

# The Entanglement between Religion and Politics

## *Hong Kong Christianity in the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement*

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### Abstract

The relationship between religion and social movements is an important topic in the study of religion and society. This paper uses various textual and online sources to examine the role of Christianity in the anti-extradition bill movement that took place in Hong Kong from April to September 2019. The anti-extradition bill movement, which later evolved into a much wider movement against totalitarianism, has caused churches to grapple with church-state relations in the post-handover era. This paper employs the notion of “public religion” as an analytical framework to examine the process of the “deprivatization” of Christianity in Hong Kong. How does the ongoing contestation, both within and outside the church, reflect the challenges faced by Christianity when entering the public sphere? By answering the above questions, we will be able to explicate the religio-political significance of the protest movement in Hong Kong.

### Keywords

Hong Kong Christianity – anti-extradition movement – church-state relations

## 政治與宗教的糾結：香港反修例運動中基督宗教

### 摘要

宗教與社會運動的關係，是宗教與社會研究中備受重視的課題。本文運用文獻及網上資料，以2019年4月至9月為研究時限，探討基督宗教在反修例運動中的角色。從反修例運動演變成逆權運動，促使主權移交時代的香港教會面對政教關係的糾結。本文以「公共宗教」作分析框架，檢討香港基督宗教「去私人化」的過程。教會在進入公共領域時引發的內外爭議，反映出基督宗教面對著何種挑戰？通過回答以上問題，我們將闡明香港抗爭運動中的政治與宗教意義。

### 關鍵詞

香港基督宗教，反修例運動，政教關係

### 1 Introduction\*

The relationship between religion and social movements is an important topic in the study of religion and society. The role of religion in a society varies according to its unique historical background and reality. Hong Kong has gone through enormous changes since the transfer of sovereignty from the British government to the People's Republic of China in 1997. The handover marked the end of the city's 155 years of colonial history and its reorganization as a Special Administrative Region (SAR). How should we understand the relationship between religion and social movements in Hong Kong amid these changes? This paper aims to reconstruct and discuss the social movement that took place in Hong Kong in June 2019. What are the reasons behind the different levels of participation by Christians in the protest movement?

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June 2019 saw the formation of a social movement in opposition to the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill.<sup>1</sup> The protests started off as anti-extradition demonstrations but later evolved into a much wider “movement against totalitarianism” (Lee et al. 2019). What was the role of Christianity (including Catholicism and Protestantism)<sup>2</sup> in the civil protests against the HKSAR government’s proposed amendment bill in the summer of 2019? While the question has received some scholarly attention (Chin 2019; Ying 2019a; Ma and Slaats 2020), there is clearly a need for a systematic collation and investigation of the subject. In this paper I will examine the role of Christianity in the anti-extradition bill movement in light of church-state relations, using various textual and online sources.

When examining the issue of church-state relations, the role of the church in the public sphere inevitably becomes a focal point. In his book *Public Religions in the Modern World*, José Casanova (1994) uses the concept of “public religion” to investigate the “deprivatization” of religion in different societies in the 1980s. According to Casanova, religion can enter the public sphere at three different levels: state, political, and civil society. Religion at the state level mainly refers to established state churches or national churches, which demonstrate close ties between religion and the state. On the political level, public religion involves the political mobilization or counter-mobilization of religious groups against other religions or against secularist movements. At the level of civil society, religion enters the public sphere of an undifferentiated civil society to protect not only freedom of religion but all modern freedoms and rights. Religion also strives to protect the traditional lifeworld and the “common good” from administrative or juridical penetration by the state. Casanova (1994:57–58, 218–219) emphasizes that only at the level of civil society can religions perform a public role.

