

An Interreligious Funeral For a Taiwanese Centenarian and the Mystery of Useless Suffering

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Abstract

Interreligious ritual and Christian preaching within it often devolve into generic theological expression. Liturgical attempts to share hospitality, unity-in-difference, and love of God end up clouding the distinctive and illuminating features of neighboring religious traditions and shrouding Christian particularity. Yet even when efforts falter to convey the love of God and neighbor with theological clarity, identifiable holiness that outshines human ingenuity can still pierce through the most opaque of prayers, ritual, and homiletic practices. In the essay below, the author engages Tom Long, Don Seaman, and John McClure, with focus upon the Levinasian idea of “useless suffering,” to explore how messianic healing became believable in the difficulties and insufficiencies of his Asian American Buddhist grandfather’s funeral and plausible for other contexts of mourning more tragic and profound.

A California Case Study

In March, 2010, my mother called with the news of my grandfather’s passing as I made my way to the baggage claim after returning from week-long visit to his hospital bedside on the West Coast. He had burned himself while drawing a bath and died only a few weeks after due to heart failure. Born in China, and later a small-business owner in Taiwan, he spent the last 35 years of his life in San Jose, California, within blocks of his children and their families. Fluent in both Taiwanese Hokkien and Mandarin Chinese, his English phrases consisted of “Hello,” “Bye Bye” and “Thank you.” He died at the age of 100.

After returning to my apartment, I reserved a flight for the following day, and began researching Taiwanese funerary rites. I had little time before my morning departure. Books and articles barely helped. Against all of my academic inclinations, YouTube videos of Taiwanese funeral proceedings did. I discovered that Taiwanese funerals begin with a 7-day viewing period of the body. The memorializing can extend to sets of 7-day cycles lasting as long as 49 days. Mourners and attending monks traditionally dress in white. Oblations include eating, percussive music and singing, as well as spoken words delivered in honor of the deceased.¹ The footage of strangers became video tutorials and surprising visual points of departure for crafting some kind of service that balanced varying cultural interests.² And I had to act fast.

¹ For example video resources for Taiwanese funerary rites, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KR-dkyO05pE> and <http://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~dmgildow/1.2.html>, accessed September 15, 2014.

² For a more complete and yet also concise description of the complexities involved in planning a funeral service for a Taiwanese immigrant with Christian and Buddhist family members, see Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America : Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 88–89.

In less than forty-eight hours, I would as a United Methodist Elder preside at my culturally Buddhist grandfather's funeral service in an evangelical reformed sanctuary recommended by the Carmelite hospice that cared for him. The plan of action would require what Thomas G. Long describes as "bold" "pastoral improvisation" as found in his reflections upon the intricacies of a Hmong Christian funeral service for Nhia Her Lo at First Covenant Church of St. Paul, Minnesota.³ In Long's account, the Lo family is active in their congregation. Yet because my family had no direct connection to the church where the funeral would be held and my grandfather was not Christian, deciding how to improvise became an especially delicate matter. Celebrating my grandfather's life within the promise of Christian resurrection seemed a risky endeavor. The liturgical goods of United Methodism had clear limitations as potential comfort for my grieving Protestant, Buddhist and agnostic relatives and friends of the family. How would I lead the service with theological integrity in the midst of so many cultural and religious variables?

Without time or expertise to recreate or approximate a traditional Taiwanese funeral experience, I decided to go with what I knew and also to make the most of my last minute liturgical guesswork by improvising very modestly. I based the order of worship upon the United Methodist 'Service of Death and Resurrection' and British Methodist funeral liturgy from my time of pastoral service in the United Kingdom.⁴ Within those liturgical parameters, I structured the service in two parts.

The first part (recited in English)—"The Word of Grace," "Greeting," and "Prayer"—marked my identity as an Asian American and Christian presider and rooted the occasion in the promises of Christianity. Part two introduced Buddhist elements by lacing selections from the Amithabha Sutra and the Heart Sutra with a reading from Psalm 23, a canticle based upon Revelation 21. A eulogy then followed from my Uncle Paul. The service concluded with a benediction and a video of sung prayers based upon the Sutras from a monastery in Taiwan (unlisted below). With the exception of the canticle from Revelation, the elements in part two occurred in both English and Mandarin Chinese to honor the different fluencies of my grandfather and the gathered assembly. The video displayed a visual bridge to religiosity in Taiwan from our liturgical occasion in California. I also delivered a brief homily just before my Uncle Paul spoke and extemporaneous words of transition throughout the service (also unlisted).

