

## Article

# Is There Life? Is There Spirit? Debating Belief and Being a Good Christian in Watchman Nee's 'Little Flock'

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**Abstract:** Christian, especially Protestant, identity is often framed through the lens of belief, particularly belief understood as an interior orientation. Through an examination of the non-denominational Protestant group, the 'Little Flock', founded by Watchman Nee in the early 20th century, we trace enduring aspects of Little Flock theology in contemporary Chinese Protestant practice. In particular, we attend to conceptions of and debates surrounding belief and how to determine the quality of one's faith—whether or not one might be considered not just a Christian, but a 'good' one.

**Keywords:** little flock; Watchman Nee; Christianity; belief; China

## 1. Introduction

The first Protestant missionaries entered China from the United Kingdom via the port of Canton (modern-day Guangzhou) in the 19th century, and a steady flow continued thereafter. During the first half of the 20th century, about 23,000 missionaries came to China for varying periods of time under the auspices of over 100 foreign organisations (Lian 2010). Despite their efforts, however, by the end of the Republican era in 1949 Christians still only made up 0.2% of China's population. In the intervening years under Mao and the Cultural Revolution, Christianity was widely assumed to have died out (Priestley 1952). After Mao's death in 1976, however, and with the advent of reform and opening up, the number of Christians—especially Protestants—in China increased rapidly. By 2010, around 4.3% of the Chinese population—about 58 million people—were Protestant (Sun 2017). Chinese Christians had spent the intervening decades not only surviving religious persecution but actively "[refusing] to be subject to the control of the state" (Lee 2007, p. 277). They managed to build diffuse, autonomous Christian communities which were able to operate under the radar—communities which then formed the foundation of the revival of Christianity as restrictions loosened during reform and opening up (Yang 2011). The expulsion of missionaries in the 1950s had ended Christian missions, but it had not ended Christianity in China.

Indeed, arguably the expulsion of foreign missionaries had effectively indigenised Chinese Christianity overnight by leaving only Chinese Christians to run their own communities, while persecution during the Maoist era strengthened a sense of religious identity against the backdrop of a hostile state. Chinese Christians had been left to "face the state's harassment by themselves" (Lee 2007, p. 282)—but they had also been left solely in charge of the affairs of their churches (Stark and Wang 2015). Christianity was kept alive and even spread in ways that often mirrored local practices, such as junior members of the community and family being required to obey elder members. In some communities, for instance, conversions followed a pattern where the "Christian patriarchs, mostly older men and women, instructed the younger members of the family in the faith, because family and marriage ties involved a sense of loyalty to household leaders" (Lee 2007, p. 287). This practice "guaranteed a steady church growth and maintained the continued adherence of



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the Christians to their faith. When Christianity became a family religion, Jesus Christ publicly replaced the ancestor as the focus of worship—creating a new religious and social identity to hold different generations of a Christian family together. Under these circumstances, Christian patriarchs saw conversion, baptism, and church affiliation as essential filial duties for their children” (Lee 2007, p. 287).

One such community was the Christian Assembly or ‘Little Flock’ (*xiaoqun* 小群)—a non-denominational Protestant group who are organised in small groups or ‘local churches’, as the group are also called—which continues to be highly influential in modern Chinese Protestantism (May 2000). Originally founded by Watchman Nee during the early twentieth century, the Little Flock was one of the fastest-growing Protestant groups in China in the pre-Maoist era. Now “often touted as the leading Chinese theologian of the twentieth century” (Lian 2010, p. 10), Watchman Nee espoused through the Little Flock a brand of millenarianism which descended directly from the “long tradition of the radical pursuit of the millennium in Western Christianity” (Lian 2010, p. 15). At the same time, this also matched many characteristics of millenarian sects in China, such as “trances, miracles, exorcism, mass penance, and, above all, the anticipation of a period of great cataclysms followed by a perfect new world that a messianic deliverer will usher in” (Lian 2010, p. 15). Indeed, much of its original appeal had been due to its Chinese identity and leadership: it actively set itself against the then-mainstream “Anglo-American Protestant denominational model” (Lee 2005, p. 68). Furthermore, its leadership, in the form of Watchman Nee and his circle, were all Chinese rather than being foreign missionaries.

In the decades since his death in 1972, Nee’s influence has only spread, especially among Protestant ‘house churches’ (*jiating jiaohui* 家庭教会). Today, the Little Flock dominate many of these nondenominational church communities which emerged in the wake of reform and opening up and which comprise, if not the majority, certainly a very significant proportion of the Christian population today in mainland China. What unites such churches—often also described as autonomous, independent, unofficial, or underground churches—is not a common denominational identity, but that they are “unregistered religious groups which, for differing reasons, are independent of the state and the officially sanctioned Protestant churches linked to the Christian Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and China Christian Council (CCC)” (Koesel 2013, p. 573).