The participation of Christianity in the anti-extradition bill movement has aroused great controversy over church-state relations. This paper employs the notion of “public religion” as an analytical framework to examine the recent case in Hong Kong. In what way might Christian praxis in the protest movement

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- 1 In February 2018, Chan Tong-kai 陳同佳, a Hong Konger, murdered his girlfriend Poon Hiu-wing 潘曉穎 in Taiwan and then fled back to Hong Kong. At that time, there was no extradition treaty between Hong Kong and Taiwan. In response, the Hong Kong SAR government proposed the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill in February 2019 in order to “plug legal loopholes,” with the inclusion of mainland China, Macau, and Taiwan in the amendment.
  - 2 Throughout this paper, the term “Christianity” refers to different Christian traditions in Hong Kong. The terms “Protestant” (*jidujiao* 基督教) and “Catholic” (*tianzhujiao* 天主教) refer to specific sectarian groups.

be understood as an effort to “deprivatize” Christianity? How does the ongoing contestation, both within and outside the church, reflect the challenges faced by Christianity when entering the public sphere? By answering the above questions, we will be able to explicate the religio-political significance of the protest movement in Hong Kong.

In this paper I discuss the relationship between Christianity and the large-scale protest movement in 2019. Since mass protests are still occurring at the time of writing, I have chosen to focus on those between April and September 2019. This period may be divided into two stages: the emergence and mobilization stage from April to June, followed by the protest stage between June and September. Historical research methods have been employed in this study to reconstruct a comprehensive account of the role of Christianity in the anti-extradition bill movement. In addition to documents and online materials, the study also draws on interviews with three Protestant pastors and laypersons actively involved in the protest movement.

## 2 The Summer of Freedom: From Anti-Extradition to Anti-Authoritarian Protests

No one could have foreseen that the extradition bill amendments proposed by the HKSAR government in February would trigger a city-wide social movement on such an unprecedented scale.<sup>3</sup>

When the HKSAR government first proposed the extradition amendment bill, the city remained largely reticent; only a few utterances of dissatisfaction were heard from the Hong Kong Bar Association and the Pan-democrats, and a rally organized by the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) on March 31 drew a modest crowd of 12,000. But when pro-democracy legislators started filibustering during the legislative process of the amendment committee, the bill immediately gained the spotlight. In late April, a multitude of 130,000 took to the streets to join the second CHRF-led protest march against the proposal. Instead of addressing jitters and removing doubts, the government only made two amendments to the bill in a bid to win over the business sector. With the support from pro-establishment lawmakers all but guaranteed, the government bypassed the usual scrutiny and fast-tracked the bill to its second reading on June 12.

3 Regarding the progress of the movement, see 22 Hongkongers 2019, *Initium Media* 2020, and Lee 2020. For the first scholarly account of the 2019 protest movement, see Ma 2020.

The anti-extradition bill movement reached a new high on June 9 when one million people thronged the streets in another protest march organized by CHRF. Much to their dismay, their wishes once again fell on deaf ears: the government pushed ahead the second reading of the amendment bill, sparking more uproar. On June 12, huge crowds gathered outside the government headquarters and the legislative Council Complex. Tension was seething. On the same day, demonstrators surrounded the legislative council and occupied the roads nearby. Police responded heavy-handedly, firing tear gas, bean bag rounds, and rubber bullets at the crowds. The clearing operation soon devolved into serious police-civilian clashes. Shortly after the incident, the HKSAR leadership decided to characterize the peaceful rally as an organized “riot.” The simmering tension began to boil over.

The government appeared poised to crack down on the movement, yet the people were determined to make a stand. On 19 June, a staggering 2 million demonstrators flooded the streets during the fourth protest initiated by the CHRF. Ignoring calls for a complete “withdrawal” of the extradition bill, the government only promised to “suspend” it. Civil disobedience and protests continued to intensify. On July 1, a group of protestors stormed the Legislative Council Complex and occupied the building.

Since July, the social movement has blossomed everywhere in Hong Kong. Demonstrations against the extradition bill have swept across many districts. Moreover, because every single demonstration has been violently repressed, protesters have made police brutality their new focus. On July 21, an armed gang indiscriminately attacked civilians at the Yuen Long MTR station. Resentment reached a new high as suspicion of collusion between police and gang members became widespread.<sup>4</sup>

Since August, protesters have varied their forms of demonstration. At the same time, they have also turned more militant because of police brutality. Nevertheless, surveys show that citizens in general were sympathetic to and supportive of the intensified protests (Lee et al. 2019:19–20).

