

## Article

# Orders of Hunger and Heaven: Neoliberalism, Christian Charity and Homelessness in Taiwan

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**Abstract:** Based on an ethnographic study of a Christian charity in Taipei, Taiwan, this paper examines how the mixing of “orders of worth” (Boltanski and Thevenot) is negotiated among charity workers and homeless people in the field setting. The organization, Grace Home Church, has two official goals: (1) to glorify God; (2) to assist homeless people. This mix of sacred and secular purposes often produces tensions, with the fundamental tension being between what the charity seeks to provide (salvation) versus what the homeless commonly want to be provided (food). As an analytic tool, I utilize Boltanski and Thevenot’s framework to link emergent tensions with broader social forces, such as neoliberalism, the welfare state, and religion. I will argue that charity workers as well as homeless individuals who have accepted Christianity attempt to separate the market and inspired orders through signifying practices that maintain a symbolic order, thereby justifying a sacred mission (for the charity organization) and self-worth (for the homeless).

**Keywords:** justification; neoliberalism; Christianity; Taiwan; charity; welfare



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“Spiritual needs surpass material requirements.”  
~Chinese/Taiwanese Proverb

## 1. Introduction

How does neoliberal capitalism impact religious organizations operating in contemporary civil society? Does the potential clash of the sacred and the laissez-faire inevitably result in the degradation of religion? In this paper, I conceptualize the merger of religious and capitalist meanings as an uneasy mixing of what Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) have termed the “inspired” and “market” orders. Utilizing an ethnographic study based on two and a half years of field observations of a Taiwanese Christian charity that focuses on homeless relief, I argue that rather than neoliberalism fundamentally distorting religion, religious actors may seek to preserve sacred religious meanings and avoid profane consumerist and monetary elements<sup>1</sup> that threaten their meaning system, even as they work within the structural framework of a neoliberal social order.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, charity workers, and homeless individuals who have accepted Christianity, attempt to separate the market and inspired orders through signifying practices that maintain a symbolic order, thereby justifying a sacred mission, in the case of the charity organization, and justifying self-worth, in the case of the homeless individuals.

<sup>1</sup> In referring to the sacred and profane, I am not subscribing to the claim that these are *the* core components of religious life (e.g., Durkheim [1912] 1995; Eliade 1959). Many religious practices found outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition do not revolve around such notions (see Smith 2017). Yet to the extent that the subject of my study is a Christian charity (albeit in a non-Western society), the sacred and profane are pivotal factors to include in the analysis.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to neoliberalism in two senses. First, I refer to it as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (Harvey 2005, p. 2). To the extent that such a theory has been put into practice, neoliberalism has macro-structural consequences for social order. Second, on the cultural level, as I conceptualize the term, neoliberalism involves the predominance of individualism and self-responsibility as societal values as well as a set of consumerist meanings and tacit understandings that saturate everyday life, thus intensifying existing capitalist social arrangements.

This study contributes to our understanding of religion in the age of neoliberalism by analyzing how tensions produced by the mixing of neoliberal capitalism, religion and social service provision manifest at the level of everyday life, and produce mutations of charity in a non-Western society. In what follows, I will first contextualize and operationalize Boltanski and Thevenot's conceptual framework, and in the process, show how competing motives and meanings result in tensions between the inspired and market orders. Then I will show how actors attempt to keep the inspired and market orders separate through two methods: (1) resignifying consumerist meanings as sacred meanings; and (2) avoiding the profane elements of the market order by distancing faith from money. In the conclusion, I return to the problem of religious charity in civil society in the age of neoliberalism.

## 2. Literature Review

It is difficult to understand the current role of religious organizations in civil society without simultaneously understanding their connections to both neoliberalism and the welfare state. The resulting convergence of faith, financial necessity, and social responsibility has been both scrutinized and celebrated in recent scholarship. Some studies have viewed neoliberalism, as a form of hyper-capitalism, as merging ever more with a consumerist lifestyle (see [Gauthier and Martikainen 2013](#); [Gauthier and Martikainen 2016](#)); other studies view neoliberal hyper-consumption as distorting religion by obscuring the distinction between sacred and profane, and by secularizing religious practices as they become a form of consumption (e.g., [Barbalet et al. 2011](#); [Einstein 2008](#)).

Neoliberal politics can also simultaneously erode welfare states while producing a greater need for social safety nets; here, religious groups have often taken on a more public role, supplanting roles that have been traditionally allocated to the state, such as providing social services to those in need (e.g., [Backstrom et al. 2010](#); [Possamai 2018](#); [Powell 2013](#)), often in ways that bolster the neoliberal project (e.g., [Dreher and Smith 2016](#)). Yet others have viewed the increased civic engagement of religious organizations in a more positive light (e.g., [Hein 2014](#); [Huang 2009](#); [Weller et al. 2018](#)), even as such organizations may take on a more bureaucratic, "industrial" form (e.g., [Weller et al. 2018](#)), or embrace commercialization, while nonetheless maintaining a sacred religious core ([McKenzie 2016](#)).

### 2.1. The Orders of Worth Framework

While much work examining religious organizations under neoliberal capitalism suggests the latter will have a predominantly negative impact on religion, it is not inevitable that neoliberalism should erode a sacred, religious core; yet such preservation, I argue, is an accomplishment involving the separation of what Boltanski and Thevenot have called the inspired order and market order.

In *On Justification*, [Boltanski and Thevenot \(2006\)](#) provide a comprehensive framework for studying how tensions arise, and agreement can be reached, in the court of everyday life. In their paradigm, grievances, disagreements, and contestable conduct continually arise, necessitating the repair of moral order through a process of justification that facilitates the coordination of action. Central to this framework is "the imperative to justify" one's speech or actions through appeal to "higher common principles," which identify the relative moral properties, or worth, of objects, actions and persons. The authors refer to the resulting organization of a social world as "orders of worth," which prescribe relations of significance, importance and value to persons and objects (both material and ideal) that are deemed to be just, or morally correct, in their arrangement.