Given their underground nature, it is difficult to accurately gauge numbers of Christians in house churches, but estimates range from 17 million (putting it on par with the TSPM) to 60 million or more. Regardless, it is generally agreed that more Chinese Christians worship in unregistered churches than in registered ones (Koesel 2013). Due to their collective size and location largely outside of institutional control, house churches are often seen as a threat to state and religious organisations, and their members are aware of this. Locations of services may change regularly, and members are often wary of bringing in outsiders for fear that they may be state agents seeking to infiltrate and thereby take down their church.

Although house churches are a diverse population overall, Little Flock churches are a major segment and are representative of many house churches, especially those in rural areas. For example, in Xiaoshan County in Zhejiang in southeastern China, about 10% of the population was Christian as of 2009; of that 10%, 90–95% of those Christians followed the Little Flock tradition (Sun 2017, p. 1700). Today, in line with Nee’s key teachings, Little Flock churches continue to follow his ‘small group’ church format and generally regard themselves—as the Plymouth Brethren in Cornwall, in southwestern United Kingdom did—as networks of similarly minded churches, rather than as members of an organised denomination. Additionally, as a result of Nee’s foundational nonconformism and the memory of the persecution they experienced during the decades underground, such churches also often adamantly oppose cooperation with the government, accusing churches who submit to government supervision of “committing adultery with the world” (Sun 2017, p. 1700).

When Xi Jinping took office in 2012, one of his objectives became to address and curb this booming population of Chinese Christians, especially those who were members of house churches—a symptom of what he perceived as the “failure of . . . religions to accept and become integrated into ‘fine traditional Chinese culture’” (Chang 2018, p. 37). The term ‘Sinicisation’ (*zhongguohua* 中国化) was officially introduced at the Central United Front Work Conference in 2015; in 2016 at the annual National Religious Work Conference, Xi announced the strategy of ‘religious Sinicisation’ and directed the audience in particular to issues of foreign influence and religious extremism.<sup>1</sup> This was supposed to be especially true for Christianity and Islam, whose adherents’ presumed “lack of confidence in Chinese culture has apparently primed them to absorb Western values and extremism” (Chang 2018, p. 37). On a superficial level, sinicisation merely indicated the state initiative to “press religions in China to incorporate Chinese characteristics into their beliefs and practices” (Chang 2018, p. 38); on a deeper level, however, the ideological project behind it is reasonably clear: a concern for regime stability coupled with a fear of religious subversion. In this understanding, Christianity is an intrinsically foreign religion which must be “sinicised by reforming its beliefs and practices, especially by eliminating its proselytism and discarding its teaching that salvation is possible through Christ alone, a belief viewed as incompatible with pluralistic and harmonious (*duoyuan tonghe* 多元通和) Chinese religious traditions” (Chang 2018, p. 40). From this perspective, if permitted to continue to grow, Christianity would “not only pose a national security threat to the country via its foreign nature but would in addition bring about a further decline of Chinese civilisation” (Chang 2018, p. 40).

Since the announcement of sinicisation as a state policy, anthropological examinations have often foregrounded the role of the state in Chinese Christianity, arguing that “the effect of any religion’s institutional features on its growth is contingent on the sociopolitical context of the religion . . . the state is the most powerful actor in creating and shaping that context” (Sun 2017, p. 1664). Although the impact of this policy has varied from area to area, sinicisation has nevertheless famously resulted in highly public, jarring campaigns such as that of cross-removals, which sought to erase even the visual imprint of Christianity from community skylines (Yeh 2022; Ying 2018). In a religious landscape that was already circumscribed, state sinicisation campaigns have rattled Chinese Christians, who fear an even more narrow space for them to practice their faith. The resultant negotiations between Christian institutions and an authoritarian, nationalist state have tended to dominate the scholarly literature on Chinese Christianity (e.g., Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Koesel 2013; Reny 2018; Sun 2017; Vala 2013).

There has, however, recently been some pushback against this tendency. Xiaobo Yuan, for instance, has recently called for a “less binarized conception of the religious landscape in China” (Yuan 2021, p. 199), arguing that “this picture of a Chinese society split between state and religious forces . . . gives us too stark a picture of the vectors of power by reducing them to disparate, antagonistic arenas” (Yuan 2021, p. 199). Instead, Yuan suggests that without reducing the impact of the state, ethnographic “attentiveness to the heteroglossic circulations of power can reveal multiple dimensions of authority and discipline beyond those of the state” (Yuan 2021, p. 199).

This question of belief and its role in being Christian is a longstanding concern for Christians. The kind of Christianity that entered China in the 1800s, from which most Chinese Protestantism is descended, was by and large “‘austere and rationalized,’ purged of much of its ‘magical’ element” (McLeister 2019, p. 132). This stream of Protestantism had been heavily influenced by Enlightenment rationalism which placed belief—in the sense of a truth claim regarding particular doctrinal dogmas—at the heart of a Christian identity. It was with primarily with the advent of the Enlightenment that Christianity began to understand itself as a system of beliefs (Smith 1962, p. 71). Previously, belief used to be “embodied in practice and discourse” (Asad 1993, p. 248). This shift towards internal belief as the primary barometer of Christian identity, which has its roots in the Protestant Reformation, significantly affected Christianity as a whole. During the 17th and

18th centuries, many Protestant theologies came to understand belief, and therefore being Christian, in an increasingly narrow sense: as an assertion and conviction of the truth of specific doctrines—and framed belief in this sense as the core of what it was to be Christian. Understandings of belief as an internalised state are “modern, privatised Christian [ones] because and to the extent that [they emphasise] the priority of belief as a state of mind” (Asad 1993, p. 247). It was no longer enough to merely act and behave like a Christian; one also had to have the correct interior orientation.

