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# Being Christian through External Giving

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**Abstract:** This study examines how Christian informants understand and practice external (charitable) giving outside of their church, both in terms of money and volunteering time and effort. While existing quantitative researches have informed us primarily about the determinants of giving in the West, we carry out a small case study in a church in an Asian city of Hong Kong to explore how local Christians understand and practice external giving. It is found that external giving is not just an obligatory religious code of conduct that the Christians are obliged to follow. More essentially, drawing reference from the concept of technology of the self, we argue that giving is an integral part of the making of the Christian self. Through giving, individual Christians redefine, transform, and enact their sacred selves in relation to God and others in the community of the faithful. At a collective level, external giving contributes to the construction of a sacred moral economy, which places Christian givers and the needy recipients in a transcendent social relationship. In this state of transcendent social relationship, the givers and recipients are all children of God, hence of equal status. As such, the secular social distinction and material hierarchy distinction between these two groups pales into insignificance. Furthermore, we argue that while secular considerations of economic rationality colour how Christians select the recipients of their giving, these practical concerns are also spiritualized and incorporated into their logic of Christian morality.

**Keywords:** religious giving; Christianity; technology of the self; moral economy; Christian morality

## 1. Introduction

The virtues of compassion and caring for others are overarching moral principles being commonly advocated by major world religions. Many religious scriptures explicitly prescribe giving and charity as a religious obligation. For instance, the idea of 'dana' is found in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, prompting believers to carry out charitable acts (Heim 2004). In Islam, 'Zakat' is one of the foundational pillars in religious teaching, which can be understood as an obligatory gift all Muslims should make from their wealth beyond the basic necessities (Queen 1996, p. 47). In Christianity, giving occupies a central role in the practice of faith. For years, tithing—in a simple term, the giving of 10% of one's income—has been an institutional form of giving Christians were expected to give to the church[1]. Beyond the church setting, Christians are also guided by Biblical teaching to engage in giving acts in everyday life. For instance, as the holy text teaches, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25: 40) Caring acts are interpreted as serving God directly. These giving acts are important to the faith-driven individuals not just for fulfilling their inner religious duties; they also serve as a crucial pathway for their civic engagement and contribution to the broader society (e.g., Wuthnow 1999; Putnam 2000; Becker and Dhingra 2001).

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[1]   For a quick historical review of the development of tithing, one can consult Quiggle (2009).

In this study, an anthropological analysis is carried out to explore how individual Christians in Hong Kong make sense of and practice external giving. In our study, 'external giving' refers to donations of money, time, and other resources to non-church, non-religious entities such as the NGOs and individuals in needs. While some scholars might specifically coin it as 'secular giving' (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011, p. 7), we deliberately select the term 'external giving' to blur the sacred–secular distinction. As we will see in Section 3.2, external giving is ambiguously defined by our informants. Some informants regard giving to non-Christian secular charitable groups as similar to giving to church although some others differentiate between secular and Christian giving. In this paper, we define 'external giving' according to our informants' perspective.

The data discussed in this paper is part of a bigger research project on Christian giving. An ethnographic case study of a local community church in Hong Kong called the Church of Benevolence (a pseudonym)[2] was conducted. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 50 church members/regular attendants were conducted between 2015 and 2018. There were 23 male informants and 27 female informants, who were aged between 18 and 74. These informants consisted of general lay members, lay leaders, and the pastoral staff. As a member of the church, Steve Cheung, through interviews and participant-observation, builds strong rapport with the informants and collect valuable data[3]. One key issue concerns how and why informants engage in giving and volunteering beyond their own church. Interview questions were directed towards informants' perception and practices of giving beyond their church[4] were probed during the interviews.

In the following, we will first begin with a brief literature review of the relationship between religion and external giving. As we will see, a handful of literature has shown a positive relationship between the two, and many of these quantitative studies have contributed to our understanding of the determinants of the giving. Moreover, this academic field is dominated by scholarly studies on giving in the Western Christian context. Yet, researches on individual Christians' engagement and perspectives on external giving in a region where Christianity is not the dominant religion—like the case in Hong Kong—are relatively scarce. It is hoped that this paper will provide relevant data and discussion to fill the gaps in the literature. Next, we will proceed forward to present and discuss how our Christian informants, from their emic perspective, discursively understand and practice external giving. Three key findings will be brought up and elaborated: First, how Christians make and transform their Christian selves through external giving; second, how they cognitively and behaviourally distinguish between church giving and external giving; and third, how it impacts their selection of the target groups for their giving. Drawing upon all these findings, we will attempt an analysis on our understanding of the complexity that surrounds the nature and essence of Christian giving, especially on external giving.