A crucial feature of "orders of worth" is that they are a plurality. Each order contains its own arrangement, and possesses its own principles that ordain its correctness. When orders collide, agreements on a definition of the situation become difficult, thus generating disputes and calls for justification. The authors identify six ideal-typical orders derived from works of Western political philosophy: market, inspired, civic, domestic, fame and industrial. These orders of worth vary not only in how they define the common good, or ideal social arrangements, but also the inherent evaluatory lenses through which judgments

are made. In this paper, although the civic order plays an important role and in Chinese culture the domestic order, that is, the considerable influence of the family unit as the foundation of society (Fei 1977), bears its imprint on all other orders, my primary focus will be on the inspired and market orders.

Before proceeding to an explication of the market and inspired orders, a few words about my appropriation of Boltanski and Thevenot's framework are in order. As I utilize it, there are a number of departures from organizational studies that have applied the framework (e.g., Binder 2007; Patriotta et al. 2011). First, rather than focusing on the justification process occurring as actors travel across various worlds, or between various departments within an organization, I examine the discord of orders of worth operative in a single setting. Second, I distinguish between justification as a process, and how the term "justification" is often used as exchangeable with the term "motive" (e.g., Mills 1940; Vaisey 2009). In Boltanski and Thevenot's framework, the closest they come to describing a concept of motive is their discussion of "dignity," which could be construed as meaning either motive, that is, post-hoc justifiable reasons for action, or motivation, referring to the internal "springs of action." In my treatment, I differentiate between motives, which I consider to be akin to "higher common principles" that serve as a frame of reference for evaluating action, and motivations, the latter which I maintain agnosticism vis-à-vis any of the actors I describe in this paper. Motives, in my usage, are embedded within orders of worth.

A final clarification refers to my treatment of meanings; the authors of *On Justification* largely bypass the "symbolic meanings" of objects to demonstrate the role objects play as the bases of tests that "enable judgments to reach a grounded and legitimate agreement" (367). In my treatment, symbolic meanings play an important role because the maintenance of meanings is directly related to evaluations, and thereby the maintenance of the worth of a given object, human or otherwise (also see Strand 2014). Here, I follow a number of approaches, for instance, the sacred classification systems described by Mary Douglas (1966) that are repaired through ritual practice; the basic human need for maintaining a meaningful world through reaffirmation of threatened meanings (Heine et al. 2006); the construction of self-worth through "signifying activity" (Snow and Anderson 1987); and the control of identity relevant meanings in social interaction (Burke and Stets 2009). In short, I posit that orders of worth themselves contain symbolic systems and provide resources for maintaining meaning. In my study, practices for meaning maintenance serve two primary objects: (1) preserving a sacred symbolic order that justifies motives; (2) and avoiding the profane elements that threaten the sanctity of a justified order. In each instance, actors must do the work of separating the market order and the inspired order.

## 2.2. The Market Order

According to the orders of worth framework, in a market order, actions are justified to the extent that they emanate from self-interest or a desire for material gratification; worth naturally follows from success as measured through the accumulation of money or the possession of valued goods. Thus, the market order is a world where the poor and homeless, lacking the means to participate fully in the market world, are degraded in value, and all but "deprived of the dignity of human beings in this world" (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006, p. 197). The symbolic dimension of this order is what I refer to as consumerist; that is, objects, including money, are defined according to meanings articulated in an economic marketplace and which permeate everyday discourse. As we will see, the mechanism of charity is one way the poor and homeless, as consumers of charitable goods, retain a quasi-relation to the market order; to an extent, the market order also conditions how some of the homeless approach these goods.

## 2.3. The Inspired Order

Based on St. Augustine's 5th century work, *City of God*, the inspired order is conceived as a world transcending all worldly orders. In it, the pre-eminent basis of worth is grace:

“The principle of grace sets inspired worth apart from other forms of worth—which are denounced as worldly interests that follow and lead to discord when they are pursued—and thereby creates a hierarchy among the different sorts of goods that attract people and thus create interconnections among them” (Ibid 86). Unlike a market order, where worth has its price, worth in the inspired order cannot be achieved through money or the satisfaction of materialistic desires; instead, it is a gift that can only be bestowed by God. In complete opposition to the market order, in the inspired order, dispossession, although initially disastrous, sets one on the path to worth, culminating in a “new self,” grounded not in self-interest or materialism, but in faith and grace. The symbolic dimension in this world I refer to as sacred. That is, the meanings assigned to objects, derived in my case from the Biblical tradition, are considered by inhabitants of this world as unalterable, that is, sacred. In my case, higher common principles serve to transcend both self-interest and material satisfaction, thus maintaining a justified order.

#### 2.4. *The Mixing of Orders*

The following example from my field notes demonstrates how a commingling of these two orders of worth can result in tensions that destabilize meanings and the kinds of work that might be done to restore a justified order:

It is the manager’s last day at Grace Home Church. At the age of 82, work in the organization has become too much for him. Giving his last address to the church gathering, he reads from 1st Corinthians 11:34, a passage called “Disorder in the Assembly”: “Now as to the following instructions, I do not praise you because you meet together not for the better, but for the worse. For in the first place, I hear that when you come together in an assembly there is division among you, and I partly believe it. For there certainly must be factions among you, in order that the approved may become recognizable among you. When therefore you come together in the same place, there is no eating the Lord’s Supper, for each one takes and eats his own supper beforehand, and one goes hungry and another has over-indulged. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” After reading the passage, the manager adds his interpretation: “In order to preserve the meaning and higher purpose of the sacred feast, the most important thing is to keep the meal in order.”

In the passage read, the *mixing* of The Agape, or Love Feast, with The Lord’s Supper, desacralizes the Eucharist as it is consumed as one would any other food. Here we have an object, a Eucharist, losing its sacred meaning as those present come not according to the religiously prescribed motive, to commemorate the death of Christ, but to indulge their appetites. Notice how the perceived meaning of both event (the meal) and object (the Eucharist) is threatened and how an appeal is made to restore sacred meaning. The manager continued reading from Corinthians: “For he who eats and drinks (unworthily), eats and drinks judgment on himself, not distinguishing the Lord’s body . . . If you are hungry, eat at home first.” Here, the higher common principle of the commemoration of Christ’s death is deployed to separate appetite from piety and thus restore the meal to a justified arrangement.