An Asian American Interreligious Funerary Rite

The Word of Grace

Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of hell and death. Because I live, you shall live also.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them With Singing*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 153. Nhia R. Lo died at the age of 93 and was an admired leader of the Hmong community in St. Paul.

⁴ Methodist Conference (U.K.), *The Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough, England: Methodist Publishing House, 1999), 448-60. And The United Methodist Church (U.S.A.), *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House 1989), 870-75.

Greeting

Family and Friends, we have gathered here to praise God and to witness to our faith as we celebrate the life of **Huann-Ching Chien**
We come together in grief, acknowledging our human loss.
May God grant us grace, that in pain we may find comfort, in sorrow hope, in death resurrection.

Prayer

Eternal God, we praise you for the great company of all those who have finished their course in faith and now rest from their labor.
We praise you for those dear to us whom we name in our hearts before you.
Especially we praise you for **Huann-Ching Chien**, whom you have graciously received into your presence.
To all of these, grant your peace.
Let perpetual light shine upon them; and help us to believe that your presence has lead us through our years, and bring us at last with them into the joy of your home not made with hands but eternal in the heavens. Amen.

Reading from 阿彌陀經 “The Amitabha Sutra”

舍利弗，彼土何故名為極樂？其國眾生，無有眾苦，但受諸，故名極樂。

Now, what do you think, Sariputra: Why is that world called the “Land of Bliss”? Sariputra, physical and mental pain are unknown to the living beings that inhabit the world called the “Land of Bliss”; on the contrary, they only experience conditions of boundless happiness. This is why that world is called the “Land of Bliss.”

Scripture (Psalm 23)

¹〔大衛的詩。〕耶和華是我的牧者，我必不至缺乏。²他使我躺臥在青草地上、領我在可安歇的水邊。³他使我的靈魂甦醒、為自己的名引導我走義路。⁴我雖然行過死蔭的幽谷、也不怕遭害，因為你與我同在，你的杖、你的竿、都安慰我。⁵在我敵人面前、你為我擺設筵席，你用油膏了我的頭、使我的福杯滿溢。⁶我一生一世必有恩惠慈愛隨著我，我且要住在耶和華的殿中、直到永遠。

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;

**Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in
the house of the LORD forever. (KJV)**

Canticle based upon Revelation 21

God shall wipe away all our tears,
And there shall be no more death.
**Mourning, crying, and pain shall cease,
For all former things will pass away.**

We shall hear One speak from the throne:
**“Behold, I make all things new.
I am Alpha and Omega,
The beginning and the end.”**

Our Lord testifies to these things:
“Behold, I am coming soon.”
The grace of the Lord is with us.
Amen. Come, The Spirit says, Come.

A Celebration of Huann-Ching Chien

Paul Chien

Reading from 心經 “The Heart Sutra”

**No ignorance and also no extinction of it,
and so forth until no old age and death
and also no extinction of them.**

**No suffering, no origination,
no stopping, no path, no cognition,
also no attainment with nothing to attain.
The Bodhisattva depends on Prajna Paramita
and the mind is no hindrance;
without any hindrance no fears exist.
Far apart from every perverted view one dwells in Nirvana.**

無無明亦無無明尽

乃至無老死亦無老死尽

無苦集滅道

無智亦無得

以無所得故

菩提薩埵依般若波羅蜜多故

心無罣礙

無罣礙故無有恐怖

遠離一切顛倒無想

究竟涅槃

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Committal follows at the final resting place.