At long last, on September 4, Carrie Lam, the chief executive of Hong Kong, announced the “withdrawal” of the amendment bill. But a decision that came three months too late could hardly raise popular opinion of the government from its nadir, nor did it calm the accelerating civil unrest.

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4 On 21 July, a large number of people dressed in white, suspected of being villagers and gangsters, indiscriminately attacked passers-by and passengers at the Yuen Long MTR Station. The Hong Kong police were later criticized for conniving with the attackers after failing to stop the incident.

Undoubtedly, the earliest protests were driven by public anger over the extradition bill. Nevertheless, the government's enduring ignorance of public opinion, the multiplying accounts of police brutality, and the alleged police-gang collusion in the Yuen Long attack revealed more deep-seated problems. Clearly, the recent wave of protests was no longer just about the controversial bill. Among the "five demands" (*wuda suqiu* 五大訴求) chanted in the rallies, the call for genuine universal suffrage signaled a critical awareness: the protesters realized that the only way out for Hong Kong was to fast-track its transition to a truly democratic political system that allows universal suffrage for the election of its chief executive and the Legislative Council.<sup>5</sup> Oblivious to the demands for democracy, however, the Beijing and Hong Kong governments maintained a hardline approach, backing the police in the use of brutal means to "stop violence and curb disorder" (*zhibao zhiluan* 止暴制亂). But this only galvanized the movement, and the unyielding protesters continued to pour into the streets. A new chapter in the history of Hong Kong was unfolding.

### 3 Christians in the Mobilization Stage

#### 3.1 *The Religious Voices against the Extradition Bill*

Between April and May 2019, the anti-extradition bill campaign began to capture the city's attention, particularly when more people became aware of the bill's threat to freedom and civil rights and its judicial impact on the existing "one country, two systems" policy. At that point, however, the Christian community largely played a passive role while gradually gearing up for active participation. As of late March, Joseph Zen Ze-kium 陳日君, a cardinal of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong, was the only individual who had publicly voiced his worries (*Apple Daily* 2019a). In a local newspaper, Cardinal Joseph said that he was concerned that his speech and actions might be seen as crimes by the Chinese Communist Party (*Stand News* 2019a).

As for Protestants, the earliest response was a joint statement on May 9 by the Pastoral Care Team and three other Christian groups. Later on, more

5 The five demands are as follows: (1) the withdrawal of the extradition bill; (2) a retraction of the official characterization of the protests as "riots"; (3) the release of all those arrested; (4) an independent investigation into police brutality; and (5) the resignation of Carrie Lam as chief executive. "Dual universal suffrage" refers to universal suffrage in elections for both the chief executive and the Legislative Council. The word "genuine" is used here because any form of "political screening" used by the government to deny suffrage to individuals should be opposed.

organizations joined the cause, making similar statements and prayer requests regarding the controversial bill amendments. Among these groups were the Theology and Ministry Department of the Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China (May 13), the Executive Committee of the Hong Kong Christian Council (May 12), the Justice and Social Concern Committee of the Hong Kong Christian Council (May 14), Hong Kong Christian Service (May 15), the Ministerial Session of the Methodist Church, Hong Kong (May 16), the Concern Group for Social Affairs of the Social Services Division of the Methodist Church, Hong Kong (May 16), the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong (May 17), the Hong Kong Association of Christian Organizations (May 20), and Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Hong Kong Presbytery (May 21).

Meanwhile, the Christian community started to ponder the threat of the extradition bill to churches in Hong Kong. Some scholars doubted that offenders accused of religious crimes would be exempt from extradition (Security Bureau 2019),<sup>6</sup> citing the Chinese government's previous choices to deal with religious issues in a "nonreligious modus." In fact, it is not uncommon for Christian house churches in China to be convicted on economic charges such as illegal business operations, publishing, or fundraising, or tax evasion. This means that mainland Chinese ministries run by Hong Kong churches, particularly those involving unregistered house churches or underground churches, could be the focus of "economic charges" (*Apple Daily* 2019c; Ho K. H. 2019).