#### 2.5. *The Market and Inspired Orders in Taiwan*

Whereas previously the market and inspired orders have been dealt with as two distinct ideal types, in this section, I will stress their interlinkages. Since its transition to neoliberalism beginning in the mid-1980s (Tsai 2001), Taiwanese society has embraced

consumerism and capitalism<sup>3</sup>, and largely adapted to the neoliberal societal framework. Taiwan's robust economic development during the 1960s and 1970s did more than transform the nation from an agricultural to an industrial society. It saw the rise of economic materialism, so much so that even the dictator that oversaw this growth, Chiang Kai Shek, lamented in 1974 that "the spiritual side and material side are no longer in balance."<sup>4</sup> By 1989, consumerism had becoming firmly entrenched in Taiwan.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, neoliberalism began to bring other social changes. As documented by the anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2006), neoliberalism in Asia has generated a new grammar of individual worth based on marketable skills in a globalized, de-industrialized economy. Changes impacting the Taiwanese economy, such as manufacturing jobs moving overseas to China<sup>6</sup> and a shift to service industries, including retail and finance, contributed to a steady rise in homelessness (Cheng and Yang 2010). While creating what Ong would describe as "zones of exclusion" for those on the wrong end of emerging re-calculations of worth, such developments have created opportunities for religious organizations to enter the public realm to address these new exclusions, while also providing religious bases of human worth counter to the prevailing market order.

The liberalization of Taiwan's economy brought changes to religion as well. The lifting of martial law in 1987 represented an end to government regulation of religion, which remains largely unregulated today (Laliberte 2009). Even though suspicion of the close relation between religion and the profit motive has brought greater calls for government intervention (Kastner 2015), the Taiwanese government is reluctant to pass laws placing restrictions on religious groups (Laliberte 2009). As a consequence, a robust "religious market" has emerged (Lu et al. 2008). To describe Taiwan's religious field as a "religious market," is not to subscribe to the economic terminology of the rational choice approach to religion (e.g., Stark and Finke 2000). Yet the omnipresent Daoist or Buddhist temples are frequented not to worship, but to seek favors from the Gods, favors often connected to the intense entrepreneurial spirit that pervades Taiwan. That is, one of the most prominent features of the market order in Taiwan is its tight intertwining with folk religion, a blend of Daoism, Buddhism, and various fortune-telling practices.

As it manifests in Taiwan, the market order views the inspired order as impractical, and unrealistically privileging higher ideals at the expense of material necessity. That is to say, in Taiwan, the Augustinian inspired order is relatively weak. However, as practiced and promulgated at Grace Home Church, the inspired order is promulgated very much in the Augustine sense where wealth is viewed as a barrier to salvation. Yet once the Holy Spirit enters one's heart and transforms the individual, "a new life in Christ" is started. Pure faith results in a state of grace in which reliance on God becomes the source of peace (or *pingan* in Chinese Romanization), where the individual is free from all worry or inner conflict. This is a state utterly separate from the market order as it is purely a gift from God and cannot be bought or sold. Doing something "For the Lord" naturally follows from this state of Grace as the individual relinquishes self-volition and acts according to the will of God.

### 3. Methods and Case

During the periods between September 2012 through January 2014, and May 2014 through August 2015, I did fieldwork in Taipei, Taiwan, at Grace Home Church (or *enyou*

<sup>3</sup> This is in line with the matter-of-fact attitude towards money present in Taiwan: "Westerners encountering Chinese culture for the first time are often struck by Chinese attitudes toward money. In the first stages of culture shock, one concludes that anything can be bought and sold, that money and its manipulation are the prime topics of conversation, and that money is an untarnished and absolute good" (Gates 1987, p. 262). During my time in Taiwan, outside of my formal fieldwork, it was not uncommon for me to hear someone say, "Money is the most important thing in life".

<sup>4</sup> "Confident and Self-Reliant," *Taiwan Today*. 1974. Available online: <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?post=13643&unit=8,8,20,29,32,32,35,45> (accessed on 5 January 2021).

<sup>5</sup> "Consumerism Comes of Age," *Taiwan Today*. 1989. Available online: <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=12,29,33,45&post=22978> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

<sup>6</sup> "In Taiwan, homeless situation worsens as income gap widens," *Channel News Asia*. 2018. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/homeless-problem-becomes-worse-taiwan-10739484#.YF1WcqyZACY> (accessed on 2 December 2021).



*zhongxin* in its Romanized form), a non-denominational Taiwanese Christian organization founded in 2003. This church is strategically positioned in a small alley near the city's central travel hub, Taipei Main Station. Like the 13 other churches in the organization, it is located in a space initially intended for commercial use, but was converted into an area for worship. The church also utilizes the rest of the building: the 2nd floor being used as an office and kitchen, while the 3rd and 4th floors are full of bunk beds and serve to house the church staff, who primarily consists of the formerly homeless. Because of its proximity to Taipei Main Station, which attracts homeless individuals from all over Taiwan, the church is by far the busiest in the organization, serving 700 to 900 meals each week. Meals are served twice a day, always after the optional church service, Tuesday through Friday, while Monday is a day of rest and thus no meals are served.

In addition to participant/observation at the church, data was also collected using semi-structured interviews with several of the church staff, and 12 homeless individuals, all of whom gave obtained informed consent, that were frequenting the church or had done so in the recent past. My fieldnotes were written and coded according to well-known guidelines described in Emerson et al.'s *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Emerson et al. 2011). All interview recordings were transcribed with the assistance of local university students, and coded and memo'd also according to Emerson et al.'s influential guidelines. In total, I amassed a total of 750 typed pages of data, approximately 500 comprised of fieldnotes and 250 comprised of interview transcriptions.

