, he differentiates between grace, love, mercy, and law. God is love, Nee says. Both grace and mercy, he tells us, are forms of love enacted from God's perspective and love received from ours. But whereas mercy involves the passive reception of God's love, grace, 'the most precious of all that reaches us', entails a more active receiving. Echoing many pursuers of grace described in this special issue (see Introduction), Nee goes on to make a strong contrast between law and grace. Law, he says, is related to 'man's work', and it comes in three categories: wrongdoings, achievements, and responsibilities. 'Law and grace are opposite principles', Nee continues, 'they cannot be put together. If man is to receive grace, he must put the law aside. On the other hand, if he follows the law, he will fall from grace.'

The first subsection of this chapter, entitled 'God's Grace Not Related to Man's Wrongdoings' (Nee 2021), begins with the line, 'the first characteristic of God's grace is that it is not related to man's wrongdoings'. However, the rest of the subsection reiterates the point that, 'wrongdoing provides the best opportunity for grace to operate. Without wrongdoing, grace has no opportunity to manifest itself. Not only is wrongdoing unable to stop grace; it is the necessary condition for grace to be manifested'. 'The Bible shows us', Nee points out, 'that once man sins, spontaneously he can receive grace'. The subsections on achievements and responsibilities are more straightforward. These, Nee says, are not prerequisites for, nor even compatible with, grace.

Nee's intricate account of grace is in line with the overall aesthetic and ethic of the group. As 'modern-day apostles' Nee and Lee have been endowed with the 'high peak truths' of 'God's plan', which, as they are lived out by their followers, will bring about a dispensationalist turn from the 'age of grace' to the 'age of judgement'. The most central truth 'recovered' by Nee and Lee is that God has a very clear 'intention', a frequent term in their ministry and in the songs and everyday language of 'the church'.<sup>2</sup> Followers of Nee and Lee, unlike the Charismatic Christians described by Bialecki (2011), understand themselves not as a collection of individuals with some more charismatically endowed than others. Rather, they are together becoming deified as the 'corporate god-man', the 'organic Body of Christ'. God's intention is to be embodied. This is all very clearly and systematically reiterated in Nee and Lee's myriad publications. But the contradiction between Nee's subtitle and the section content quoted above also points to the ambivalent place of grace in the life of this group. In a group which has a very clear 'vision' of the precise coordinates of God's plan and how to live according to it, the idea that grace—'the most precious of all that reaches us'—only comes with wrongdoing, points to the possibility that the fulfilment of said plan paradoxically requires moments of its own transgression.

The aim of deification is partly about erasing the role of individual intention in action altogether. As Lee said to a group of church 'elders' gathered in Anaheim,

California in June, 1982: 'When we reach the stage of the Body life [i.e., corporate deification], we will be pure. We will not have any intention, and we will know only to live Christ [as the "flowing", edible substance of "the Body"] and minister Christ as life to others. We may think that such a living is not easy to attain, but when we reach the stage of the Body life, it will be spontaneous and easy' (Lee 2021a; see also Breen 2019: 71). He continues: 'There is a great difference between our intentions and the Spirit's leading. When we reach the stage of the Body life, we will not care for our own intentions but only for the Spirit's leading.... When we are in the Body, all our individual intentions, burdens, and desires are swallowed up. We only live and function in order to minister Christ as life to the saints [i.e., other followers]. We have no intentions to accomplish anything outward. This is the difference' (Lee 2021a).

As I have been told many times, the accomplishment of the Body life in fact occurs momentarily every time Nee's followers 'enter their spirit'. Another 'high truth' revealed to Nee and Lee is the tripartite anthropology of body, soul, and spirit. Intentions, any follower knows, arise within the mind, part of the soul. 'Christianity' has been 'degraded' so long they say, because Christians have misguidedly been using their soul to contact God, instead of the hidden, 'innermost organ', the spirit. That is where God resides. The Body life will become the permanent reality Lee describes, when the members learn never to leave their spirit for their soul or body. I detect a deep tension then between the goal of becoming 'perfected' members of the Body and the means by which this is routinely achieved. But it is also true that the apparent contradiction between the theological ideal of deification and the fortuitous real of grace as a gift in the midst of wrongdoing, far from being evidence of graceless living, is, as Nee infers, the precondition for grace as a dynamically evolving Christian experience.