## 2. Approaching Religion and External Giving

The topic of giving has attracted attention among scholars in different fields like philanthropic studies (Hodgkinson et al. 1996) and sociology of religion where an entire volume is devoted to religious philanthropy in *Review of Religious Research* in 1994. Scores of academic literature have discussed how different dimensions of religiosity have encouraged believers to engage in religious giving (Lincoln et al. 2008). At the same time, studies have also shown a positive correlation between external giving and religiosity, particularly between external giving and religious attendance and membership (Jackson et al. 1995; Bekkers and Schuyt 2008; Helms and Thornton 2012; Forbes and Zampelli 2013; and Bekkers

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[2]    This Church is a small Baptist church located at a kindergarten in a public housing estate in Hong Kong. By 2017, it has 140 registered members, with an average weekly attendance of 110 people.

[3]    All quotes from the informants appeared in this paper are found in Cheung's PhD thesis. See Cheung (2019), chp. 7 ("Giving beyond the Church").

[4]    Scholars have reminded us that we have to make separated analysis between religious and non-religious giving, hinting that the determinants of these two kinds of giving are different (e.g., Kitchen 1992; Chan and Lee 2016).

and Wiepking 2011).[5] These researches provide rich statistical data to understand the correlates and determinants of the giving acts from a quantitative perspective. In our paper, we explore religious and external giving from a qualitative perspective by studying the subjective experiences and rationale of giving of individual givers. Hence, this current study hopes to fill this missing puzzle.

One key issue in this paper explores the correlation between external giving and volunteerism. There are two key theoretical perspectives which guide our understanding of the relationship between religion and volunteerism (Becker and Dhingra 2001; Ruiter and Graaf 2006; Van Tienen et al. 2011; Yeung 2018). One perspective is the 'network explanation theory', which highlights how external social contacts and ties among believers, sometimes facilitated by the church organizations, could trigger and increase their likelihood to participate in volunteerism. For instance, church attendants learn from their fellow church members about specific voluntary organizations and their volunteering opportunities. A second perspective is a value-orientation approach, which focuses on the role of beliefs and values in shaping the individuals. This perspective argues the subtle internalization of religious values of altruistic and pro-social practices that encourages individual volunteering. As Wuthnow (1991, p. 159) finds, Christian informants routinely recount specific Biblical stories like the Parable of Good Samaritan, rather than theological reasons, to account for their charitable actions. Furthermore, as Son and Wilson (2012) suggest, the normative internalization of these prosocial religious messages bring believers a moral obligation and identity to serve as volunteers.

At present, the literature on religion and giving is very much dominated by studies on the European and, in particular, American Christian scenes (Lincoln et al. 2008). There are a growing number of academic endeavours to extend this research field to the other cultures like Chinese societies where Christianity is rapidly gaining grounds. Among this pool of scholarship, there are two key lines of studies. The literature that follow the quantitative tradition tends to examine the correlates between different dimensions of religiosity (taken into consideration Eastern religions like Buddhism, Taoism, and popular religion), the level of giving and some other factors. For instance, Chang's (2005) examination on the data of the Survey of Social Development Trends shows a positive connection between age and both religious and charitable monetary giving in Taiwan. More recently, Terazawa's (2015) analysis on the data from the Taiwan Social Change Survey suggests that different kinds of religiosity in Taiwan have different effects on religious and secular volunteering, with religious participation having a stronger impact on religious volunteering but not secular volunteering. At the same time, spiritual behaviours like practicing yoga and reading spiritual books appear to be powerful determinants for both religious and secular volunteering. Another line of literature probes at the dynamic interaction between the religious organization, individual believers, and even the state, through the lens of religious volunteerism. In her study on religious charity in China, drawing from the experience of a Catholic and a Buddhist charitable group, respectively, McCarthy (2013) touches upon how these groups cooperate with the state in organizing social services and mobilizing their volunteers to serve the society, while at the same time repurposes the state for religious ends. In Taiwan, a number of studies on socially engaged Buddhism, notably on religious charity groups such as Tzu Chi association, have open dialogue and help us understand how religious volunteers (especially female volunteers) practice Buddhist teaching of compassion through their services. This process not only effects spiritual transformation and empowerment of these Buddhists, but also contributes to the development of its unique organization structure (Huang 2009; O'Neill 2010; Yao 2012).

In our current discussion, we seek to explore how Christians in Hong Kong understand and practice external giving. Theoretically, we adopt the value-orientation track to examine how informants' subjective interpretation and reflection of the Christian teaching affect their giving behaviours. However, instead of seeing religious teaching simply as an independent factor motivating believers to take giving

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[5]　　However, a minority of the studies shows counter or ambivalent results over the positive relationship between religiosity and external giving. See Lyons and Nivison-Smith (2006) and Sablosky (2014).

as a religious obligation, we will argue how, inspired by their understanding of religious teaching, external giving serves as a technology for these Christian believers to undergo spiritual transformation and the making of their Christian selves.

## 3. Discussion: Being Christians through External Giving

### 3.1. External Giving and the Christian Self

When it comes to the topic of religion, there is a popular Chinese saying which conveys the meaning that "all religions guide people to be benevolent"[6]. From an essentialist point of view, one might argue that giving is simply a religious duty that every Christian should enact. However, in our findings, as expressed by our informants about their views and experiences on giving to charity, there is no clear articulation between their giving and their faith. Most informants would say that they simply want to help people, particularly the needy. It is only through in-depth probing that we unveil how Christian faith implicitly and subtly affects their giving acts.