On the other hand, some church leaders were in favor of the contentious bill. For instance, Rev. Canon Peter Douglas Koon 管浩鳴, the provincial secretary general of Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui (Hong Kong Anglican Church), affirmed that the amendment bill was aligned with the principle of justice. As a member of the Beijing committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Koon did not believe that the amendment would lead to Hong Kong residents being extradited on religious grounds (*Sing Tao Daily* 2019).

### 3.2 Religion amid Joint Statements

As the local churches and their followers became increasingly concerned about the controversy over the amendment, some banded together as "groups of denominations" (*yiqun zongpairen*—一群宗派人) to voice their concerns through joint statements (Table 1).

6 The Security Bureau document states: "Requests involving persons being discriminated against or prosecuted/punished on account of race, religion, nationality, or political opinions shall be refused."

TABLE 1 *Voluntary joint statements by pastors and laypersons*


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May 24	Members of the Catholic Church
May 25	Members of the Methodist Church St. Francis Action (Anglican)
May 26	Members of the Assemblies of God Members of the Baptist Church
May 27	Members of the Evangelical Free Church of China Members of the Pentecostal Holiness Church Members of the Hong Kong Tsz Kwong Bethel Church
May 28	Members of the Pentecostal Church Members of the Covenant Church Members of the Lutheran Church Members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Members of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church Graduates of Evangel Seminary Interdenominational pastors and alumni Students and teachers from various theological institutions
May 29	Members of the Rhenish Church Members of the Remembrance of Grace Church Members of the Bread of Life Christian Church Members of the Kowloon City Baptist Church Members of the Anglican Church
May 30	Members of Tsung Tsin Mission
May 31	Members of Swatow Christian Church Members of Chung Chi College Chapel

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One of the organizers of the “groups of denominations” said that their purpose is to arouse Christians’ attention to this public issue. They also initiated a joint statement concerning religious freedom in China in 2018 (Ying 2020). Although the dispute over the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill does not directly involve religious freedom, it is of great significance to justice, civil rights, and freedom in Hong Kong. An examination of the content of the statements made by the various “groups of denominations” in response to the amendment bill shows that their major concern is that it poses a threat to the “one country, two systems” policy and Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy (Interview 2020b).

The joint statements were also signed by alumni and students from many secondary schools, including Protestant and Catholic schools. According to



initial statistics, students and alumni from at least 344 secondary schools signed the joint declarations,<sup>7</sup> accounting for more than half of all secondary schools in Hong Kong.<sup>8</sup> Of these schools, nearly 200 were Protestant or Catholic and included schools run by the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Church of Christ in China, Baptist Church, Methodist Church, Lutheran Church, and Tsung Tsin Mission of Hong Kong.

Online petitions led by secondary school alumni and students (who were later joined by primary school alumni) played an important role in the movement. In just a few clicks, organizers were able to quickly mobilize people from across different sectors to sign the petitions, creating a far-reaching impact. By June 9, according to *Hong Kong Citizen News* (2019), a total of 259,000 people in Hong Kong had signed certain joint statements, including 173,000 persons from secondary schools and alumni groups. *Hong Kong Stand News* estimated that the number of signatures collected from students and alumni stood at 132,000, not counting signatures of individuals who did not list their graduation year or current year of study, or signatures of teachers and staff. This total included 28,000 currently registered students and 35,000 alumni who had graduated within the past five years.

The vital role of young people (13 to 24 years of age) indicated in the above data has completely changed our view that youth are uninterested in social movements (*Stand News* 2019c). In retrospect, young people's critical role in the mobilization stage, particularly in the e-petitions in late May, was the first inkling of their active participation in the later part of the movement.