A second key point to take forward from the foregoing is that the perfected member of the Body and God as a pre-Bodified independent figure are quite different. God has a plan which he acts on, whereas the perfected Body member acts without such an *a priori* intention. It is this tension which somewhat pushes God out of the picture, evident, for example, when, expositing on Matthew 15, in Taipei, in January 1972, Witness Lee, who became de facto leader when Nee was imprisoned for life in 1952 by the Chinese communist regime, said to those gathered, 'consider this: who is greater, you or the Lord Jesus? You have to boldly say, "I am greater because I am a child and He is the bread"'. He concluded the point by declaring 'with all sincerity of heart, you can say, "Lord, I thank You and praise You! Today You have become my food. The eater is always greater than the food. Lord, You have become the small food for me to eat"' (Lee 2021b). We will see that God's greatness re-emerges with His grace, and this grace is premised in practice on Him being as intentionless as a perfected Body member.

Throughout the Sino-Taiwanese Christian history recounted in this article, the mystery of God's grace does not remain solved for long: it experientially deteriorates, never works in practice as it is supposed to in theory and emerges anew in unexpected ways. However, in secular contexts, when God is pushed out of the

picture altogether, I will suggest, we are left with a rather toothless kind of grace: A grace of givenness without a Giver, blessedness without a Blessor, a secular grace, which challenges no-one in particular and even bristles against critical thinking.

### **'That Day, Heaven was So Near to Earth!': The Grace of a Gift Already Received**

The key catalyst for the formation of the unique patterns, styles, and infrastructures which today hold Nee's many followers together across oceans, borders, and languages was a Eucharist wafer, tasted in the shadows of the foreign and familial oppressions of the time. In late October 1921, on the outskirts of Fuzhou, church spires rose up from a bustling, smoky cityscape (Kinnear 1973: 40–41). At this time, the Western missionary presence was still strong, though, following the Boxer rebellion (1900) and the May Fourth Movement (1919), this presence was increasingly awkward (Dunch 2001). In one corner of the city, three young Christian enthusiasts met in secret: *Ni Shuzu*, later to become 'Watchman Nee' (*Ni Tuosheng*), called together a gathering with his Christian friends, Ada and Leeland Wang. They met unbeknownst to the Methodist and Anglican priests, parents, and educators who had thus far bound their experience of Christian power so closely and so alienatingly with England, North America, and the missionary enterprise (Woodbridge 2012). 'Missionaries', Watchman Nee once complained, treat Chinese Christians like they were 'just a kind of little toy terrier to be taken up and set down without their opinion being consulted'; his great-niece, Jennifer Lin, reports (2017: 128). At Trinity College, Fuzhou, where Nee was educated, an Anglican priest would administer the Eucharist perhaps once a month, after which a prayer for England was uttered. 'The shadow of imperialism seemed to hover over every communion service', Gracie May writes:

The elements tasted foreign. The table setting looked unfamiliar. And the prayer honoring the crown of England sounded like a betrayal of China. Christianity was a Western import that had little to say to patriotic Chinese youth at the turn of the twentieth century (2001: 13–14).

On that October evening, Nee snuck away from his mother's house for fear of reproof, to meet Leeland and Ada. Baking their own Eucharist bread, the three blessed, broke, and ate it themselves. Nee would later recount, 'I will not forget that night until death, even in eternity.... That day, heaven was so near to earth! All three of us were so joyous that we cried' (Nee quoted in May 2001: 100). This would be recalled by followers as the first meeting of the 'recovered church', the resurrected Body of Christ, after centuries of 'degradation' under the auspices of 'Christianity'. Sidestepping the priestly administering of the Eucharist in school and church, Nee's modern-day followers say that, in those early days of the group, these pioneers would 'break bread together' whenever they felt like it. For me, this enthusiasm suggests the excess, the 'whoosh' (Willis forthcoming; see Introduction, this issue), the 'something extra' which for Pitt-Rivers is the hallmark of grace's experience.