A Reflection Upon Service Hopes

Examining the order of worship, a reader may wonder why I attempted to connect such differing religious and cultural views in the first place. An exclusively United Methodist funerary rite would have glossed over cultural complexities and amounted to theological inhospitality. Inventing a new order of worship without any denominational reference would have obscured my orders and belief in Christianity. Weaving together Methodist liturgical structure with East Asian elements seemed more promising. The resulting pattern of worship risked ritual incoherence and even transgression to serve the context and situation with respect to Christian conviction and connection to the myriad of beliefs espoused by the deceased and assembly.

Long sheds retrospective light here:

Throughout their history, Christians have always done what every other social group has done; figure things out for themselves and construct death practices out of rock from nearby quarries. When someone dies, Christians, like all other humans, look around at the immediate environment and ask: What do we have to do? What seems fitting to do? What do we believe we are summoned to do?⁵

When Long identifies the task of Christian funeral planning with the care of the dead undertaken by every other social group, he expresses a shared vulnerability that is also present in interfaith and interreligious funerary rites. Death unifies human differences and its finality can call us to live into those differences with a shared sense of faith. In a West Coast funeral for my Taiwanese and Buddhist centenarian grandfather, the liturgical blending facilitated a funeral idiomatic for the occasion and characteristic of Christian beliefs. It also grew out of a shared vulnerability that I want to describe as a theodical disquietude.

⁵ Long, *Accompany Them With Singing*, 8.

Don Seeman's "Otherwise than Meaning"

In Don Seeman's "Otherwise than Meaning: On the Generosity of Ritual," Seeman broadly describes theodicy as the "production of ordered meaning in response to catastrophe" and he questions the benefit of understanding ritual as a theodical exercise, one that derives or generates meaning from human suffering.⁶ He points to Clifford Geertz in "Religion as a Cultural System" from *The Interpretation of Cultures* and Max Weber in *Sociology of Religion* as intellectually responsible for wide association of religious experience with theodicy (endeavoring to make sense out of suffering). According to Seeman, Geertz positions ritual practice (which includes liturgical acts and preaching) as meaning-making exercise. Ritual practices operate as "embodied symbol systems." They have a hermeneutic quality to them as they cohere "the world lived and imagined" according to religious belief in order to make suffering more bearable.⁷ Thus, a funeral makes suffering sufferable.

Seeman acknowledges that Weber's account of religious practices differs from Geertz. Yet like Geertz, Weber understands the purpose of ritual practices as providing orientation toward the expression of meaning. For Seeman, Weber sees ritual practice as a concrete representation of an interior analytic, as a sign of a believer's "inner reality."⁸ Ritual practices provide a set of actions through which participants can gauge salvation with regard to level of involvement and thereby give unintelligible interruptions of life – like death and the suffering that surrounds it – "systematic and coherent meaning" in the world. Ritual practices justify suffering.

Reading Seeman homiletically, it becomes perceptible how Weberian and Geertzian understandings of ritual influence authors like Long. In the introduction of *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Long writes, "The purpose of a Christian funeral is to enact the human obligation to care for the dead in such a way that we retell the story of baptism, and if we look hard, we can still see the contours of this understanding of the funeral singing out beneath the confusion of what funerals have become."⁹ A Christian funeral is obliged to punctuate the narrative of baptism in order to generate theological meaning and coherence out of death. Long continues, "While death may feel and look like the world coming apart and life dissolving into meaninglessness, through the lens of the funeral ritual we can see it for what it truly is: a saint moving through the troubled waters into the promised land, a follower of Jesus traveling his same road, from death to resurrection life."¹⁰ Funerals quell the sting of death because they articulate for the deceased and living that God has promised eternal life.

Indeed my grandfather's funeral also began by announcing the promise of resurrection. If cast in a Weberian light the ceremony's start attempts to make sense of

⁶ Don Seeman, "Otherwise than Meaning: On the Generosity of Ritual" in Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist, *Ritual in Its Own Right: Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation*, Pbk. ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 55.

⁷ Seeman quotes from Segal (1999). Ibid., 70.

⁸ Ibid., 58. Here, Seeman also points out the parallel between the arguments regarding ritual espoused in Weber's *The Sociology of Religion* and the Weber's claims about capitalism and its connection to religion in *The Protestant Ethic*.

⁹ Long, *Accompany Them With Singing*, xv.