Drawing from our data, we argue that there is a linkage between external giving and the making of the Christian self. Here, we borrow the theoretical insight from Michel Foucault's notion of the 'technology of the self'. On the topic of subject and the self, Foucault (1988, 1990) discusses the application of 'technology of the self' by individuals to discipline and transform themselves into desirable ethical subjects. To actualize and become the ethical self, Foucault points out the importance of 'ethical work', which is the technology applied by individuals voluntarily to "transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (Foucault 1990, pp. 10–11). This notion offers us a useful entry point to analyse the way religious practitioners construct themselves into spiritual subjects. For instance, Palmer and Siegler (2017) show how Daoist practitioners apply technologies like qigong in their cultivation of their Daoist selves. In Christian traditions, there are different technologies, such as doing prayers and reading the Bible, for individuals to nurture their selves. The key to this making of Christian selves is the renunciation of one's ordinary self. As Foucault (1988) writes on early Christian asceticism, "your self is a part of the reality you have to renounce in order to get access to another level of reality." (p. 35). In the current study, we see giving as a specific kind of technology for Christian believers to nurture and realize their Christian selves. In doing the giving, they attempt to transform from their ordinary selves to selves charged with sacred qualities.

We begin with the discursive account offered by informant Aaron on his view over donation. He states,

> "Donating to the poor is one of the basic teachings God gives to humans. Throughout the Bible, God wants those who are rich and abundant to help the poor. The former should never exploit the latter. In the Old Testament, like in the Book of Ruth, it is suggested that during harvest time, some grain should be left over for the poor people to pick up. . . . . . . Moreover, I don't think that I am 'giving alms' to the poor, nor I am 'donating' and 'helping' them. I simply think that providing for the poor is necessary because God (Jesus) also does so. He does not need humans for His existence, but He kindly sends us His son. Likewise, God does not need you to help the poor. He could offer His providence through whatever means."

From Aaron's quote, we see the complex emotions that govern Aaron's understanding of donation and his understanding of the Biblical teaching. Two issues should be noted. First, Aaron does not see donating to the poor simply as a religious command that he needs to follow. This is because he believes that God does not really need this particular 'him' to do the good work. In short, there is no compulsion for him to deliver the act of giving. However, as Christian, he emulates the characteristics

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[6]    In Chinese, "所有宗教都是人向善的" *Suoyou zongjiao dou shi dao ren xiang shan de.*

of the compassionate Christ and enacts Christ compassion to the needy. In other words, giving becomes an important aspect that enables Aaron to effect a moral transformation in alignment with the self of Christ. This view on donation and volunteering is widely shared by a sizeable number of informants who mentioned that they are doing these giving "with the love of Christ" (著基督的 *daizhe jidu de ai*). They cognitively see that their giving is not charged with the compassion out of their humanly selves. Rather, it is the transformed Christian-imbued moral self that propels them to serve the needy with the love of Christ. Another informant, Joseph, makes clear reference to a Biblical teaching that suggests that Christians should imitate Christ to become a humble servant in voluntary services[7].

The second insight that we draw from Aaron's account is the relationship between the donor and recipient. Under a normal situation, practically and materially speaking, the donor, because of wealth, is materially superior to the recipient, thereby underlying a superior status of the donor. However, in this instance of religious giving, and at least in a discursive sense, Aaron's denial of 'giving alms'/ 'donating'/ 'helping' is an attempt to dissolve this superior-needy hierarchy. This line of logic is more expressively articulated by informants Naomi and Priscilla.

Naomi is a middle-aged woman with modest means and living in a public housing estate. For a period of time, she was not a full-time worker and had to take care of her dependent children. It was a period of financial hardship for her. Nevertheless, during this hard time, she continued to provide financial assistance to a widow friend in her home-town in Mainland China. This informal giving persisted for almost two decades. Here, even though Naomi had limited resources, she continued to be willing to share them with her friend in need. She shared with us her motivation to give as below:

"I don't give simply because of my personal relationship with her. I do have a strong connection with her and her father. But there is something more: she is truly in great need. She once got married and does not have children to take care of her. And I know that she continuously needs money to receive treatments for her chronic diseases. If I stop aiding her, she will die. In Bible, it is said that we need to offer help especially to orphans and widowed. Now you see someone who is in great need. Do you just tell her to go in peace but not giving her any substantial help? … … Actually, I do not just see her as a 'sister' (This lady is a Christian as well), but an important person in God. I don't know why, but I feel that I am obliged to help her even though my own economic condition is not particularly well. It is not just a commitment I have towards a specific lady, but I look at the issue from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. Do you remember Prophet Elijah, who once helped a poor widow in Sidon (a city outside Israel)[8]? Actually, in Israel there were also a lot of widows. Why did God send Elijah to pastor a widow outside home? I thank God for putting me in a similar situation—I am living in Hong Kong, a free and affluent city, and I have a chance to help a widow in Mainland China. I know God has His plan on me as well."