The emphasis on interior belief as the ultimate marker of what it means to be Christian has been influential within scholarship, especially in describing Western Christianity: Tylor famously defined religion as “beliefs in Spiritual Beings” (Tylor [1871] 1920, p. 1), while for Firth (1966), it was belief that ‘made up’ religion. The ubiquity of belief as both interior truth and the ultimate marker of whether someone’s Christianity is ‘authentic’ has, however, attracted critique. Scholars have pointed out, for example, that the word ‘belief’ itself in French, English, and Spanish incurs three meanings in one—of faith in God; trust in God; and acceptance of the truth of God (Pouillon 1982). Others have argued that the centrality of belief is peculiar to Christianity (Ruel 1982), especially Protestant Christianity, and that someone else’s internal beliefs are always going to be very difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain and analyse. Scholars are thus faced with the “problem of belief” (Engelke 2002) when it comes to understanding the nature of religious experiences. If belief is an internal state, then it is ultimately unknowable, and belief statements are only social performances which are not reliable bases for analysis (Needham 1972, p. 188).

In response, recent scholarly discussion of what it means to be Christian has often retained the focus on belief but pivoted towards external markers of belief. The ethnographic literature argues that models of belief as primarily an interior state “[neglect] the important roles of the body, experience, and emotion in religious processes—processes of belief” (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, p. 80). Thus, attention to belief as an externally marked behaviour is necessary in order to analytically access belief. Mitchell and Mitchell point to, for instance, Maltese Catholics, who come to display a particular habitus—embodied in the reverence displayed towards the Eucharist (such as learning not to bite the Eucharist, or learning as children to lower one’s eyes and kneel before taking First Communion)—which “does not demonstrate an inner orientation to the host in Communion—a ‘belief’ in its capacity for salvation—but actively [constitutes] it” (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, p. 86). In Malawi Pentecostal communities, belief is not what “defines and determines Pentecostalism” (Englund 2007, p. 480); rather, church membership was maintained through social relationships, with Malawi Pentecostals emphasising that the commitment to Jesus must be this-worldly, not “abstracted from the practical circumstances of its emergence and continuation” (Englund 2007, p. 485). Pastors in such communities therefore figure Jesus not as the focus but rather as the “source of their relationships with one another” (Englund 2007, p. 486).

Belief as an internal state is, obviously, difficult to analytically determine even as it continues to be a widespread ethnographic concept. Today, scholars have long noted that low-church Protestant Christians tend, around the world, to emphasise internal belief above all else as the true indicator of the quality of their piety. At the same time, focusing on external markers of belief tends to sidestep the content of what it is to ‘believe’. We argue that another way of accessing belief and being Christian is through attending to and tracing the theological underpinnings of belief—and, crucially, to attend to these theological underpinnings as an ongoing, dynamic discussion among Christians. In particular, we trace the roots of how the founder of the Little Flock, Watchman Nee, formulated what constituted a ‘good’ or, as he put it, ‘spiritual’ Christian and how the theological underpinnings of this formulation continue to manifest in contemporary Chinese Christianity. We draw on two texts and a personal testimony to show how Nee’s distinctive theological imprint—how he rooted what it was to be a good Christian in an unusual vision of the human being as made up not of a binary spirit and body binary, but a trinitarian spirit, soul, and body—continues to be influential.

In focusing specifically on theology as seen through a sociocultural lens, we consider, as Yuan called for, realms of authority and discipline which are not of the state. Rather, we show the enduring authority of not just Nee's theology and thought, but the wider theological framework, which is often hidden or implicit, but which nevertheless structures Chinese Christian faith. In doing so, we also seek to counter perceptions of theology as static and divorced from Christianity as lived (Robbins 2020), and to draw attention to the importance of theology in how Chinese Christians understand themselves—particularly with regards to the matter of belief and the quality of faith, issues which have tended recently to be analysed through the lens of practice. In these lights, Christianity may be seen as a “movement—a flow, a traveling religion” (Farhadian 2012, p. 2), shifting away from views of Christianity (especially indigenous, local Christianities) as ultimately made up of discrete elements which can be neatly dissected and sorted to provide a closer view of theology, not as a static constant but a dynamic force in contemporary Chinese Christianity, and through that, a window into Chinese Christian debates for and about themselves.