More specifically, we see that *taking* the gift of salvation (rather than having it administered) was all-important to the excessiveness of this experience. This seems to confirm Nee's description of grace as an active receiving conditioned by a kind of wrongdoing (in relation to parents, school, and the Anglican church). But it also confirms the more analytical definition of grace proposed earlier: Eucharistic presence was a gift to Watchman, Ada, and Leeland from God, but God's intentions in giving to them at all were still unclear. It seems to be this, divine givenness minus the rationalised intentions of an institutionalised Giver, which differentiates the preceding religious experience as one of grace in particular.

Taking hold of the most powerful symbol of the West, the sacrificial Body of its God, Nee, Leeland, Ada, and those who soon joined their passion-filled clandestine group denied divine power to the Western church, took hold of it themselves, and consumed it directly again and again. Like all good gifts, this one seemed to be a surprise. Who knew that simply taking hold of the bread themselves would close the gap between earth and heaven? From a humble wafer emerged a heavenly vista. 'The Christian concept of grace', Pitt-Rivers wrote, 'is above all about salvation' (2011: 441), but here it seems more about experiencing as a gift what, by divine rights, these young ex-Anglicans had in theory already received. It was, as Pitt-Rivers himself writes, a grace based on the mode of God's expression rather than his 'expressed intentions' (2011: 424–425). In sneaking away from parents and disobeying their church and school, there was a sense of wrongdoing. But it was only in the act of wrongdoing that they could receive the grace they had encountered in theory as a living grace in practice. It was only in wrongdoing that God's intentions became less transparent but his Intentionality, the givenness of the Eucharist, all the more powerfully felt.

Through these Eucharistic innovations, or ambivalent wrongdoings, the bond between the original three, through which they escaped the institutions which oppressed them, multiplied and spread, though things still centred around Nee for the time being. The group developed a distinct set of practices and aesthetics, acquired property in several eastern provinces, and set up a Shanghai publishing house, which together sedimented Nee's ideas into a relatively integrated 'ministry'. To a large extent, this ministry, which articulated a 'vision' of divine and human 'oneness' in contrast to the divisiveness of 'Christianity', became part of a 'total aesthetic experience' (Forrest 2018: 2), a newly indigenised Christian lifeworld. As the number of his followers increased, his ministry developed and retained a set of common qualities that were irreducible to the socio-political contexts in which the group was first formed or to the infrastructures through which the group expanded. Moreover, this growing church-world was transposable: Nee's followers spread beyond Fujian to West China, to Southeast Asia, and eventually to the West, taking their styles of meeting, acting, and speaking with them.

Today the whole essence of the group is righteously heterodox. Lee, Nee, and their many articulate followers constantly reiterate the principle that their becoming God, as an 'organic', 'living' 'Body', without hierarchy but also emphatically non-democratic, is entirely alien and even wrong to 'Christianity', with its



**Figure 1:** Breaking the Eucharist bread. Photo by the author.

denominations, clergy-laity distinctions and emphasis on ‘being good, rather than being God’ as one follower put it to me. This sense of naughtiness I propose is crucial to experiencing God as grace-ful. To be entirely orthodox, to ‘follow the law’ as Nee puts it, God’s grace would become a contractual reward, not a surprising ‘whoosh’. His intentions would be clear, but the directionality of his experiential givenness diminished.

While the group still today repeats the critiques of Western ‘Christianity’ which Nee first began then, they no longer articulate the grace of God as being about a sudden immanence between earth and heaven. In the picture of a Eucharist wafer at a gathering of followers in Taipei I attended (Figure 1), we see a different grace being enacted (but one that still fits with the proposed definition). Now the gift is deification. In ‘giving yourself to the Lord’, members tell potential converts, you receive something much more expansive in return. This is a grace which does not emerge from resistance to the old but from the participatory creation of something new. Speaking to members, visions of mass gatherings of church members are central to their feelings of the something extra that church membership gives to their lives: they are expanded beyond themselves, their families, their cities, and their nations. One member said that he ‘was captured by the vision of the Body, seeing so many young people that love the Lord and enjoy Him together’. Informants often refer to the ‘wonderful’ sights, sounds and atmospheres of gatherings of followers, how they captured and continue to rejuvenate them.