Taiwan serves as an ideal case for this investigation due to the strong connection between its religious and economic landscapes (Weller 1994), the robust civic engagement of religious organizations, and the prevalence of free-market economic policy (Taiwan ranks 6th overall in economic freedom).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this case provides added perspective on the impact of neoliberalism on religion in a non-Western context, a generally understudied area (see Moberg and Martikainen 2018).

#### *Christianity and Welfare in Taiwan*

Christians comprise only 4% of Taiwan's population (Chao 2013), yet they have played an outsized role in Taiwan's history, including a prominent role in Taiwan's pro-democracy movement during the 1980s (Rubenstein 1991). Upon their initial arrival in the mid-19th century, they brought food and other forms of material assistance and later established hospitals and schools (Chao 2013). Although the Taiwanese, then as they are now, are religiously non-dogmatic and respectful of other religions, Taiwanese that converted to Christianity in the mid- to late 19th century time were derisively called "Rice Christians" as it was perceived that their conversions were due only to the material assistance they received (Moody [1907] 1973); or in other words, they were perceived as converting not "for the Lord," but "for the belly."

In reality, the Church organization seeks to simultaneously serve both functions. While the primary mission of the church is religious, during an interview, the president of the organization and a professor of Social Enterprise at National Taiwan University, described its overall purpose like so: "We want to serve their material needs by feeding them and offering them a place to live. But we also want to serve their spiritual needs, and direct them to the Lord." Such an approach however means the organization, as a religious group, has to sometimes compete with the goods it offers as a charity and welfare service provider.

The nature of Taiwan's welfare state has created a niche in civil society for the organization. Although Taiwan has one of the lowest poverty rates in the world, this is partially because the threshold for poverty is also quite low, the equivalent of \$300 USD.<sup>8</sup> The relative minimalism of the welfare state stems not so much from the rise of neoliberalism, but from the prominence of the domestic order in Taiwan; it is generally not considered the state's obligation to take care of the poor, but the family's (Aspalter 2019). Taiwan's

<sup>7</sup> "2021 Index of Economic Freedom". Available online: <https://www.heritage.org/index/> (accessed on 4 February 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Chen, Li-Cheng. Interview by author. National Taiwan University, 28 July 2015.

government today could be described as “cooperative” (Weller et al. 2018) with respect to potential religious social service providers. Concurrent with a series of natural disasters, and the overwhelming response by religious organizations, was the realization by the Taiwanese government that making it easier for religious charity organizations to distribute welfare services takes some of the burden off the state (Laliberte 2015).

The organization thus serves a variety of civic functions that supplement the minimalism of Taiwan’s welfare state. Grace Home Church is contracted by the Taipei Department of Social Services to distribute poverty relief by providing shelter and meals. The Health and Welfare Department of the Taipei Government also refers individuals who call their suicide prevention hotline to the church. In addition, individuals recently released from jail may also be referred to the organization. Supplementing financial support received from the government, although officially a religious non-profit organization, Grace Home Church also supports itself through a variety of business ventures undertaken by senior members of the organization. These, and charitable donations, have funded the relatively rapid expansion of the organization.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1. *For the Belly or For the Lord?*

Situated in a narrow alleyway is a storefront church. Standing or crouching just outside it are 10 homeless lined up beneath signage similar in form to that of businesses lining the streets of Taipei. Inside, there are around 33 present, including 7 women. The preacher leads a series of church hymns, his robust voice carrying the tune over the rather frail voices of the homeless. Most are at least mouthing the words, but many have their hymnals closed, and, having attended many services, are singing it from memory. Later, throughout the sermon, noises from outside, and sometimes inside, draw quick glances. Motorcycles roar, a woman’s cell phone goes off inside the church, and from time to time a very loud noise is heard. A man perhaps in his early thirties, sitting away from the others, is holding a bible and appears to be reading from it, gesticulating wildly, while silently preaching to an imaginary congregation. An old man is outside rummaging through the trash can; he finds a plastic container, washes it, and then sits down near the entrance, waiting for the end of the sermon. As 11:30 am approaches, the wall clock starts to garner the quick glances. Soon the call is given for the meal to start: “First row!” The “congregants” begin to stream outside one row at a time.

On one such morning, I am sitting inside, next to Mr. Tsai, a 50-year-old Taiwanese man who is part of the small group of staff that both lives and works at the church. The homeless individuals that attended the daily Christian service are inside eating their meals, some eating very quickly so they can get in line for seconds; Mr. Tsai has just come back from serving the rice; looking around the room at those that are eating, he comments that so many of the homeless just come to eat, but do not listen to the sermon. He explicitly expresses his displeasure, shakes his head, but adds that he must defer to wishes of the head of the charity organization, Executive Pastor Li, adding the pastor loves Jesus so much that he allows people to just come and eat, even those they do not attend the church service.

A common question preachers ask during the church services attended by is, “Why do you come to the church?” On one occasion, a Christian homeless man yelled out, “For God’s love.” At times, someone may respond to the query in a similarly enthusiastic manner. But most individuals just sit and listen quietly, while a few do not pay much attention at all. Sometimes it is quite obvious who has arrived just to eat:

In the back corner of the church, a homeless man is talking to another man while the preacher gives a sermon. The homeless man is perhaps in his mid-50s,

<sup>9</sup> This expansion followed an “industrial model” utilized by the Tzu Chi Foundation, by far Taiwan’s largest recipient of charitable donations. The founder of Grace Home Church is a former volunteer for the Buddhist organization, which started several business ventures to support expansion, and Grace Home Church’s expansion is done in part to compete with the Tzu Chi Foundation, who receive 80–85% of charitable donations in Taiwan (Kastner 2015).

has longish grey hair, and wears a baseball cap and a soiled t-shirt. Between two fingers he is holding an unlit cigarette. Sitting in the row just in front of them, I overhear him saying to the other man, “I just come here to eat. Sometimes I will go to a church, sometimes I will go to a temple. Wherever there is food, it doesn’t matter.” Soon, the man sitting next to me, Brother<sup>10</sup> Chen, who lives at the church, stands up, turns around, and asks the homeless man to take off his hat as wearing it is a violation of the church’s rules. He refuses and then is asked to leave. After some resistance, he leaves.