The following article draws first on two texts from within the last 30 years from websites identifying themselves as by and for mainland Chinese Christians, publishing Christian materials in Chinese for Chinese Christians. First, we examine an excerpt from the *Christian Life Quarterly*, the “first Christian magazine started by and designed for PRC Christians of the Chinese Christian Life Fellowship”, founded to “facilitate and mobilise the spiritual growth of PRC Christians and to raise up Christian leadership among Chinese intellectuals”.<sup>2</sup> They assert that they are the “voice of the house church in China, and that copies of the magazine in mainland China are “passed on as treasures. One copy would be passed to hundreds. Readers are copying the magazine excitedly using Internet, copy machines, printers, and even by hand”.<sup>3</sup>

The second text comes from the hugely popular Christian website *Jonah's House* ([jonahome.net](http://jonahome.net), accessed on 3 March 2022), which was shut down in April 2022 due to Chinese regulations about religious content online, but which had by then been online for 21 years. It had been a source for Christian writings in Chinese, by mainland Chinese Christians with a target audience of other mainland Chinese Christians; crucially, it had also hosted a major forum where Chinese Christians socialised and conversed with each other about a broad range of Christian topics. These two sources stand as major focal points for discussion, debate, and the dissemination of information within the wider Chinese Christian landscape, drawing in readers and participants from across diverse ‘house church’ communities. Both websites express no explicit denominational loyalty, but rather identify themselves more generally as Chinese Christians. In practice, however, this often refers in significant part to the broad, widespread influence of Nee and the Little Flock. For example, *Jonah's House* prominently hosts the complete works of Watchman Nee, alongside associated figures such as the British Christian evangelist Theodore Austin Sparks<sup>4</sup> and Jiang Shoudao, a close colleague of Nee's. One of the key testimonies from the *Christian Life Quarterly's* website includes Nee and the Little Flock's legacy.

Finally, we show how these same debates from two or three decades ago are ongoing in Chinese Christianity today through an examination of the 2022 faith testimony of Uncle Zhang, a Christian convert from Xuzhou, a city in the province of Jiangsu. His church, located in a village near Xuzhou, was heavily influenced by the Little Flock and descends from them. Uncle Zhang speaks at length about his faith and his reasons for being a Christian, as well as how he thinks one should be a ‘good’ and ‘spiritual’ Christian—discussions which, we argue, reflect how Little Flock theology continues to be dynamically refracted through lived experience in the contemporary Chinese Christian landscape.

## 2. To Be a Spiritual Christian

To be a ‘spiritual Christian’ was a status which Nee built on an unusual distinction between the ‘soul’ and the ‘spirit’ and a “theology of triumph over the blight of existence” (Lian 2010, p. 10). For Nee, the end times to come revolved around the “‘truth of the Cross’: those who penetrate the mystery of God would understand that they are already dead with,

and in, Christ and have been ‘grafted’, through the Cross, onto a glorious, incorruptible, and bountiful life; it is only through ‘brokenness’, ‘destruction’, and ‘death’ of the ‘self’ (the work of the Cross) that the inner spiritual being springs to real life in Christ” (Lian 2010, pp. 155–56). For Nee, this ‘spiritual’ quality was an internal one which rested not in a binary but a trinitarian view of the human being as consisting of spirit, soul, and body. This view formed the basis of one of his core teachings: that the process of Christian sanctification is primarily about breaking the ‘soul’ to the point where it can be lived out in the form of the ‘spirit’ (as the title of the second work suggests). Nee’s magnum opus, *The Spiritual Man* (*shuling de ren* 属灵的人), promised to “lead Christians into the ‘innermost part of one’s being’ where one encounters the ‘life of God’” (Lian 2010, p. 165). This promise was made on the basis of an unusual distinction between ‘soul’ (or self-consciousness) and ‘spirit’ (or God-consciousness), where:

“spirit power is God’s power received spiritually at regeneration, while soul power is his own granted him naturally at birth. Whether one is to be a spiritual man or not largely hinges upon how he handles these two forces within him. The believer enters the ranks of the spiritual by drawing upon the spiritual power to the exclusion of that of his soul. Should he use his soul power or even a combination of the two, the result inevitably shall be a soulish or carnal Christian. God’s way is plain. We must deny everything originating in ourselves—what we are, what we have, what we can do—and move entirely by Him, daily apprehending the life of Christ through the Holy Spirit”. (Nee [1928] 1977, p. 159)

For Nee, it was such a “spiritual man, made alive by the ‘God-consciousness’” (Lian 2010, p. 165) who would leave behind worldly matters such as being “driven merely by one’s own will or emotions (the ‘soul’) and manifested in profitless ‘zeal’” and enter into “the life of God Himself” (Lian 2010, p. 165). At the time, among the wars, upheavals, and chaos of early 20th century China, the millenarian and anti-establishment aspect of Nee’s teachings resonated deeply with many. In the fresh fervour of conversion, feeling as if they had been renewed and reborn, new members often felt that they had become spiritually “impervious to the evils of this world” (Lian 2010, p. 156). For instance, Yu Chenghua 俞成华, an eye doctor who later became one of Nee’s trusted associates in the Shanghai Little Flock church, “had this reaction to the sight of truckloads of severed human limbs after a series of Japanese aerial bombings in Shanghai: ‘Let me be counted among the severed limbs on the trucks. Yes, I am already dead. I have been nailed to the Cross with Christ’” (Lian 2010, p. 156). The physical form and the sufferings and horrors it and the soul had seen and experienced were de-emphasised in favour of the spiritual self.