By the gratitude members express, it seems these live visions of the Body are experienced as grace-like, but even these sights get old. With the post-war efflorescence of non-hierarchical, non-denominational forms of Christianity globally (Bielo 2012; Robbins 2015), it perhaps is harder for followers of Nee and Lee to



feel counter-culturally distinctive from 'Christianity', to feel the transgressiveness at the heart of God's grace. Accordingly, I detect a new form of grace at work in some sections of this global following, clearly articulated in the relatively recent cemetery project, located in Rose Hills, California, entitled 'Grace Terrace'. Here the constitutive transgression of grace is not external, as with Nee's rebellion against the missionaries or the critique of 'Christianity', but internal, an ambivalent transgression of the church's own principles. Before going there however, I want to briefly consider the experience of grace for those followers who define(d) themselves less against Christianity than against ancestral obligation.

### **'They Truly Touched Heaven': The Grace of a Gift Already Given**

The origins of the group lie not only in an intense embodied critique of missionary imperialism. There was another element to grace being experienced as the gift of more immediate proximity, between the Eucharistic ideal and the real, the sacred heavens and profane earth, the culture of Christianity and Chinese society. What made the Eucharist so appealing to early members of Nee's movement was another freedom it promised: it allowed them, in Francis Hsu's (1948) memorable phrase, to climb out from 'under the ancestor's shadow', to escape a sense of ancestral obligation and to claim ancestral divinity immediately as their own. This is not the first time that it has been suggested that 'one real benefit' of becoming Christian in Chinese-speaking communities, 'sometimes a selling point of Christianity, is that it relieves [converts] of the burden to make offerings'. Indeed C. Fred Blake, author of *Burning Money*, writes that 'countless persons have told [him] as much' (2011: 18). (Often ancestors themselves don't get the message, hanging around in dreams and hauntings until they get their due.) Looking at the place of grace in this conversion motive, however, grants us a new perspective. It shows us that ancestral power was not only elided through conversion, but, at times, harnessed and transformed.

Divinity in China has classically been a possession of the dead. Especially important in this regard is the reverence paid to ancestors. These divine dead are so central to patrilineal notions of the self, Steven Sangren (2000) argues, that every generation experiences them as an alienating force. This alienating force paradoxically produces the desire (the something extra, Pitt-Rivers might say) which keeps ancestor worship going, generation after generation. By demanding that sons recognise that they owe their existence to their predecessors (i.e., 'filial piety'), socialisation within (rural) Chinese and Taiwanese society produces the desire for 'author[ship] of one's own being' (Sangren 2009: 256). Thus, while officially sons are obliged to feed their ancestors, given that they gave them life, it is also true that the continued existence of these ancestors is dependent upon these sons' offerings. From the former perspective, the son acts out his recognition that he is the product of his lineage. This gives rise to the latter perspective, the son enacting his fantasy of self-authorship through feeding the loins that birthed him, thus becoming author of himself and resisting the alienating feeling of being entirely produced by society (Sangren 2013: 183).

Here again we see the complexity of grace in practice. In theory, the gift the ancestors give to you is life itself. Like the official gift of Christ's salvation, this is a gift which can never be repaid, and so—like all Maussian gifts—carries with it the curse of eternal indebtedness. Both are also contractually obliged: what makes Christ Christ is the gift of salvation; what makes an ancestor an ancestor is the bestowal of further life. However, in practice, according to Sangren, ancestral grace is experienced in gifts given, not received. While everyday life may inscribe in a young worshipper the sense of being a cog in the machine, or worse, a spare part, ancestor worship gives a vertiginous sense of self-transcendence. Here is another instance of a gift without clear intention: there is gift-giving but the intention behind it is unclear. Is the intention to thank the ancestors for one's life or to produce that life oneself? The ambiguity of intention is perhaps vital to the mystery of grace in this instance.