The preceding examples reveal a fundamental tension found at the Taipei Grace Home Church, one that has ramifications beyond the discontent expressed by some devoted Christian volunteers. “For the Lord,” and its variations, is the official higher common principle in this inspired order, one that serves to sustain a justified order among Christians. While we can see how the motive, “For the Belly,” might also express disrespect for the rules of the church and dismissal of Christianity, it also expresses a consumerist mentality towards the specific church in question: one option among many in a charity market that provides material goods for consumption. As a higher common principle, if we may call it that, “For the Belly” is the only necessary justification for going to the church.

The market order penetrates the setting in other ways as well. For instance, church staff often refers to the homeless as “guests,” or *keren*, a word that in Chinese is synonymous with “customer.” A consumerist mentality also can be seen while the homeless are receiving meals, indicating that not just needs, but preferences, are operative. When dispensing food, the homeless are often noted by church staff to be “picky,” rejecting with a brisk wave of their hand one dish they find unpalatable, complaining that not enough rice has been given, but then stating too much has been given, asking for soup without slices of radish, or more of this or that. Several times, I heard complaints from staff such as “That woman was very rude.”<sup>11</sup> Requests made by the “guests” are sometimes rebuffed, but more often than not they are accommodated.

#### 4.2. Consumerist vs. Sacred Significations

Although a certain degree of accommodation was made towards consumerist expectations of the homeless, this inevitably created a tension with the organization’s religious mission, invoking continual efforts to maintain the religious meaning of the enterprise to keep the market and inspired orders separate; this involved a re-affirmation of what really matters by linking objects and actions to the higher common principle, “For the Lord.” The man in charge of the Taipei church, often referred to simply as the “preacher,” brought up the issue of whether the “center”<sup>12</sup> was a restaurant or not. One day he was addressing a group of church workers, some of which had previously been homeless, while others arrived at the church through other paths:

When I was meeting with co-workers<sup>13</sup> earlier, they were discussing what they ate every day and what they dislike to eat. I was laughing and told them that Enyou Center is not a restaurant. Although Enyou provides them with meals, Enyou is not a restaurant. Do you understand? Enyou center is not a restaurant, although it provides meals and helps a lot of homeless people. It seems like that we voluntarily do this, but Enyou is not a restaurant. We do this because of God’s love. It is because of God’s love, because I am a Christian . . . that I do this. I said to them, “You are preachers. How can you say that?” I must speak my true feelings. It is because of God, because of the Lord Jesus, and because I am a Christian that I do this. Or, honestly, I would disdain to do it.

<sup>10</sup> Brother and Sister are terms Christians in Taiwan use to address each other.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, this is not to say all homeless approach meals provided by the church in a consumerist fashion. The more devote among the homeless could often be heard saying, “Thank you Lord,” each time food is placed in their bowl.

<sup>12</sup> Not being officially ordained as a church by Taiwan’s Protestant diocese, although often referred to as a church, Grace Home Church is officially, in its Chinese transliteration, Grace Home Center.

<sup>13</sup> The Romanization of this term would be Tonggong, which specifically refers to co-workers among Christians.



A few minutes later, the preacher spoke about the importance of adopting the higher common principle when serving food to the homeless: “I don’t think I really see you [speaking about the volunteers present] serving. If you don’t do it for God, does it count as service? That’s why I mentioned earlier that we are not a restaurant.” Besides using the sacred motive “For the Lord” to justify the church’s mission, the higher common principle stands in relation to a sacred meaning system. That is, “For the Lord” also signified church work as “service,” meaning that serving the food is a way of serving the Lord; through this signification, Grace Home Church was elevated above the secular status of a restaurant.

Such admonishments aside, there is a tacit understanding at the church that many of the homeless come there to just eat. While both Christians and non-Christians are allowed to eat at the church, this state of affairs was nonetheless frustrating for some of the Christians. During an interview with Pastor Li, I asked him what question he would ask of the homeless if he were to interview them: “If there was no Grace Home Church, where would you get a meal or a place to live?”, adding “After 10 years of receiving these meals, the homeless start to think it’s an entitlement, and they sometimes complain that the meal does not taste good. They forget that the food is *mana*, a gift from God. Whether it is delicious or not is not important.” Thus, a focus on preferences in taste, a consumerist attitude, demotes “*mana*” to the status of secular food, negating its status as divinely distributed. Again, mixing the inspired order and the market order threatened the symbolic order that justified the church organization’s religious mission.

The preachers at the church would make light of the consumerist mentality during their sermons, and attempted to move symbolically from the material to the spiritual. After wondering why some have come to eat at the church for nearly ten years, but still do not believe, a female preacher says:

Today, you come to Enyou . . . if you come just to eat, it really doesn’t have value. But if you come to get spiritual nutrition, then you can enter into the kingdom of God! (Amen!) Jesus professed that believing in him was a requirement to enter the kingdom of God. You will have Jesus’ salvation in you, and your life will be changed; because of the power of the Holy Spirit you will be changed, and your weakness will become less and less.

Coming to the church for “spiritual nutrition” was used as a way of separating the inspired order from the material appetites of the market order while also justifying the spiritual purpose of going to the church. Similar appeals were made to change the significance of why the homeless attended the church. For example, after acknowledging that many of the homeless went to the church just to eat, Bible passages such as “Man does not live on bread alone, but on the word of God,” were often invoked, along with reminders that in addition to material hunger, there is also “spiritual hunger.”

As previously shown, the members of the charity organization attempted to signify the purpose of going to the church in a way that distanced it from the materiality of consumption; such acts, in turn, reaffirmed the organization’s symbolic order and justified the church’s religious mission.