In the modern day, this particular set of experiences have largely faded from living memory, although to some degree they have been replaced generationally by memories of suffering and persecution during the Maoist era. Chinese Protestantism today is largely nondenominational, resulting in a blend of many theological approaches from across the Protestant spectrum; however, the continued dominance of Little Flock Christianity and Nee’s distinction between body, soul, and spirit can still be noted. This comes to the fore especially as part of a regular refrain among Chinese Christians: ‘is there life?’ (*youmeiyou shengming* 有没有生命) and, ‘is there spirit?’ (*shubushuling* 属不属灵). These questions are a recurring area of high concern for Chinese Christians, especially regarding how to determine whether one is a ‘good’ Christian, a true believer.

Under the typical aforementioned frameworks for examining Christian belief and membership, one might—as previously discussed—try to determine a Christian’s internal beliefs and knowledge of doctrine or examine their behaviours, such as the frequency and intensity of their religious practices. How often a Christian participates in church activities, such as services, Bible studies, prayer meetings, personal devotion to private prayer, or Bible reading, might be part of how to constitute their belief analytically. Yet, both these approaches reflect either an internal or external view of belief. Instead, we propose that the way Chinese Christians pose this pair of questions and argue over the answers in fact

reflects the theological, theoretical frameworks descended from Nee in which such debates are constituted.

The following two excerpts present a snapshot of a lively debate among Chinese Christians over what it means to have ‘life’ and ‘spirit’ in one’s faith. This first excerpt presents a view which the second, as we shall see, argues vehemently against.

The following excerpt from a testimony, titled “We are in Christ and Christ is in us” (*women zai Jidu li he Jidu zai women li* 我们在基督里和基督在我们里), was originally published in the March 1997 inaugural issue of the Christian Life Quarterly Digest. Twenty-five years later it is still hosted on their website, indicative of how the concepts within it are a continuing theme in what it means to be a Christian.

“Our relationship with the Lord lies within:

[ ... ]

It is evident that being a Christian is not a superficial effort, and external forms are irrelevant. I know who Jesus is, and I understand the salvation of the cross. Am I a Christian? I am determined to believe in the Lord, and I am baptized. Am I a Christian? I go to church every Sunday, I join in fellowship, I am dedicated and I seem to have done everything I need to do. Am I a Christian? Maybe, maybe not. Because whether I am a Christian or not depends on whether we have the life of Christ in us, and whether we have a direct relationship with the Lord in us. If so, then yes; if not, then no.

[ ... ]

In our pursuit, the disconnect between truth and reality really needs to be surpassed by our faith in God. God really wants us to have absolute faith in Him. [ ... ] When we say that we are justified by faith, we are restored to a relationship with God through faith, this relationship is not primarily manifested externally, but internally. This heart-to-heart communication within is premised on faith. Only the inner communication is direct, essential, and precious to God.”<sup>5</sup>

In this excerpt, the writer puts forth their understanding that it is not baptism, fellowship, or doctrinal understanding which determines whether one is a ‘good’ Christian. Instead, to be a ‘spiritual Christian’ rests on personal, internal connections with God. Having the ‘life of Christ’ within is taken as having a direct personal relationship with the Lord. Furthermore, for this form of faith, ‘external forms’ are not to be taken into account. It does not matter what one is seen to be doing, or indeed what one does. Instead, what is truly key to having the ‘life of Christ’, to being a spiritual Christian, is the holding of a particular communication and relationship with God—an orientation which must necessarily ‘lie within’.

As with Nee’s rejection of the worldly, this excerpt too rejects the external and focuses on the internal by rejecting ‘external forms’ and looking towards one’s ‘heart-to-heart communication’ with God. However, the writer presents a view of the Christian person which sidesteps Nee’s finer distinction between the soul and spirit and his understanding of the soul (in the sense of emotions) as something worldly. Instead, the writer relies on a binary, referring to ‘faith’ as contrasted against ‘external forms’. The focus of the excerpt is not on the trinary distinction between soul, spirit, and body but more on a binary distinction between the internal and external.

A binary understanding of the human being as made up of body/spirit is more common worldwide; Nee’s soul/spirit/soul formulation is in the minority. Yet, because of his enduring influence on Chinese Protestantism, such understandings rouse strident responses among Christians who argue for a more trinitarian view closer to Nee’s and hold that distinguishing between soul and spirit is essential to being a ‘good’ ‘spiritual’ Christian. In this second excerpt, from an article entitled *Who is Spiritual?* which was posted and hosted long-term on the popular Christian website Jonah’s House, an anonymous author vehemently criticises such views of the spiritual Christian which rely on zeal and perceived

purity of faith. Instead, the author presents a view of a spiritual Christian which not only emphasises rejection of worldly things but also ‘living by the Spirit’:

Over the years, I have heard many times in conversation that someone is a spiritual Christian, someone is a spiritual preacher, or someone is not spiritual. When I asked them in detail what they meant by “spiritual”, it turned out that when some people said “spiritual”, they actually meant “zealous”. They think that a person who is zealous in meeting, zealous in giving, and zealous in bearing witness is a spiritual Christian. [ . . . ] Needless to say, many of those who seem to be zealous in serving God from the outside are not really zealous, and many of those who say they believe in the Bible and believe in the Gospel do not really believe this in their hearts. [ . . . ] There are many who are really zealous, but not spiritual; and there are many who really believe in all the doctrines of the Bible, and yet have not even the slightest smell of spirituality. How can zeal and purity of faith mean “spiritual”? [ . . . ]

To be clear. Do not assume that all zealous believers are spiritual. Do not assume that all believers of pure faith are spiritual. And do not think that all those who claim to be filled with the Holy Spirit are spiritual. If we thoroughly understand what “spiritual” means, we will know that not all those who speak “spiritual words” are “spiritual” and neither are those who understand “spiritual teaching” all “spiritual” people. “Spiritual teaching” is not always “spiritual”. The facts tell us that many zealous believers, believers of pure faith, believers who profess to be filled with the Holy Spirit, are not only unspiritual, but very worldly. For many things in their lives were “acting like mere humans,” as Paul rebuked the Corinthian believers.

In that case, who is spiritual? They do not speak, act, treat others, or work ‘as men do’, but instead “live by the Spirit”. In life, they are full of “the fruit of the Spirit . . . love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”. Such people are truly ‘spiritual people’ according to the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

At first glance, this author merely takes umbrage not only with using external forms to judge internal faith but also with using faith or belief alone to gauge spirituality. For them, this is a shallow way to approach spirituality: one may be full of zeal, one may be a true believer, pure in faith, but still not be spiritual. A closer look, however, reveals that what the author criticises as “zealous” maps closely onto what Nee criticises as ‘soulish’. The ‘soulish’, says Nee, are “second to none in the matter of works. They are most active, zealous, and willing.” (Nee [1928] 1977, p. 158). However, Nee argues that the motivations of the soulish are suspect—the soulish “do not labour because they have received God’s order; they labour instead because they have the zeal and capacity to do so. They believe *doing* God’s work is good enough, unaware that only doing the labour of God’s *appointment* is truly commendable. [ . . . ] Because they diligently work, these Christians fall into the error of looking upon themselves as far more advanced than their leisurely brethren” (Nee [1928] 1977, pp. 158–59). To be soulish is still to be worldly, centred on the self and the world, rather than truly giving everything up to God. Indeed, this is something which the author critiques directly: that “many zealous believers, believers of pure faith, believers who profess to be filled with the Holy Spirit, are not only unspiritual, but very worldly”.

In this, this anonymous author is reflecting Nee’s distinction between soul and spirit but with different terminology, with ‘zeal’ in the place of ‘soul’. As this author argues, spirituality rests not merely on belief but on belief alongside a rejection of that which is worldly—a rejection of both body and soul in Nee’s conception of the terms, turning away from “acting like mere humans” and towards “living by the Spirit” and being filled with the “fruit of the Spirit”. Following Nee, it is the spirit, not the soul or the body, which must be emphasised, and spirituality may be seen not in zealousness but rather personal



qualities such as love, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. To conflate the soul with the spirit is to introduce the worldly soul into what should be the purely spiritual and Godly.

The two excerpts both come from the wider shared pool of Chinese Christian literature for and by Chinese Christians. Both share a distrust of the ‘worldly’ or external and prioritise the ‘spiritual’ or internal; both also are concerned with whether one’s beliefs, or internal faith orientation (rather than one’s external actions) are the right one. In short, it is not enough merely to believe—one must believe rightly.

However, what constitutes ‘right’ belief, what it means to be a ‘spiritual Christian’, is hotly disputed. Is it to have a direct personal relationship with God? A ‘heart-to-heart’ communication with God? Or is it to be “full of the fruit of the Spirit”? To “live by the Spirit”, rejecting that which is worldly? The first relies largely on an understanding of the human as constituted of an opposition between the spirit and the flesh; the second argues that this division is deceptive, that it allows ‘zeal’ (or soulishness) to be mistaken for the spiritual. Although they share a goal of ultimately giving oneself up entirely to God and the Holy Spirit, the framework through which this can be achieved differs. How should being a spiritual Christian be framed and understood? Is it merely a personal matter, resting entirely on one’s relationship with Christ, with all external forms irrelevant? Or is a spiritual Christian also someone who rejects the world and has the qualities which reflect this? Should one think of a ‘spiritual’ Christian in terms of a binary or a trinity?

We turn next to a personal faith testimony in order to show how these debates still surface in the modern day as Chinese Christians continue to debate what constitutes a spiritual life.