Whatever the subliminal intentions that may accompany offering to the ancestors, however, it is explicitly and aesthetically framed as an act of servitude. The freedom Sangren describes is only to be found in the *practice* of ancestor worship. For Nee's followers, who had recently ceased offering to the ancestors while continuing to be in some sense overshadowed by them, these ancestors would be all givers and no receivers, all alienation and no grace. These understandings make the following oft-recounted church origin story especially significant. We may think of those involved as short-circuiting the 'cycle of yang' (Stafford 2000), in which each generation is indebted to the previous one, by directly appropriating the divinatory power of the ancestors. The story is re-told here in 1963 by Witness Lee:

After we crossed nearly everything off our list and gave up Christianity entirely as a religious system, we did not know what to do, so we simply came together. In my home province a group of saints composed primarily of medical students began to meet together... Since they did not have any place in which to meet, they went to a cemetery. Most cemeteries in China are located outside of town at the base or top of a mountain, so these young believers went to the outskirts of town to meet together in a simple way in a cemetery. In many cemeteries in China, each gravesite has a small pyramid next to it along with a stone table that people use for offering sacrifices to their ancestors... The young brothers used the stone table as the table for the breaking of bread. They placed the bread and the cup on the stone table; then they all sat on the ground around the table and sang hymns and gave praises to the Lord. In this way they broke the bread. Someone told me that in their meeting they truly touched the presence of the Lord; they truly touched heaven. This was the beginning of the church in Tsinan. (Lee 2021c)

If the traditional Chinese practice is to offer food to the ancestors, only indirectly accessing their divine power via the blessings that come from this (Sangren 2013), here Nee's adherents feed one another, and without any mediation from either missionaries or ancestors, they 'truly touch heaven'. Eating the Eucharist on the table usually reserved for ancestral offerings denies not only the earthly authority of Western Christian powers but also the heavenly power of Chinese ancestors while crafting both traditional and foreign forms of divinity into a new

relationship of empowerment. In Taiwan, this account is far from exotic, as many family members of followers today take care of their ancestors in the traditional ways. Today the significance of the shift from feeding the divine to feeding on the divine is still articulated in the strong emphases among followers upon 'eating', 'masticating', and 'digesting' Jesus. Witness Lee referred to the following he led as 'the recovery of eating', and it is through practices of eating both food and 'the Word' that followers understand themselves to be on route to becoming 'godmen'.

For Nee and Lee, both third-generation Christians, the grace of this conception arose from ambivalent rebellions against the missionary establishment. For first-generation Chinese Christians, it is my understanding that the enthusiasm with which eating the divine to become divine is embraced arises from the sense of grace inspired by the righteously rebellious shift from gifting the divine to the gift of divinity, first experienced in graveyard gatherings and still relived by followers today. With Christian conversion, indigenisation and re-globalisation, at least in the case of Nee, Lee, and their followers, this implicit capacity of ancestor worship to induce an expanded sense of self through the experience of one's own divine capacity to experience and transmit givenness without intention (small 'i') is brought to the foreground and explicitly embraced.

As I have been saying, however, it is my understanding that the experience of grace often contradicts its most immediate theological rationalisation in that an expected gift with transparent intentions is no longer experienced as particularly grace-ful. Unlike the ancestors, the God of Nee and Lee wants to infuse himself into his human counterparts. As pure Spirit, Nee and Lee held, God cannot express himself. His 'intention', they say, is to be embodied. In this penultimate section, I ask whether this rationalisation of divine grace means that followers of Nee and Lee today are experiencing grace differently to the way in which it has come to be thought about, that is, as an exchange of the convert's own 'small', often 'broken', 'sinful' self for the cosmic self of deification through incorporation into the Body of God.

### **Internal Transgressions: Emerging Regimes of Grace**

In the year that Witness Lee died, 1997, 'leading brothers' in the following that began with Nee started making plans for 'a solemn cemetery for Christians, in order to develop saints' eternal knowledge of the biblical truths'. The result is nestled in the hills of Southern California:

A stream, uttering sweet sound, goes through the center of this simple cemetery, flanked by natural rocks and flourishing trees. Two semi-circular memorial walls, made of dark red granites, solemnly stand on the two sides of the entrance. The rock walls are craved [sic] with eight precious hymns.... On the round ground for gathering there is a fountain, clear as crystal.

...

The stream winds down, and there is a lotus pond halfway. At one end is a quiet and elegant waterfall; water overflows down on a stone wall carved with scriptures full of inspiration. The lotus pond opens a clear view of the boulevard; on ... both

sides of the boulevard there are memorial walls made of dark red granites, which are designed as magnificent mausoleums.