#### *4.3. Self-Significations and Self-Worth*

Whereas for church workers, “For the Lord” was the primary higher common principle, being baptized, thus signifying oneself as a Christian, was also utilized by some homeless as a way of justifying their self-worth by distancing themselves from homeless people that went to the church primarily to eat; the latter were often perceived as alcoholics, gambling addicts, or as working for gangsters in the black market.

During an interview, when asked how he is different from other homeless people, a Christian homeless man remarked, “I’m nothing like them!” He further distinguished himself from such homeless individuals that did not go to the church to pray:

Those others that go there just to eat, they do not believe. They don’t believe. They are angry. They have difficulties. No one helps them. But you find the church, you believe, sing with your heart. Jesus will bless you. Some people,

are like this. They will go in the direction of belief and find peace. Others will only receive consolation. Jesus gave you belief. Do you believe that good luck is coming? You must believe.

In this example, “Those others” shows that this homeless man is distancing himself from a material motivation for going to the church; those “others” that just go to eat only go through the motions of worship and receive only temporary alleviation of suffering (consolation). Thus, by invoking the higher common principle of *pingan*, and signifying himself as a Christian, he distanced himself from other homeless people, and thereby justified his worth as an individual.

Going to the church just to eat created a dilemma for some homeless people that did not believe. During an interview, when asked why he appeared to pray during church services when he did not believe, one homeless man said bluntly: “I prayed, but my heart did not pray,” meaning that he did not pray with sincerity. Yet because he had been baptized in the church, this same man identified himself as a Christian. During the interview, he repeatedly professed that the primary reason he went to the church was simply to eat, yet this reason was not sufficiently justified, so he eventually was baptized:

Interviewer: When you were being baptized, what thoughts or feelings did you have?

Interviewee: When being baptized, my first feeling was that I was being hypocritical; I was doing this just in order to eat. Obviously, I did not believe. I only wanted to eat, then I did as the Romans did.<sup>14</sup> After [being baptized], I felt that eating at the church was justifiable. But my first impression was that I had lied that I believed.

Thus, going to the church just to eat was not by itself an acceptable motive for this homeless man. However, going to the church as a Christian, thereby signifying himself, made the act more justifiable. The action of being baptized also resignified eating at the church in a way that distanced it from the market order. Rather than the immoral act of *pianchi pianhe*, literally translated as “cheat eat, cheat drink,” or the act of eating at a restaurant and then leaving without eating, it was rid of that consumerist association. More importantly, the act also justified his self-worth through, at least in part, reaffirming his own moral worth.

#### 4.4. Filthy Lucre: Distancing from the Profane

In the previous section, we saw how sacred meanings were controlled to maintain their alignment with a higher common principle. In this section, like the previous, higher common principles serve a justificatory role, but they must be distanced from a profane element (money). Although sacred meanings play a role, that role is not as prominent; rather, the primary task is to justify distancing from money, especially when it comes to the issue of giving direct monetary assistance to homeless people.

The strong link between religion and money in Taiwan made distancing from the latter necessary yet difficult for the organization. On a brisk Tuesday morning, the smell of incense wafts into the church, perhaps emanating from offerings for a God given by a local business. I am sitting next to Mr. Tsai. A homeless man in the row in front of us has his head down, seemingly in prayer. After Mr. Tsai says a few words to him, the homeless man turns around, and says with his eyes open wide, “I want to pray to God for money.” As with going to the church just to eat, Mr. Tsai again indicates his displeasure. It should not be a surprise a homeless person would be beseeching a God, in this case Jesus, for money; nonetheless, unlike in Taiwanese folk religion, the true purpose of worship was to bring *ping an* to the individual through faith, not through praying for money when one does not have faith.

<sup>14</sup> Doing “as the Romans do” here means someone simply follows customs without adopting them sincerely.

In many ways, money represents the pre-eminent object of the market world. Yet the founder of the organization frequently scrutinized the pre-eminent role money played in Taiwan's religious landscape. In a book written by the founder of the charity organization, Pastor Li lamented the tight intertwining of religion and money, and how rich but corrupt businessmen donate their money to Daoist or Buddhist temples in order to "buy righteousness." By doing so, entrepreneurs believed that they had "justified" their "ill-gotten" fortune and thus need not confess their sins. The author provides an example from the Bible to demonstrate the line that should be drawn between money and religion:

The Lord Jesus Christ came to the world wanting to seek sinners such as the tax collector Zacchaeus. He was not proud of his wealth, and took care of the poor in this world, "Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor." He reviewed himself at any time, "If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." This confession was truly from the heart and that's why Jesus was moved by it . . . Otherwise, even if you are baptized to become a Christian, before and after the baptism, if you are still rich, and feel you are righteous, and do not need to save the poor, then that confession has no meaning and makes no sense. Therefore, do not think you are rich and powerful. Maybe you will receive praise in another religion, but a church should not do this.

In this passage, the pastor attempts to keep the inspired order, embodied by nonattachment to wealth, and the market order, embodied by using wealth to buy righteousness, separate, thus signifying the meaning of true righteousness. In order to preserve the true meaning of baptism, or being "re-born with a new life in God," baptism must also be sought through the right motive, or higher common principle, and not out of self-interest. In each instance, justifying that religion and money should be separate.

Although Grace Home Church attempted to distance religion from money, they could not escape money as a necessity, which threatened the organizations symbolic order. During my fieldwork, more than once there were rumors of financial hardship that would potentially result in closing some of the organization's locations. Church staff was forthright in admitting the financial stress of sustaining the operations of multiple "centers." About this, one volunteer remarked to me: "We never know where the money will come from. But when it comes, it is a gift from God." Signifying money as "a gift from God" was a way keeping the inspired order and market order separate, while also re-affirming a higher common principle, faith. Both acts, in turn, also justify the receipt of money as separate from the kinds of financial dealings that occur in the market world.