How, then, should we understand the large numbers of signatures of alumni and students from Christian schools? Not surprisingly, the *Global Times* blamed the clergy. In a fiery attack, the newspaper alleged that "the Protestants and Catholic religious groups and clergy have used their advantageous positions in Christian schools to foment turmoil, class strikes, and confrontation with the police" (*Global Times* 2019; *TKP* 2019b). Just as the anti-extradition bill movement has been linked to foreign manipulation, and Christianity is associated with CIA infiltration, the narrative of the clergy's influence (which was clearly exaggerated) aimed to ascribe the ire of the young people to an external instigator. The political smear intended to deflect attention from the core issue and dismiss the strong public support and rallying power of the movement.

7 This is based on the information collected by HKEd4All, an education advocacy group, and posted on its Facebook page up to May 27, 2019.

8 According to the Education Bureau, there were 587 secondary schools in Hong Kong in 2018–2019.

The joint statements of students and the wider community made the Christian denominations and churches increasingly aware of the extradition controversy. In early June, Sen Lok Christian Church (June 4), the Baptist Convention of Hong Kong (June 6), and members from Evangelize China Fellowship (June 4) launched their petitions and statements of concern. The Baptist Convention explicitly accused the government of ignoring public opinion and made it clear that the church could not just “remain silent” (Hong Kong Baptist Convention 2019). While this has changed the general perception that the Baptist Church takes no position on contentious issues, there was backlash within the church itself, and sixty-nine board members requested a retraction of the statement (Tin and Mak 2019). In response to the internal objection, Reverend Lo Hing-Choi 羅慶才, chairman of the Baptist Convention, condemned the extradition amendment as “evil” and urged the church to express its views according to Christian faith and to refuse to be an “accomplice” (Lo 2019). On June 9, 1.03 million Hong Kong people poured into the streets to march against the amendment bill. But the government was determined to press ahead with the second reading. Bracing for heightened tension, churches and various denominations began to organize prayer meetings to allay anxiety.

The grim political situation caused grave concern among churches. Some called for a “suspension” of the amendment bill. The Anglican Archbishop Paul Kwong 鄭保羅, in his first pastoral letter on June 11, acknowledged that the proposed amendment had caused “heated debates and deep-seated uneasiness and worries that have resulted in violent conflicts, thus dividing the society” (Kwong 2019). On June 8, Hong Kong Christian & Missionary Alliance Church Union suggested the amendments be put on hold “until a consensus was reached” (CMACUHK 2019). On June 11, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, in its “Bishop’s Pastoral Letter,” called for a suspension of the amendments while expressing “deep regret” for the government’s insistence on carrying out the second reading (Chang and Yeung 2019). Efforts to suspend the bill also came from some pro-establishment church leaders. Reverend Patrick So 蘇穎智, at that time the pastor-in-charge of the Evangelical Free Church of China (EFCC) Yan Fook Church, called on the government not to “push” the second reading (*Stand News* 2019b). Days later, the senior pastor of 611 Bread of Life Christian Church, known for his pro-establishment profile, appealed to the government leadership “to empathize with the fears and doubts of the general public, and to suspend the bill with a humble and open attitude in order that disputes be defused” (Cheung 2019).

### 3.3 *Christianity without Leaders*

On examining Christians’ participation in the mobilization stage, it is clear that the most active players were individual believers who initiated numerous

impromptu joint statements. As a matter of fact, only a handful of organizations issued group petition statements or prayer requests, either as joint organizations, denominational committees, or church groups: the Hong Kong Christian Council, the Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China, the Methodist Church, Hong Kong, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, Cumberland Presbyterian Church Hong Kong Presbytery, the Baptist Convention of Hong Kong, and the Christian & Missionary Alliance Church Union, Hong Kong. This indicates that churches were generally cautious and remained tight-lipped on touchy social and political issues—most likely because of “political neutrality.”