¹⁰ Ibid., 102.

the occasion. The service culminated with Sutra readings and a screening of evening prayers from Taiwanese cenobites designed to untangle worldly anxiety and move listeners to unshakeable peace. Those additions articulate modes of thought intended to make suffering sufferable if examined according to a Geertzian lens. But was there more happening than theodical response?

For Seeman, the answer is “Yes.” He sees suffering as too profound to find resolution in ritual practices intending to generate meaning out of suffering or to make suffering bearable. Departing from Weber and Geertz, Seeman looks to Levinas, who understands suffering as “useless.” Suffering – like the grieving and unanswered questions of my grandfather’s funeral – evades categories of meaning. Suffering therefore requires more from ritual than a preoccupation with meaning. Ritual practices must recognize the otherness and alterity of pain as an unexplainable and unjustifiable given. Suffering is simply there. Attention to suffering’s inexplicable thereness necessitates an approach to ritual practices as opportunities for collective compassion and healing that puts suffering to an end.

Kalonymos Shapira’s Preaching

Seeman adopts Levinas for a framework to challenge the metaphysical biases of anthropology, specifically with relation to social scientific understandings of theodicy. Yet instead of focusing strictly upon the theory of Levinas, he illustrates his argument by introducing the Holocaust Ghetto writings of Rabbi Kalonymos Shapira (1889-1943), a contemporary of Levinas (1906-1995) who at one time led the largest Talmudic Academy for Hasidism in Warsaw. Shapira also studied with Husserl and Heidegger and maintained a lifelong friendship with Maurice Blanchot. Following the invasion of Poland in 1939 Shapira lost his only son, his daughter-in-law, his brother’s wife (visiting from Palestine at the time) and eventually his mother (from “a broken heart” or complications due to grief). In the face of such unbearable and inexplicable suffering Shapira continued to write “a volume of sermons” weekly in the Warsaw ghetto until his deportation and death in 1943.

An especially trenchant homily Seeman analyzes from Shapira points to the biblical character of Sarah as defying the suggestion that insufferable suffering bears meaning and is bearable. Shapira laments:

It is also possible to suggest that Sarah herself, in taking Isaac’s binding so much to heart that her soul expired, did so for the good of Israel. In order to show God that an Israelite cannot be made to suffer beyond measure, and that even a person who remains alive after his affliction, through God’s mercy, must still lose portions of his vitality, his mind and spirit. What difference does it make to me if I suffer a full or a partial death?

Shapira’s message about ambivalence toward death as derived from the sacrifice of Sarah carries undertones of losing his mother, who notably, was also named Sarah. Seeman also sees in Shapira’s claim a protest against extreme suffering as intelligible and endurable.

Shapira is a preacher who shows that ritual responses must transcend conceptual meaning and release hopes of making suffering sufferable. For Seeman, Shapira’s

unrelenting composition of sermons, sharing food in *tish*, and studying *Torah* even while in captivity continue without regard for reasons and out of more than resolve. For Seeman, Shapira upholds those rituals through the exercise of radical human agency in the midst of human frailty and for the sake of radical fidelity to the community, even when his fortitude seems meaningless or destined for slaughter. In his ritual practices Shapira cares for others despite unbearable suffering and imminent death. His selfless actions transcend theodical understandings that associate ritual practice with meaning-making, and expose them as underestimating the uselessness of suffering and inherently “self-absorbed.”

Indeed, an inter-human dimension drives Shapira’s religious outlook and practice, but that is not all. In a June 27, 1942 *derashah*, Shapira writes, “For this reason everything a Jewish person says or does is, at the level of his inner soul, directed to God. For his soul knows that there is nothing beside Him, that all is divinity; so whatever the soul does or says is directed to him.” Foundationally, what elevates Shapira’s homiletic thinking above metaphysical logic – boiling ultimate meaning down to ontological questions of being – or anthropological reduction – reducing his consistency of ritual practice to theodicy – is not simply the community, but also confrontation with the Divine. In that way Shapira’s actions manifest a mysterious faithfulness harmonious with the deeper theological concern inspiring Long’s understanding of Christian funerary rites, even though Shapira’s ritualizing does not “retell” the story of faith Long understands as primary within and particular to Christian funerals. The theological efficacy of Shapira’s homiletic and ritual acts also challenges the traditional Weberian and Geertzian categories critiqued by Seeman. It cannot be dismissed as a different permutation of meaning-based understanding. Nor can it be subtracted from the Levinasian approach Seeman recommends instead.