Chinese New Year was the only time of year the organization distributed money, but in this instance, cloaked in around 200 red envelopes<sup>15</sup> each with \$500 New Taiwan Dollars in them. Addressing the homeless and volunteers, the founder of the organization explains the relation between money and the larger purpose of the organization's New Year's event: "Some people will look at how many red envelopes we hand out and think our church is rich. But they do not know that only right before New Year's, by God's will, someone donated the money. So we were able to hand out envelopes. But do not say, 'You are rich, give me money.' We will help people experiencing hardship, but not just with money. We will help them find a job and get on the right track and warm their heart with God's love."

In the previous example, money is re-signified by placing it in a red envelope; the pastor also distances from money by both highlighting that the church is not "rich" and that the money was received by the will of god. In the process, this justifies not giving money directly, further reaffirms a higher common principle, spreading God's love.

In the next example, a preacher also distances from money through reference to the higher common principle, faith, as well as defining love in a way that is congruent with that principle. During a weekday morning service, the usual preacher is away on business, so Preacher Hsu takes the podium. After a singing a few songs, he begins to give some

<sup>15</sup> These are the customary envelopes used to gift money during Chinese New Year.

general information on the church, while also talking about “God’s love” and how it is different than romantic love, he turns to the topic of money:

“We do not give out money. Don’t ask for money. We just yesterday paid \$300,000 NTD to rent this building, and we have many other centers where we need to pay rent. But we do not worry about money. We have faith that God will provide. So our center helps people, but we never give out money. Some will come and say they don’t have money, they want to go back to go home, “I want to go back to Kaohsiung.”<sup>16</sup> We will help you find a ticket. There are many ways to help besides giving money. This is God’s love, a stronger, merciful love. If you love someone, you will ask if they are ok. There are many places in the bible that teaches God really loves us. But God will discipline us, just like when we love our children.

As with the previous example, the church organization distances itself from money by referring to a higher order principle, faith; but also through signifying love in a different way. In this sermon, the preacher would also state: “The strongest love comes from our faith in God.” In the process of signifying the meaning of love and distancing themselves from money, the preacher also justifies the kinds of non-material assistance the center dispenses.

Requests for money from the homeless, and justification for not giving out money by charity workers, were a recurring theme during my fieldwork. Before a rather well attended service, the preacher is giving a rather typical sermon, the theme of which is “Jesus is your best friend.” As is usually the case, the homeless are being encouraged to believe in Jesus and seek help from him (rather than turning to Buddha or one of the many Daoist gods at a temple). In the middle of the sermon, a young homeless man sitting with the congregation suddenly stands up, and says, “Pastor, I have a question to ask you. You say that Jesus is our best friend, but we are trapped and can’t do anything about it! We are desperate and have even thought of committing suicide. But Jesus is our best friend, right? We are homeless and life is very difficult. We pray every day, but want to commit suicide, and there is no way out. But you say Jesus is our best friend!”

In response to the man’s question, the preacher relates the story of his journey into homelessness and back again; at the end of the service, he walks down the aisle of the church; nearing the homeless man, they began to talk in quite a friendly way, as if they were friends. Soon, I overheard the homeless man repeatedly asking, to the point of begging, the preacher for money so he could return to his hometown in southern Taiwan; he even promised to be baptized; however the preacher rejects this offer, on the basis that baptism, “is not a [financial] transaction,” adding, “You should take responsibility for yourself and go to social services.” The homeless man does not give up though, and the preacher pulls very close to him, and begins to whisper such that I can no longer hear what he is saying. He puts his hand into his pocket, and just as I expected, he pulls it back out with cash in hand and very furtively gives it to the homeless man. The preacher then quickly leaves.

In the previous, we again see how the inspired order is separated from the market order. The preacher attempts to preserve the sacred meaning of baptism by admonishing the homeless man, saying “Baptism is not a [financial] transaction,” thus distancing baptism from the market world; the preceding example also shows how sincere baptism is only done for the sake of the correct higher common principle, which in turn plays the pivotal role of justifying the act of baptism. Of central concern here is how not giving money is justified, interestingly, through reference to a higher common principle, and one not native to the inspired order: personal responsibility. This was not the only instance this higher common principle was used to deflect such requests; was a conscious strategy sometimes used by charity workers when what was asked, or taken, by homeless people exceeded or diverged from what the charity organization was willing to give. In the later discussion section of this paper, I will try to make sense of this puzzle.

<sup>16</sup> This is Taiwan’s third largest city, and is located near the island’s southern-most tip.

#### 4.5. Money and Self-Worth among the Homeless

Like signifying the self as Christian, distancing from money could also justify self-worth for the homeless person. Mr. Chou previously worked at a bank, but after experiencing problems with severe depression, he lost his job. Now, due in part to age discrimination, at only 43 he faces serious obstacles to finding work again. In an interview, Mr. Chou expressed how he had become less concerned with money after his conversion to Christianity:

Interviewer: Since becoming Christian, how have you changed?

Interviewee: Prior to knowing Jesus Christ, I would pursue work and money. Now, I will pursue knowledge of God. I won't seek wealth, and I'm less likely to think that I must have work for my life to have value ... To serve God is more important than pursuing money.

To be sure, the separation of the homeless from the market order is not necessarily done voluntarily, and initially undermines their self-worth. Nonetheless, this state of affairs creates a predicament in which they needed to search for other ways to justify self-worth. In the above example, the reference to the higher common principle, "to serve God," replaces the pursuit of wealth, thus placing God above money. This, in turn, justifies the value of the very existence of the homeless person through seeking refuge in the inspired order.

The following example also demonstrates how a separation from the market order can lead homeless people to reaffirm their self-worth through the inspired order. Mr. Hsu is a homeless man that rotates his time among the various churches around Taipei Main Station, sometimes going to Grace Home Church, sometimes going elsewhere, as he shops around for a church he can truly believe in. A basket on the front of a bicycle he bought for the equivalent of \$60 USD with money he did for odd jobs carries signs of his tenuous connection to the market order: some clothes, some instant noodles and fruit, a thermos, a small stereo given to him by a nearby church that plays Christian music, and a Bible, also given to him by a nearby church. While speaking to him for the first time in front of the church, he is quick to declare: "I am homeless, but I have dignity. You can live without money, but you can't live without dignity. Dignity is your very last possession," contrasting himself with other homeless that sometimes do illegal work for gangsters to make money, a condition he refers to as "degenerate," as such homeless people sacrifice their dignity for money. Mr. Hsu recounted how, once they got a little money, some homeless would flash it in front of their peers, of which he said, "Why do you show off your money like this? Aren't you still homeless?"