“Political neutrality” represents a purposeful distancing from all political positions. Primarily driven by one’s belief in a cloistered life and unworldliness, political neutrality also creates a tendency to be nonpolitical or apolitical. No doubt, some churches were also concerned that official church statements would further strain the internal relationship, as exemplified by the Baptist Convention’s statement mentioned earlier. The Convention’s ordeal clearly shows the pressure and challenges faced by religious leaders who were outspoken on some political issues.

A church leader explained their reticence on political issues thus: “To remain impartial, the church would not issue an official statement on a political problem when both sides of the argument are reasonable. The church does not take sides on every [political] issue. The world is full of controversies, but we trust that our almighty and omniscient God is in control” (Chan 2019:1).

Compared to church statements, voluntary joint statements by believers are much less contentious. Their voluntary nature means that everyone can act according to their own reflection of faith. Individual statements also offer great opportunities for building rapport among like-minded believers across churches with the same denominational traditions. This precisely is the essence of the “leaderless” (*wudatai* 無大台) anti-extradition bill movement. Despite this, conflicts were almost inevitable, as individuals’ impromptu actions could be seen as attempts to “hijack” and divide the church. To illustrate, just two days after a group of Kowloon City Baptist Church members launched a petition on May 29, the church clarified its position on its website and Facebook: “We hereby declare that we have not initiated any petition in relation to the amendments to the extradition bill.”<sup>9</sup> This upset some members, who perceived the church’s statement as a prompt move to distance itself from the petition.

9 This clarification has been deleted from Facebook and the website.

## 4 Christians in the Protests

### 4.1 “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” as Spiritual Resistance

As the movement evolved from emergence and mobilization to mass protests in June, the Christian community also redefined its role along the political trajectory. In May, individual believers, denominations, and church leaders were not mobilized for actions beyond declarations. During this period, the Hong Kong Pastors Joint Declarations Committee played a pivotal role in coordinating and mobilizing the Christian community in the movement.

The committee was a group of pastors who were concerned about the recent crisis in Hong Kong. On May 28, thirty members of the committee led a petition against the extradition and collected signatures from eight hundred pastors from various Christian denominations (HKPJDC 2019). On June 10, just three days before the second reading of the bill, the Committee organized a seventy-two-hour prayer meeting (“Shalom of this city from the fear of captivity”) at the Central Government Offices. Nearby, a multitude of citizens were gathering for a similar cause. In the face of fear that the proposed bill would be passed after the June 9 protest, the public prayer meeting offered an opportunity for the church to reach out to civilians rallying at the same open space while gathering many believers to pray for the crisis.

Perhaps not many would anticipate that “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord,” a closing hymn picked by the convener of the marathon prayer rally, would become one of the theme songs of the movement. Soon after midnight fell on June 12, protesters started to sing the hymn incessantly, calming many souls, especially in the tense and highly charged situation (Lo 2019b). With its reassuring message of God’s ultimate victory (Cultural Watch Dog 2019), the hymn quickly became a rally favorite among Christians and nonbelievers—and even more so when confrontations with the police erupted. The song even made the headlines in overseas media (Pang and Zaharia 2019).

Behind the serenity of “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord,” a group of pastors were bravely standing between protesters and police on the front line. The Hong Kong Pastoral Care Team, established in 2014 during the Umbrella Movement, was committed to mobilizing pastoral workers to act as buffers when clashes broke out. On June 12, in a clearing operation, a pastor urged the police to give a warning before advancing. In a belligerent tone, a police officer replied, “Ask your Jesus to come down to see us” (*jiao ni yesu luoli jian wodi* 叫你耶穌落嚟見我地) (Mak 2019). A few days later at a prayer meeting, a pastor reassured his congregation that “Jesus is among us” and encouraged the church to boldly engage with the world and not to pull back from contentious political issues (Ko 2019). Since June, many pastors had taken to the streets to support

the young protesters. As a result, people's perception of Christianity greatly improved. Some media even hailed the frontline Christian leaders as the "fire-fighting priests" (*jiuhuo mushi* 救火牧師) in the movement (Yeung 2019). Even on LIHKG, a Hong Kong equivalent of Reddit, many subscribers posted messages of appreciation for Christians (LIHKH 2019). Indisputably, the great reconciliation between LIHKG and "Christards"<sup>10</sup> was no less significant than the cooperation between the peaceful and radical protesters in the social movement.<sup>11</sup>