In Naomi's account, she finds a parallel between her and a Biblical character, Elijah. She interprets her giving in the context of God's plan. God puts everyone in a certain position with His own plan, and she is positioned in a similar setting as Elijah faced. Eventually, to respond to God's higher plan, she does the similar giving act as Elijah did, even though she is also facing her own financial problems. It is a deep sense of moral commitment in her heart, her moral self, that moves her to give. Alongside with this way of reasoning, she has an interesting perspective on the relationship between her and the widow friend. While materially she appears to be better endowed, spiritually she finds herself and the widow largely on equal footing. She viewed their different status as part of God's plan. Symbolically, she even recognizes this widow friend not just as a 'sister', but an 'important person in God'. Here, we see how the power hierarchy between the giver and the recipient is transcended.

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[7]    The exacting teaching is found in Mark 10:45. The general idea is that Jesus Christ comes to the world to serve, not to be served.

[8]    See 1 Kings, Chapter 17 in Bible for reference.

One might cast a doubt that Naomi's case is not strongly evident—after all, the aiding target is a friend she personally knows of, and it might be easy for her to downplay the giver-recipient hierarchy. Here, we might also consider Priscilla's reflection on her volunteering experience. She said,

> "In practice, I am 'helping' the others, so to speak. But I try to avoid using this term in order to prevent myself from turning to be arrogant. I don't want to present to the recipients that I am the one with prowess to help, and the recipients are the powerless. . . . . . . I firmly hold that God has His plan in creating every one of us. Our existence bears its intrinsic value, and this value is originated from God's love. The people in need are located (by Him) at a disadvantaged position. And we, being provided with abilities, are also placed to be living with them in the same time and space, the same community. ...... Actually, giving what we have to them is a blessing to us. At the same time, it is also a way to respond to His love."

Once again, Priscilla's account downplays the idea of 'helping' and neutralizes the power relationship between her and the people she aids. Similar to Naomi, she conceptualizes a transcendental moral community structure: While there is a real material and social division between people, such distinction is set under God's plan, with every position, including the subordinated one, containing its own value. Under God's love, interaction between people in different positions is charged with a moral quality. What is even more remarkable is that, instead of seeing giving as a deprivation act which decreases her possession, Priscilla actually perceives a gain of blessing from it. In her study on female participation in Buddhist volunteerism in Taiwan, Kuah (2015) sheds light on how the ideology of gratitude (感恩 *ganen*) motivates and guides these volunteers to perform compassion. Essentially, they have to show gratitude to those serving targets who offer them the chance to provide assistance. From their perspective, the significance of their giving is not just about addressing the recipients' needs, but more about how their own spiritual need is addressed when recipients give them the chance to volunteer. Here, in Christian's view on external giving, as exemplified by Priscilla, we can also see that giving actually offers believers an occasion to receive God's blessing. By sharing their material richness to the needy, Christians fill their spiritual poverty with God's provision.

### 3.2. External Giving versus Church Giving

The above sub-section outlined how, in principle, Christians undergo spiritual transformation through external giving. The subject matter concerns more about how individuals make their inner Christian selves and relate their selves with others. We might want to further probe how they outwardly perform and make decisions on external giving. To do so, one meaningful step is to first unpack how Christians understand the nature of external giving. In the course of our research, we discover that our informants adopt a deliberate ambiguous and multi-layered viewpoint to make sense of external giving that is sharply in contrast with a clear and definite understanding of church giving (i.e., giving inside the church).

In the discussion on religion and giving, the relevant literature focuses on the relationship between religious giving and secular giving. In some quantitative studies, it was found that religious participation has motivated believers to do BOTH religious giving and secular giving. In other words, the relationship between these two types of giving could be seen as complementary and hence is not a zero-sum one (e.g., Clain and Zech 1999; Nemeth and Luidens 2003; Hill and Vaidyanathan 2011). Yet, other studies have demonstrated that the generosity of believers on giving is largely confined to donations within churches, instead of spilling over to secular groups (Eckel and Grossman 2004). There are also studies that revealed competition between religious volunteering and secular volunteering although scholars such as Wilson and Janoski (1995) and Campbell and Yonish (2003) have highlighted that active religious participants tend to spend less time on secular volunteering. In these studies, the classification of religious giving/volunteering and secular giving/volunteering is based on the target groups (i.e., religious or secular groups) where the giving goes to. An emic perspective on how

Christians cognitively and discursively distinguish their giving to the church from giving to secular charitable groups has been overlooked.