In the middle of the boulevard, the stream whispers, soothing man's heart, and flows down, converging into a pool reflecting the sunlight; this signifies the ultimate uniting and mingling of God and man ... there are independent family cemeteries ... and each family can be buried together in an elegant garden according to their need. A special video kiosk will be installed in the garden, presenting the lifetime information of the buried ones.... Besides the preservation of the rich data, these abundant historical images and text can be used for the saints to remember their beloved relatives. (Grace Terrace 2021)

The cemetery, at the head of which Lee's remains lie re-interred, is a symbolic depiction of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. This is a relatively secret project, as it is felt that some members would be offended at its apparent fetishism. But the promotional video for the cemetery, featured on the website where interested members can claim a place, argues that it is undignified for church brothers and sisters to be buried in common cemeteries when all sorts of 'idols' adorn the other graves, using a close-up shot of a plastic Santa Claus resting against a grave to demonstrate the point.

The project is said to have been initiated by Lee himself and is justified, in the promotional video, with a recording of Lee appealing to the living's responsibility towards the dead. Nonetheless, these words compared to others in the 'ministry' are uncertain, grappling with issues not yet explored. Following Nee's and Lee's deaths, the legacy of their following has expanded across several generations as well as national borders. One might say that a Christian ancestral reserve has been accumulated. An international network of 'elders' to which Nee and Lee directly or indirectly delegated authority are approached and looked up to for how to live a deified life. With this relative democratisation comes an expansion in the number of 'God-man stories' which might serve as lights along the paths of the living to God-man status. 'Do you feel that when you walk on the grassland of Grace Terrace, there is no time wasted but the realization that we all have received great mercy from God to become the witnesses in the trail of the history of the Lord's recovery until that day?', asks one writer on the cemetery's website. They go on:

Inheritance is the continuation of person.... Look at these words of testimonies on the tombstones. The inscription of testimony looks like cloud surrounding us, and this causes us to be reverential.... Every saint is different in nationality... but they all have one thing in common, that is, a touching God-man story. Their God-man living stories indirectly governed the direction of my heart and strengthened my desire to serve the Lord, so I often come here by myself and walk around.... In fact, the 'God-man stories' of the saints who are resting here are the spiritual materials for our proclamation in truth education. (Grace Terrace 2021)

The point here is not the reappearance of traditional practice after a period of apparently 'ma[king] a complete break with the past' (Meyer 1998: 1). Rather, these testimonies show that as with ancestor worship and earlier Eucharistic practices

within Nee's following, grace in theory is never enough. In order for theorised grace to be experienced as grace, its enactment must contradict God's theorised intentions. And indeed, here, in a group that defines itself around the grace of de-individuation, grace is enacted through the upkeep of individual graves. The place of grace here is necessarily unstable. Grace is encountered otherwise and elsewhere than planned. Aside from the ambiguous role of materiality, a further factor contributing to the uncertain role of the cemetery in the life of the church is that it rubs against the principle that church members are God, in the here and now, and that the culminating perfect deification of the church is immanent. The promotional video refers explicitly to the upkeep of the site, 'even after all the plots have long been filled and generations have past'.

Is it possible that the gracious gift of an expanded self, once contractual, with transparent intentions, can wane in its effectiveness? Perhaps the promise of daily deification alone is not enough to sustain the sense of a life lived in grace. Rather, this cosmic gift is becoming, or already is for some, the background to a more personalised, individual, ancestral experience of the gift of edification that the 'God-man' stories inscribed on tombstones can give. God's presence is evidently here, but why we're not quite sure. As those worshipping at their ancestors' tombs are subliminally gifted with expanded, autochthonous selves, those who embrace an expansively theologised cosmic God-man self slip away to receive blessings from new Christian ancestors. This too reaffirms the idea that divine favour comes most often in unexpected ways, and that this unexpectedness in relation to grace in theory is a vital ingredient to grace in life.

What of the dead themselves? Are they not poised there to receive the ultimate gift of Christian grace: eternal life? We may understand the existence of Grace Terrace as a contradictory wrongdoing—as noted, it seems to elevate materiality to a degree of significance many church members would be displeased with—as an act of receiving grace, not only on the part of those tending to it, but for those lying within it. The positionality of the dead inside Grace Terrace, away from the satanic Santas, holding a reserved place in the Terrace's landscaped eschatology, seems to be significant for their actually receiving this ultimate gift in practice. Could we suggest that this final act of gracious wrongdoing, taking the materiality of their bodies too seriously, is a condition for the grace that grants eternal life? Maybe this is a step too far. But this does lead us finally to a question only intimated so far: If grace comes from a giving God with missing intentions, what happens to grace when a god with intentions is missing altogether?