### 3. Living a ‘Spiritual’ Christian Life

We spoke with Uncle Zhang in 2022, when he was 60 years old and had recently retired from being a middle-school English teacher in the nearby city of Xuzhou. He had been ordained as a deacon for his village church in 2015 and was now the head of said church, but he had not always been Christian. As he put it, as part of a longer faith testimony,

It was around 2008. God chose me. My old father-in-law lived with me. He had no sons, only daughters, and my wife was his second child. He believed in Jesus, preached the Gospel to me, read the Bible to me. I didn’t know anything about Christianity, what salvation was, who Jesus was, I knew nothing about it. [ . . . ] It turned out that, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, I felt that the Bible was pretty good actually and the Spirit guided me to read it. I would come home from the school, from work, and listen to this sermon . . . I felt that the sermon was very good and the Holy Spirit grabbed me. I said, “Jesus is so good, he is my Savior, he died for me, he was buried, and he gave me my life”. At that time, my heart was very touched, very moved, and very grateful to the Lord in my spirit. If it were not for Jesus Christ I would not have life, have looked at Genesis and read the book of Revelation. I didn’t know what I was reading, but the light of the Holy Spirit opened me up and edified me. Within less than a year, I was baptized into the light of Jesus Christ.

As of 2022 he had been a Christian for seven years, having converted in his early fifties. Like other Christians, he too had had his share of trials and tribulations, and he often credited his faith in the Lord for carrying him through worldly difficulties. Of particular importance to him in his testimony and reflection was the role of the spirit in being a good Christian, especially given his leadership role in the church.

Life is to be pursued with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. [ . . . ] This life, then, is to realize that the Lord Jesus is my Saviour, who went to the cross for me. From the day I was converted, God chose me and turned me to Jesus Christ. I became a child of God, a child of the Kingdom of Heaven. Thank God, that I have a connection and a relationship with Christ.

[ . . . ]

We have to constantly aim higher, constantly moving, constantly leading. You have to pay the price, you have to work hard. Gentle and easy will not get the Lord's Spirit inside you moving and leading . . . Likewise, if you don't pursue life, if you don't pursue being touched by the Spirit, and if you don't associate with the Lord in life and leadership, the one thing you must do is to rely on the Lord, not on yourself, but on the Lord. It is not easy to rely on the Lord, by the light of the Lord, and by the leadership and help of the Holy Spirit. Especially in the service of the church and in life.

Why is it not easy? Now there are so many people in the entire church, fifty or sixty people. Look at the growth of life. Look at my five fingers stretched out. Some lives are like this, and some are like that. Five people have five different situations. Look at some elderly brothers and sisters who have believed in the Lord all their lives. Although they have believed in the Lord all their lives, they have not made any progress. Other brothers and sisters, although they have believed for many years, have grown very much, they are willing to keep chasing after God, to be touched by God, to be close to God, to lean on Jesus Christ, to let Him lead their service, to let Him lead their life. They must draw on the relationship with Christ. In this aspect, we must draw in the relationship with Christ. Otherwise, you will achieve nothing without Christ. You must rely on the Lord, trust and trust and trust. Once you believe in the Lord, you still have to rely on the Lord. [ . . . ] You believe in the Lord, but also have to rely on the Lord. [ . . . ] Many people rely not on the Lord, but rely on their own intelligence, their own ability, their own talent and blood and mind and service. How completely self-centred this is, rather than God-centred.

Here, the refrain and concern for Uncle Zhang is how to have spiritual 'life'. As an educated man, quite well-off economically for the area, and a local Christian leader, Zhang's testimony provides both a view of his own personal faith narrative as well as what he thinks, as a leader and spiritual guide, needs to be improved.

Like the author of the first excerpt, Zhang foregrounds the personal connection and relationship with Christ as the foundation upon which one's Christian identity and faith must be built. God chose him; the Holy Spirit guided him to read the Bible. But, as he argues, this is not enough on its own, simply to 'believe' or to have a relationship with God. This relationship must be a reciprocal one, and it is not, Zhang says, an easy one. It is one which must be actively pursued, and in doing so it must downplay one's reliance on one's own abilities, talents, and mind.

Notably, however, Zhang speaks relatively little of matters of the flesh and body as in binary opposition to the spiritual. Instead, Zhang relies implicitly—especially in his arguments about how difficult it is to trust in God rather than in one's own abilities—on a distinction between 'soul' and 'spirit'. To believe in God but still rely on one's own ability is soulish in Nee's sense of the world—as Zhang puts it, it is completely self-centred rather than spiritual or God-centred. In Zhang's testimony and his critiques of fellow members, we see replicated the themes of the debate between the excerpts from *Jonah's House* and the *Christian Life Quarterly*. Zhang describes members of the congregation who, despite a lifetime of belief, have not achieved 'life'. He contrasts them with those who have actively sought to squash soulishness, by not only believing in God but pursuing God and subduing their own worldly, soulish inclinations. As a Christian and as a leader, he acknowledges the central importance of the spiritual and contrasts it not against the bodily but also the soulish as worldly.

Given Zhang's position in the Christian community, his emphasis on the constant need to strive for the Spirit by letting go of one's own intrinsic desires and motivations is not simply a statement of his own understanding but a reflection of an ongoing, dynamic debate about belief and being among Chinese Christians. Nee's formulation of a trinitarian soul/spirit/body has endured, even as it has gone by different names and wording, in how Chinese Christians perceive what it means to be a good, spiritual Christian.