An Eschatological Consideration

In *Otherwise Preaching*, John McClure innovates a homiletic based upon the humility and force of a Levinasian ethic for the Other. “Otherwise” preachers become “self-suspicious” and revolt against the tyranny of ego by submitting to “ego-martyrdom.”¹¹ Erasing the self, “otherwise” preachers listen for the theological and cultural wisdom of others and enable the voices of others to speak toward the mysteries and insights of the Infinite. What I want to suggest in closing is that in an interreligious occasion like my grandfather’s funeral, divine giving took place beyond our comprehension.

Of course a theodical pressure admittedly guided rushed efforts to strike a balance between Protestant commitments and limited knowledge of Taiwanese and Buddhist funerary rites. Therefore, the funeral service of my grandfather was no exception to Weberian and Geertzian concerns. A Levinasian inter-human responsibility, however, appeared in our unspoken pact to participate in imperfect ritual practice and commit to caring for one another no matter what transpired.

Furthermore, another generosity spilled over our compassion, efforts, and the ritual practices provided. As we listened, spoke, ritualized, and watched together out of respect, reverence, and confusion, the collective response to useless suffering was taken

¹¹ John McClure, *Otherwise Preaching*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 81–152.

up into tides beyond coherence, meaning, and radical mutual responsibility. We experienced more than the charity of mutual support while the multicultural demands of the circumstances exceeded the ceremonial reach of the actual service. Our powerlessness and inability to produce precisely the right kind of funeral observance, the disorientation and insufficiency of our plural experience, gave way to an inexhaustible benevolence that made up for our liturgical misgivings.

I call that benevolent source and end God. Long elegantly describes the one I mean as “one in history in time,” a Christ whom we recognize and who bears mortal wounds that become transfigured in glory and who still approaches us along an eternal horizon that we can recognize but not fully understand.¹² The uselessness of suffering may outmaneuver meaning and resilience. Nevertheless, the multicultural mourners of my grandfather’s funeral and I ended up in rituals that made clearer the intervention of the divine. The inexplicable thereness of useless suffering confounded us into actions bearing witness to the mysterious presence of an incomprehensible God.

The details of my grandfather’s funeral and Shapira’s remarkable devotion offer limited guidance for those with questions about how to lead faithful interreligious worship with theological integrity or reckon with useless suffering with ritualization strong enough to endure. Lean upon your sense of Christian calling and ecclesial identity, but do not fear including the wisdom, language, and customs from other traditions. In fact, welcome them with trust that even in a foggy pattern of worship, the light of the Holy Spirit can flicker and even shine. Consider YouTube (!) as a liturgical resource because sometimes circumstances do not allow for exhaustive research. Sometimes (and perhaps more often than not) the literature does not convey what seeing a ritual in action can. Realize the limits of making sense out of suffering and seeking meaning to articulate when unintelligible suffering determines the very reality in which our rituals occur.

When we are vexed by the irreconcilable differences living within our own Christian and cultural identities or overwhelmed by the kaleidoscopic dimensions of human diversity that intensify the world in which we live and die with incalculable complexity, we need more from ritual and preaching than what we can possibly devise. When we kill out of irreconcilable differences, religious, cultural, and otherwise, when we pervert ritual practices to such an extent that they produce useless suffering rather than confront it and defy not only comprehension but any kind of good, like the barbaric shooting, beheading, and bombing of innocents in neighborhoods at home and abroad, then I pray to God that healing arrives in (spite of) our insufficient attempts to address unimaginable evil and unending grief. Even when interreligious ceremony devolves into barbaric propaganda or brings a violent past back to the future, it is believable that the absurd and dangerous world our loved ones entrust us with is nevertheless approached by the one by whose wounds we are healed.

¹² Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 45.

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