### **Conclusion: (Theophanic) Grace as Something Missing, Something Missing from (Atheistic) Grace**

I have argued that grace arises when God's intentions are missing. And that, historically, moments of grace dissolve as rationalised intentions catch up with them. But what of grace in a Godless place? Grace exists there too, I claim. Now more than ever, the secular mainstream (if I can be permitted to call it that for a moment),

seems to be full of grace as I've defined it: the gifts of fame, success, digitally mediated beauty are apparently abundant. We can tell they're gifts because they are so often declared alongside overt presentations of gratitude. But very often they are not recognised to emanate from any particular Giver ("the Cosmos" or "Life" perhaps, which by definition seem to possess Intentionality but no intentions as such). A more mundane example from the United States is Thanksgiving. Across the country (Siskind 1992: 168), non-believing families nonetheless share stories and sentiments of gratitude for the physical and emotional endowments of their lives. Like the widespread practice of gratitude journals (O'Connell et al. 2017), this seems to me to assume a givenness, a blessing, but very often without a Giver or a Blesser.

Perhaps the ultimate example of humanised grace is that of the unexpected gift. Birthday, Christmas, and Valentine presents almost by (my) definition lack grace. The intention is clear: 'they are giving me this gift because it is a gift-giving day, because they would probably be in trouble if they didn't'. In contrast, the surprise gift comes from nowhere. Like a reward in the midst of wrongdoing, the intentions are obscure, but the givenness, the Intentionality of the gift is undeniable. However, we may also note that the surprise gift can also quite easily become its opposite, a disgrace. If the gift is truly a surprise, the receiver is likely unaccustomed to receiving gifts from the giver. Perhaps a very rapid response will be precisely to search for the intention behind this unprecedented act, and the settled-upon intention may well be a bad one. Hence, the proverbial guilty bouquet: the intention behind this surprise is only too clear. (To receive future forgiveness or to ease a conscience).

The problem of the suspicious surprise gift is much less common with the Christian God, who perhaps can only have good intentions. But this leads to a more serious point. That, if we accept that secularity exists and is relatively widespread (which I, following Farman 2013 in part, do), grace without a Giver (or a giver) is likely a notable phenomenon of our age. What is perhaps slightly worrying is that, though easier to attain, I think, this kind of grace lacks the transgressiveness of its theophanic cousin. This seems to be at least anecdotally supported by the gratitude culture alluded to earlier. If divine grace is more powerful not knowing the intentions behind its givenness, perhaps secular grace leads us to be uncurious and uncritical as to the socio-political origins of our own blessedness? Critical awareness perhaps sits uneasily with the whooshed givenness of intentionless grace.

Our lives are given, not just made as social constructivism emphasised. That's what Mauss' (2002) 'gift' taught us. There is more surprise in *how* our lives are given than why ('because God wants to be embodied', 'because humans want to be reproduced'). I think this is what a history of grace among followers of Nee and Lee teaches us. What we learn from a brief consideration of gratitude journals, guilty bouquets, and secular Thanksgivings is that if the gift is too private and the giver too obscure, there is little opportunity for grace to be socially transformative. Whether it be the ancestors, the missionary church, or the Body of God, grace which emanates in theory from a single source, seems most conducive to grace in practice, which is thoroughly singular, new, unique. Perhaps, be it God, the state, or Gaia herself, without a shared Giver, grace is unlikely to give us anything surprising at all.

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## Notes

1. I use the church's own English translations for each church term. And in the quotations from Nee's and Lee's digitised books throughout, I use the English language versions of them.
2. 'Intention' in Nee and Lee's English language publications usually translates or is translated into (they were bilingual) the term *yi* (wish, idea, desire, intention) or words that contain this term (*xinyi*, *xin* being 'heartmind', or *zhiyi*, *zhi* being 'aim' or 'purpose').

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