#### 4. Conclusions

In its long history in China, Christianity—whether Catholic or Protestant—has repeatedly been viewed with suspicion, assumed to be forever foreign, never to be indigenous or ‘really’ Chinese. This preconception has formed the basis of many anti-Christian prejudices and policies in modern China, from the expulsion of all missionaries during the Maoist era to the modern-day exhortation to sinicise Christian churches. Yet, modern-day indigenous Chinese Christian communities have, as a consequence of the 1950s expulsion of missionaries, been under the control and guidance of local Christians for generations, often in the face of overwhelming odds and persecution. Under Watchman Nee, the ‘Little Flock’ flourished, often outside of government auspices and on their own terms. Even today, the figure of the ‘spiritual Christian’ and Nee’s unusual trinitarian formulation of the human being— influenced by Welsh evangelical Protestantism via Penn-Lewis and Barber—is evident in contemporary debates over what it means to be a good Christian and what is considered desirable as the goal of a Christian life.

In and of itself, such debates are par for the course; that Christians often think other Christians are not the ‘right’ kind of Christian is perhaps universal. During the early 20th century in the United States, for example, Irish, German, and Italian Catholics vigorously argued about the ‘Italian problem’—that is, whether Italian Catholics were in fact ‘really’ Catholic enough to warrant their own parish. An Irish Catholic priest at the time publicly took issue with the content of Italian Catholic spirituality, deriding the “peculiar kind of spiritual condition” of the Italian immigrants, “fed on pilgrimages, shrines, holy cards, and ‘devotions’ [as] lacking any understanding of the ‘great truths of religion’” (Orsi 1985, p. 55). Garriott and O’Neill have argued, however, that such intra-Christianity arguments should be responded to not by trying determine who is ‘right’ but rather that attending to the “problems posed by Christianity to Christians themselves . . . offers a window into what is at stake in the lives of Christians themselves, and thus has the capacity to provide a non-essentializing foundation for the anthropology of Christianity as a comparative project” (Garriott and O’Neill 2008, p. 381).

Between the first two texts and in the third, a debate recurs centred on questions of ‘life’ and ‘spirit’, about what it is to be a good Christian, a good believer. Is it to be zealous? Is it to simply have always believed? Or is it to continually reject the worldly and the self? What can and should one do in order to ‘have life’, to be a ‘spiritual’ Christian? Underlying the debates over what it is to be a good Christian in the texts, which span multiple decades, is a theological difference between a binary (spirit/body) and a trinary (soul/spirit/body) understanding of the human being.

It is clear from the texts and testimony that this question of and debates surrounding the ‘spiritual Christian’ are highly important to what it is to be a Chinese Christian, both now and in past decades. To believe is not simply a matter of holding the right interior orientation, nor or is it simply behaving rightly. At least according to those who hold to a trinary view, one must reject not just the needs of the flesh but the needs of the soul, which are the needs of the worldly self, in favour of the spirit. Through this debate, we can see the enduring influence of Nee’s theological trinitarian understanding of the human being through ongoing debates about what it means to be a good Christian and consequently, defences of this conception in Chinese Christian understandings today.

To examine belief and debates centred on belief, such as questions of how to be a ‘good’ Christian, through either an external or internal lens here (as in, focused either on aspects such as church attendance or people’s accounts of their own belief) would miss the ongoing arguments between Chinese Christians about how exactly one should believe as a Christian. These arguments are inextricable from the theological conceptions of the human beings which structure them. Belief, as it has developed among Little Flock Christians, is still seminally linked with Nee’s theology and his “call for an individualistic, mystical union with Christ” (Lian 2010, p. 216), demonstrating not just the legacy of Nee’s theology but also the importance of certain theological concepts for how Chinese Christians understand and seek to form themselves.

Finally, these debates also show how much of Chinese Christians' conceptions and understandings of their own religious lives are primarily concerned with fellow Christians. The questions of whether there is spirit, whether there is life, are matters which are largely internal to Chinese Protestantism, not only rooted in an internal theological divide but also simply in its attention to fellow Chinese Christians' spiritual lives. In this, one may also see Chinese Christianity's shared discussions, debates, questions, anxieties, and goals which exist beyond the remit of the state.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Xi Jinping: all-around improvement of the standard of religious work under new circumstances, 23 April 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c\\_1118716540.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c_1118716540.htm) (accessed on 25 September 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Chinese Christian Life Fellowship, Inc., 13 January 2015, <https://www.cclife.org/View/Article/1399> (accessed on 25 September 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> See note 2.
- <sup>4</sup> For a few years in the 1920s, he was associated with Jessie Penn-Lewis, although he later broke with her.
- <sup>5</sup> 我們在基督裏和基督在我們裏 (*Women zai Jidu li he Jidu zai women li*, We are in Christ and Christ is in us), 9 August 2016 [March 1997], <https://www.cclife.org/View/Article/533> (accessed on 25 September 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> 誰是屬靈的呢? (*Shi shei shuling de ne?* Who is spiritual?), <http://www.jonahome.net/files/wmd/wmd4/chapter03.html> (accessed on 10 November 2017).

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