Again, this distancing from money, when it came from the homeless, was a way of justifying self-worth. Although not baptized, later he would come to consider himself a Christian, another move that served to justify his self-worth: "I don't care what anyone thinks about me. I have Jesus in my heart. That is enough." In this way, like the other homeless individuals mentioned in this paper, some homeless found justification for their life by distancing themselves from the market order and embracing the inspired order.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

### 5.1. Discussion: Towards Neoliberal Charity?

Utilizing the orders of worth framework, I have attempted to show how the contest of competing orders of worth renders objects ambiguous, and how actors attempt to restore definitiveness and reverse the imbrication of religion and economy. In the wider social context, the charity organization, as an object, is itself subject to the same ambiguity as it becomes entangled among vying market and religious logics. In this section, I ask, "How can we understand the status of such a charity in a neoliberalized civil society, that is, within the sphere 'between family and state'" (Weller 1999)? In order to answer this question, I will first return to the social impact of neoliberalism.



Neoliberalism has in some ways expanded civil society, opening space for the participation of NGOs and individual citizens to address social problems as social programs administered by governments are curtailed or supplemented by service providers (Powell 2013). These changes have been coupled with a weakening of the domestic order as traditional family structures have weakened, increasingly placing responsibility on the individual for his or her welfare. Such developments have coincided with a rise in “active citizenship” (Ibid), a notion that has also become more prominent in Taiwan in the recent past (Hung 2013). Thus, in an age of neoliberalism, the social contract between state and society, including in Taiwan, has been rewritten.

Under these conditions, religious charity, and religion more generally, enters civil society in a somewhat vulnerable position if it is to maintain its core principles, or even its very survival as an organization. Under such conditions, has a new form of charity, call it neoliberal charity, emerged? In a discussion of the state of religion in the 21st century, the authors of an important volume, have noted how increased competition with secular agencies has impacted religion in general: “Religion has specialized in providing personal services and therefore has to compete with various secular agencies, also offering welfare, healing, comfort and meaning” (Barbalet et al. 2011, p. 281). In the process, the authors argue, religious groups will take on “the methods and values” of the institutions they compete with, thus compromising religion in the process. While my case confirms that a religious organization may adopt some methods of those they compete with, they may draw the line at compromising core religious values. Even so, although members of Grace Home Church attempt to distance themselves from the market order, and thereby prevent a distortion of their creed, they cannot completely escape it. Competition necessitates adaptation. In this context, religion, and religious charity, is not so much compromised in terms of values, but innovated in terms of methods, a claim that is similar one made by the authors of a recent book on “industrial charity” in Asia (see Weller et al. 2018).<sup>17</sup> This new form of charity, including Grace Home Church, incorporates entrepreneurial practices, including businesses ventures and organizational expansion. We have seen, however, that Grace Home Church has maintained a sacred core it refuses to compromise.

Nonetheless, a compromise does still exist. Grace Home Church, and its entrepreneurial model, serves as a compromise between two orders, one which Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) described like so: “A compromise suggests the possibility of a principle that can take judgments based on objects stemming from different worlds and make them compatible. It aims at a common good that transcends the two different forms of worth in presence by including both of them” (278). I would add though, although the point of agreement on “a common good” creates the possibility of a new higher common principle to emerge, it may not necessarily be transcendent. Between charity workers and the homeless, the compromise consists in an unlikely inversion of Maslow’s pyramid of needs. A Taiwanese homeless man I interviewed expressed this compromise as a symbiotic-like relation. After complaining that the organization does not do charity to help the homeless, but rather “For the Lord,” he reconsiders and says: “We use each other.” That is, the charity organization needs the homeless to justify their existence while the homeless need Grace Home church to sustain their survival. In this sense the higher common principle, if we may call it that, is survival: as a religious minority, the charity organization seeks a niche in society while the homeless that simultaneously also seek a niche. Thus, I would not call this neoliberal charity, but a mutation of charity in the age of neoliberalism amid the struggle for survival.

An additional compromise exists between the charity organization and the market order. In order to understand this compromise we need to return to a higher common principle this organization’s charity workers used to deflect requests for money, one that echoes marketized civic values in a neoliberal age: personal responsibility. Such a principle would appear to undermine a core tenet of the organization’s theology, reliance on God,

<sup>17</sup> Even so, these authors largely dismiss the influence of neoliberalism in shaping the forms of charity they describe, which in my opinion, prevents them from developing a more comprehensive account of the charities they analyze.

thus potentially undermining the organization's own values. As Grace Home Church distanced faith and grace from money, church workers also justified not giving direct monetary assistance, in the process referring to "social services." Thus, the notion of "personal responsibility" represents a way of drawing the line between charity and welfare in terms of the kinds of assistance that will be offered, but in the process drawing it closer to the market order under a shared higher common principle. Yet this perhaps irresolvable tension does not necessarily indicate a mutation into neoliberal charity, but a way of negotiating a changed, if not frayed, social contract.

## 5.2. Conclusions

In this paper, I have shown that even within a setting saturated with neoliberal capitalist meanings, actors may actively use higher common principles to preserve sacred meanings that are foundational to their religion and their selves. Yet higher common principles do not solely do the work of justification, and in some ways need to be sustained through signifying practices. I have also shown that the niche and influence of the charity organization in civil society is predicated to a certain degree by accommodation to a prevailing entrepreneurialism, partnership with a minimal welfare state, and economic displacement resulting from neoliberal economic models. Grace Home Church, and similar organizations, with all their faults, nonetheless may serve, not as a solution, but as a necessary salve for the worst injustices wrought by neoliberalism.

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