From the emic perspective, our informants have qualitatively differentiated between these two kinds of giving. First, our informants use different terminologies to demarcate these giving. In particular, they have two specific emic terms to refer to giving to church. The term 'Offering' (奉献 *fengxian*) is used for monetary offering. This is to differentiate from the general term 'donation' (捐钱 *juan qian*). 'Serving' (事奉 *shifeng*) refers to the provision of time and effort to the church. This is in contrast to the general idea of 'volunteering' (义工 *yigong*)[9]. In pronouncing 'Offering' and 'Serving', the individuals often refer to giving to the church. In this sense, the church as a site is the destination for the purpose of Offering and Serving. However, there is also a variation to this where some lay members use these two terms of offering and serving beyond the church confines and for external giving purposes. In this sense, there is a blurring of the line between church giving and external giving. Aaron's view on Offering and donation provides a good illustration of this blurring boundary:

> "In Bible, it is said clearly that you need to take care of someone who is in a disadvantaged position. God gives us talent to spend the money wisely to assist the needy. It is not always the Christian groups which can do well in providing to them. For instance, my family regularly gives to United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), a non-Christian group, because we trust that they (the organization) can offer help to the refugee. . . . . . . In a sense, we also consider our donation as Offering because it is only with God's provision on us and His teaching, so that we can express our love to the broader society and the needy."

From Aaron's remark, it is clear that he sees external giving as part of his Serving and Offering to God. In addition, specifically, external giving (donation) is an essential act in the making and actualization of his Christian self. Aaron stresses the talent provided by God as opposed to individually acquired talent. In his own belief, the act of donation is a process of serving that facilitates the activation and enactment of this gifted talent from God and which helps to shape the inner quality of his Christian selves. In his view, it is the motive of giving that defines what constitutes religious or secular external giving. When the act of external giving is made in the name of religious or perceived as a religious cause, then, it is religious giving even though it is made to a secular charity. To him and his group of Christians, such external giving regarded as a direct enactment of faith and gifted talent from God.

Furthermore, the meanings and importance attached to church giving and external giving are influenced by various multi-layered perceptions of the lay Christians. This conceptual distinction also has an obvious consequence over the way they practice giving. In the following, we look at the discursive and reflective accounts given by three informants—namely Esther, Priscilla, and Daniel, i.e., how they see the differences between giving within (Offering and Serving) and outside (donation and volunteering) the church.

> Esther: "I think Offering is more essential than donation. Actually, I am not giving to the church organization per se—not giving to the people and the staff there, but I am Offering my very best to God. Of course, then, giving to God is of paramount importance. It is like an obligation I need to take. But for donation, it is targeted at needy people or organizations. I need to look at the targets and the organizations to judge whether I will donate."

> Priscilla: "To me, Offering is a responsibility I have towards God, as well as towards myself. To God, He is our provider, and we need to respond to Him. Bible also teaches us to do Offering. There is no doubt at all that we need to Offer. To myself, it entails whether we acknowledge that we are Christians. It is a matter of identity. If I consider myself truly as a Christian, I could not just claim that I am a Christian. I have to do certain things that fit

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[9]    In this paper, we write 'Offering' and 'Serving' in capital letters to refer to the emic terms used by the Christian informants.

to that identity correspondingly. I am a Christian, so I Offer and Serve. ... ... However, donation and volunteering are something extra. I find it less imperative to do donation and volunteering than Offering and Serving. The sense of obligation is lower. When I do volunteering work for organizations, I will 'flap my hip and leave'[10] once after I get the task finished. Yet, for Serving at church, I have a higher expectation on myself and want to do it as best as I can."

Daniel: "The messages one shoulders and delivers are different during Serving and for volunteering. When we volunteer, we are spreading the message defined by the organizations. But when we Serve, we Christians are of course spreading the message of Jesus Christ. I am representing Jesus to serve others, but for volunteering, I just help the organization and share my loving-kindness to the needy. ... ... Moreover, you just need to do volunteering out of the capacity you can reach (量力而 *Liangli er wei*). It is not extremely pressing that you have to do it well. However, Serving is of a higher degree of urgency. Even Serving, for instance, for the kids at church is hard and challenging, you will still do so. The feeling is different. Serving bears a sense of mission that I have to accomplish."

At a first glance, one might interpret that, contrary to what we argued in the previous section, these three informants—particularly Priscilla and Daniel—appear to find external giving not directly relevant to their spiritual cultivation, and therefore they might pay less effort into such non-church giving. Here, we would like to clarify that, in Priscilla's and Daniel's comments on external giving, their emphasis is on the specific physical and mundane actions or tasks to be carried out under the instruction of the charitable organizations. To them, these are secular mundane activities that one performs when there is time. Such acts are replaceable. Thus, these acts are considered to be of lesser weight compared to religious acts. However, when it comes to the concrete services for the needy, it is their Christian spirituality that shapes their giving actions. In Priscilla's case, it is her understanding of the Christian logic that propels her actions and with the people she serves. For Daniel's case, he sees his volunteering engagement in an elderly service as providing him an occasion to enact and express Christ's love.

In the above three case examples, we aim to draw attention to how our informants attached different levels of importance in the making of their Christian selves through church giving and external giving. We observe a scaling of the level of spiritualization according to the informants' subjective understanding and performance of church giving vis-a-vis external giving. This is reflected in two aspects. One aspect concerns the destination of the giving. Many informants like Priscilla view church giving as a religious act to respond to God's grace and provision. Other informants like Esther, explicitly or implicitly, see that their church giving goes directly to God, even though their giving is channelled to the church organization. In other words, the church organization is symbolically and cognitively conceived as the direct embodiment of God. As a result, there is a strong sense of moral obligation for them to provide money and time when doing church giving. Among this group of informants, the imperative for doing external giving is not as strong. While external giving also bears religious significance and runs in consistent with Christian teaching on compassion, its target is not directly God Himself but the secular organizations or people in need. In this sense, the destination of external giving is perceived to be less sacred but more human/secular when compared to church giving.

The scaling of the levels of spiritualization is also related to the nature of giving. Many informants expressed different interpretation on the significance of the resources (money and volunteering tasks) involved in the two kinds of giving. As a consequence, they also hold different attitudes when practicing giving—that of divine duty or secular duty. For instance, both Priscilla and Daniel regarded

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[10] 'Flap one's hip and leave' is a direct translation from a Cantonese slang 拍拍柚就走 said by Priscilla, which means that one can leave easily without any consequence.

giving money and time to the church as a direct involvement in God's holy work, hence it is divine duty. It therefore requires the believers to have full commitment and meticulous attitude and performance in the delivery of sacred giving. When it comes to external giving and volunteering, it is considered as secular duty and is seen as supplemental to the core divine duty. For secular duty, the informants have imposed fewer self-demand and self-expectation on themselves in performing the tasks.

Given that external giving is sometimes seen as non-divine duty, it carries a lower degree of urgency and hence, provides more flexibility for individual believers to decide on whether they should do it, and, if affirmative, how they should give. Yet, even when external giving is considered as divine duty (e.g., utilizing the wealth and talent gifted from God to serve the poor), the making of the Christian self is sometimes also coloured by secular reflexivity where pragmatic concerns and calculation (e.g., not exceeding one's normal capacity of effort) are often taken into account. The emic contrast on church giving and external giving as divine and secular duty enables us to get a better sense of how Christians live out their sacred and profane selves through external giving and the complexity that surrounds the religious–secular logic of giving.

### 3.3. Where Does External Giving Go to?

In the following sub-section, we will present how Christians make their decision on external giving. In the selection of the charitable organisations of their external giving, personal consideration and knowledge of the charitable organisations are two important criteria. For instance, informant Ruth provided a personal reason for making a regular donation to Orbis, an international NGO dedicated to sight-saving. She accounted it to the experience of one of her family members who got a sight illness, saying that she would like to offer assistance to people who also suffer from similar problems.

Another selection criterion concerns the informant's knowledge on the charitable organizations. Informants often look at how the charitable organisations operate, particularly the financial accountability and transparency of the charitable organizations. They will be willing to provide external giving to those with solid integrity and good reputation in using the resource and avoid giving to organizations that incurred huge administrative costs. Another key concern is the effectiveness of the organization in managing and channelling the resources to help the needy. Here is a crucial note: While such secular considerations are less likely to be considered in church giving, the informants made conscious attempts to understand the operation of the charitable organization when making external giving. For an illustration, Sarah's view over Offering and donation is a remarkable one.

> "My impression on Offering is that we can do it in a free-handed way, and somehow after we give to the church, we generally don't express a strong care on how the people (leaders at church) spend the money. But donation is different. Before I make my donation decision, I will screen and get information from my friends and others over how well the organizations use the money. I can't stand if the organization is doing badly in administration and I will not donate to it. . . . . . . The difference here is on the people: People at church are not professional. They are just volunteers in the church organization. Even though there is a few Serving church members who are full-time staff working in the financial division in the business world, church finance is different from the type of finance they are good at. However, people in those charity organizations are hired staff and are supposed to be professional! They should be more knowledgeable and skilful in managing money."

Informants like Sarah see their giving to the church as divine duty and hence absolute giving. Therefore, secular concern over how well the church uses the money is not a primary concern of their contribution to the church. However, external giving is secular duty and hence, informants have a higher expectation over the effectiveness and accountability of the receiving organizations in managing their giving. While the informants differentiate between these two types of duties, it is evident that the performances of both types of duties are important to them. As such, external giving is an important part of the giving among Christians.

This line of inner logic over external giving provides us with a clue to understand a piece of interesting finding: Christian charitable groups might not be particularly preferred by our informants when deciding their donation and volunteering. Scholars working on the domain of social identity have studied and generally supported the idea of in-group favouritism (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 1986). On the field of religious and secular giving, Wuthnow (1999) contends that religious exclusiveness encourages people to volunteer for their own religious groups; and such motivation might not extend to a broader context. Schnable (2014) also concludes that aid-organizations with religious background enjoy the advantage in raising funds from people of their corresponding religious faith. Sargeant and Shang (2017, p. 96) suggest that charity with 'Christian' label could bring a higher level of confidence to Christian donors because of perceived better management. Yet, some scholars cautiously remind us that in-group favouritism on giving is not always held in practice. In her writing on welfare and sectarianism in Lebanon, Cammett (2014) observes that sometimes sectarian faith groups make a deliberate attempt to distribute welfare goods to members of out-groups. She identifies factors such as the selection of political strategy and the degree of intrasect competition to account for the likelihood of a sectarian group to engage actively in welfare provision to out-group members. Our findings also show a complicated picture on how in-group favouritism influences the informants' decisions on external giving. On the one hand, supports for the Christian-preference are detected. Many informants gave a positive evaluation on 'Christian charity' as they view Christian groups to be more trustworthy. One informant, Claudia, commented that as these Christian run groups are under sacred monitoring and hence would do their best as they see their actions to be accountable to God. This sense of 'sacred monitoring' and doing the religious duty assures her of her choice in supporting these groups.

On the other hand, some informants remarked that the Christian identity of the charitable groups might not be extremely appealing to them. To some informants, the ultimate decision over the selection of the organization is the management and effectiveness of the charitable organizations in using the resources to serve their charitable cause. Paul's critical remark serves as a nice illustration.

> "In principle, we express our faith in every aspect of human life. Donation and volunteering could also be one aspect. However, we cannot say that donation and volunteering is the only path we need to take in expressing our faith. … … Sometimes, we humans tend to pay unnatural and unnecessary effort to manifest our faith in our life. When I donate, I will not concern whether the organization is a Christian group or not. Even if it is a Christian group working on evangelical mission and spreading Gospel, it will not be appealing to me. Unless the specific target group or community I am eager to donate is only run by a Christian group, I will not have a preference donating to a Christian group. When I donate, I only consider with money—how well the group manages the money, how well it spends the money on the needy. Christian groups are not necessarily good at doing this. They might get into different kinds of troubles. They might perform badly financially. Eventually, it is really 'money'. We will judge from the angle of money to determine where we donate the money. Faith is not the criterion when we make donation. If it is about faith, then we can just give the money to the church."

Joseph also noted from his own volunteering experience that, in some scenarios, Christian groups might not be very effective in providing the services. He is a leader of a singing volunteering team, which often receives invitations from different organizations to hold singing performances. He finds it quite challenging to work with Christian groups. He said,

> "Of course, it is good if we can serve these Christian groups. But it is extremely hard … … (He then sighed.) There is one thing: the songs we sing (popular songs or Cantonese opera) do not fit Christian groups. 'Oh, these songs are not good. Better to sing hymns!' They probably say. … … It is not us who don't want to sing the hymns, but then many non-believers (audience) actually don't know what you are singing!"

Beyond the concern that Christian groups might not be competent in providing effective services and aid to the needy, one informant, Phoebe, added that she deliberately donates money to non-Christian secular groups. Her rationale, paradoxically, has to do with her Christian faith and mission.

> "I deliberately pick non-Christian groups to give. I expect myself to respond to God, and when I take part in donation or volunteering, I intend to spread the Gospel and God's love outward. Of course, the organizations do not know I am a Christian. But I have such expectation. . . . . . . Perhaps it is more visible in volunteering: when you do it sincerely, seeking to bring God's love to others, the people can see and feel it. Just like what Jesus teaches, we need to do things on others, so that they know we are Jesus' followers. In this way, Gospel is spread out. . . . . . . Perhaps people looking at my donation do not know that I am spreading the Gospel, but at least God knows I am doing so. After I do my part, God has His methods to let himself visible to those people."

The above finding that Christian charitable groups might not always be preferred by our informants actually runs parallel to the previous discussion on the making of Christian selves through external giving. The essence of the Christian self is not so much about following Christian teaching commands at face value or embracing Christian labels in name. Rather, it is the inner transformation of the selves, taking up and enacting the spiritual qualities, that counts. Recapping a sentence said by informant Aaron earlier, "God gives us talent to spend the money wisely to assist the needy." In doing external giving, individual believers utilize and activate God's gifted talent, using it in a 'wise' way to benefit the needy. In this case, external giving embodies secular reflexivity within an expanded space that allows Christians to live out their sacred selves with different practical and rational calculation and consideration. It is this integration of divine duty and secular duty as demonstrated in the act of giving that transforms the individual Christian into a Christian sacred self.

## 4. Analysis and Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have presented a case study of the Hong Kong Christians' subjective understanding and practices on external giving and the complexity that surrounds this act of external giving. From a scholarly viewpoint, this paper hopes that the findings from our specific case study of a Hong Kong Christian community will enrich our understanding on the subject matter of Christian giving, specifically external giving.

One key idea highlighted is the act of giving, which constitutes a central part of the religious life for individual believers that enables them to live out their faith and become truly Christians. In the existing scholarship on the subject, scholars generally adopt a rational choice analysis on giving (Lincoln et al. 2008), seeing it as a rational and economic transaction undertaken by believers in exchange for expected returns (Hoge 1995, p. 56), such as afterlife-utility as well as personal fame and social reputation in this material world. Without rejecting this line of arguments, the data from this study inform us of another important perspective to religious (Christian) giving. We argue that giving should not simply be understood as a rational decision made by Christians to fulfil their religious duties or pursue external rewards. Giving should be viewed as a dynamic and transformative act. Through giving, individual believers reflect upon and enact their sacred selves. In this sense, giving can be seen as, in Foucauldian language, a 'technology of the self' applied by Christians to engage in their self-making project. They are not compelled by any religious authority to do the giving, but, with their internalization and understanding of Christian morality, they actively take up giving as a technology to activate and transform their selves. Along this line of argument, then, the question to be pondered is not directly concerning whether or not individual believers make a giving, or what the determinants of giving are. Instead, we need to explore how the self is transformed through giving and, correspondingly, how the practice of giving is shaped within this process of self-transformation.

There are two important aspects of the self-transformation process. On the one hand, in doing giving, Christians align their selves with God. At a discourse or an ideal level, they acknowledge

that giving is not simply about expressing and utilizing one's own effort and wisdom to do goodness. Although we highlight that there is a relatively lesser degree of spiritualization on external giving when compared to church giving, they also attach transcendental meaning on their external giving, viewing their actions as tantamount to the work of Jesus Christ as Christ's love to the needy. Likewise, they viewed their actions as making good use of the talent given by God, hence their response to God's grace. In the playing out of the sacred self, they viewed themselves and the recipients of their giving as of equal standing. In this sense, they attempt to transcend the material superiority and class hierarchy between themselves and the recipients. They see giving as a divine duty to God and the recipients as participants who offer them a chance to perform God's calling to do goods to others, hence fulfilling their inner spiritualism.

From a broader perspective, Christian giving not only contribute to the making of individual sacred selves, importantly, it also contributes to the construction of a sacred moral economy with God, Christian givers and the recipients of the giving as three key players in a tripartite relationship. In his book *Ritual and its Consequences*, Seligman (2008) argues that religion and rituals contribute to the making of 'make-believe' or a subjunctive world. Their discussion hints to how non-human agents like God take part in the believers' subjunctive world and shape their concrete actions, which bring real consequences on their social world. Although God may not be seen as a concrete social actor, we can see how, from the believers' point of view, God is imagined as an actor they try to respond and emulate through their giving to real human subjects of the needy recipients. In other words, the symbolic connection between God and believers is channelled by the concrete flow of giving between believers and the recipients.

Within the matrix of the moral economy, the social relationship between different actors is not so much governed by economic forces, but more by moral norms and expectations (Booth 1994), which could transcend the economic reality. This could be seen in the way Christians relate themselves with the recipients in external giving. In principle, Christian givers highlight the moral and spiritual equality between them and the recipients of their giving, as they are all children of God. Moreover, instead of seeing the recipients having a material need for receiving the giving, arguably it is the Christian givers who have a greater spiritual need to do giving. More scholarly endeavours could be made to reflect upon the conceptualization of 'needs' in future research on Christian giving, as well as on the broader issue of religious giving.

One final point to note concerns the significance of Christian morality and Christian ethic in motivating and guiding believers to engage in giving and doing it in a Christian way. Under Christian ethic, giving is not seen and enacted as a self-fulfilment of the ego, but a realization that one's self is part of God's moral order and is under constant divine moulding and guidance. At the same time, individual Christians also make their giving decision based on deep-rooted values such as economic rationality and effectiveness maximization of our modern secular world. Their selection choice of the charity organisations is a rational choice decision where trust, organisational effectiveness, and integrity are important characteristics that feature in their decision-making and acts of giving. It is thus possible to argue that there are two forces at work here, that of Christian ethics and secular ethics, with each playing complementary and supplementary roles to the other. This organic integration of sacred act of giving with secular considerations prompts us to reflect upon the Durkheimian tradition in seeing sacred-profane division as an essence to religious lives. In his review and discussion on the concept of secularization, Casanova (2006) remarks that "the religious and the secular are inextricably bound together and mutually condition each other" (p. 10). In our case study, we see a dynamic interplay between the sacred and the secular forces surrounding external giving. In this way, we see a 'sacralization of the secular' and at the same time 'secularization of the sacred'.

Finally, in the modern era, many reflexive believers of different religions do not just confine their expressions and practices of religiosity within the sacred places and institutions. Their faith is expressed and practiced on different occasions in everyday lives. From Max Weber's (1992) discussion on inner-worldly asceticism, to the more contemporary discussion on everyday religion (Ammerman

2007), scholars have long paid attention to how religious followers express and practice their faith in everyday secular life. Thus, in interrogating Christian giving, it is imperative that we explore giving at church and outside of it. It is through interrogating and understanding the multifaceted and multi-layered expressions and meanings that the individual Christians adhered to and embraced in their act of giving that we could fully comprehend the quest for enacting their divine and secular duty as they seek to follow the Christian logic of giving and transform their mundane secular self into the sacred self.

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