Since June, the Hong Kong Pastors Joint Declarations Committee has published a few prayers on its Facebook page, faithfully responding to the tensions in Hong Kong during the anti-extradition bill movement. The following prayer was posted on June 13 after the police unblocked the streets on June 12:

We proclaim once more that we are in but not of the world, that the evil regimes of the earth will collapse, and that only God's kingdom of justice and mercy will prevail forever and ever! At this moment, we will continue to lament with tears and strive for true serenity, though our fear has not been removed as there are beasts baring fangs and brandishing claws! We do not know how long we shall cry out, but we beseech the Holy Spirit to continue to pray for us with unutterable sighs, and to remind us to keep praying until the day when the Lord's kingdom finally prevails! On that day we shall sing, again and again, to praise the Lord! All nations shall sing together: "Sing Hallelujah to the Lord!" (Lo 2019a)

Another prayer also expresses the anguish and struggle of believers while calling on the Lord:

10 The English word "Christards" is a translation of the Chinese word 耶L (*ye L*), which, in Hong Kong Cantonese is used to mock those "superstitious," "blind," or "fundamentalist" Christians who have lost their abilities to distinguish right from wrong because of their conservative Christian beliefs. See Kursk et al. 2017.

11 Some scholars have pointed out that there are six key Chinese and English phrases in the movement: "valiant" (*yong wu* 勇武), "peaceful, rational, nonviolent" (*helifei* 和理非), "Be Water," "not one less" (*yige dou buneng shao* 一個都不能少), "leaderless" (*wudatai* 無大台), and "we fight on, each in his own way" (*xiongdipashan* 兄弟爬山). See Leung 2019. During the Umbrella Movement, there appeared two different lines of protest—the "peaceful, rational, nonviolent" one and the "valiant" one—that reflected the peaceful and nonviolent principles of the mainstream social movements in Hong Kong, which frowned on violent protests. However, during the anti-extradition bill movement, since the police had been using disproportionate force since June 12, the protesters used more radical or violent measures, which were better understood by the general public.

Lord, how much longer shall we be oppressed?  
 Until when shall we live in fear?  
 Are you hiding your face from all that is before you?  
 Are you indifferent to what is happening now?  
 We regret our past ignorance toward society, our love of our own lives,  
 our selfishness.  
 But at this moment we earnestly beseech thee, to quench the fire of  
 hell which is before us.  
 Show, O God, that thou art a mighty God, and break in pieces the head  
 of evil power.  
 Grant us great boldness to stand up against the unjust regimes.  
 How will the world know you as God?  
 How can we take responsibility for our children?  
 Empower us to take the path we should and can take;  
 Let Hong Kong remain hopeful by revealing Yourself.  
 All that we have has been taken from us, but we will never yield to evil;  
 We stick to the true, the good, and the beautiful, for we will remain  
 faithful to God until death. (B. Ho 2019)

Best described as the “laments” for Hong Kong in the summer of freedom in 2019, these prayers expressed determination to stand up to totalitarianism while laying bare the struggles facing Christians in times of uncertainty.

Meanwhile, the Pastors Joint Declarations Committee and the Pastoral Care Team called for more pastors to boldly walk with the protesters on the front line. In August, the Hong Kong Catholic Center posted on its web page a picture of Jesus embracing protesters with a caption reading, “Children, are you tired?! Come to me!!” (*haizi, leilema?! daowo genqian lai!!* 孩子 · 累了吧?!到我跟前來吧!!) (Figure 1). The message brings the much-needed reassurance that God is the refuge for young people. By emphasizing Jesus’ strong presence in his walk with Hongkongers in the movement, it adds a “spiritual” dimension to the movement and shows just how “down-to-earth” Christian spiritual practice should be. However, the image was quickly interpreted as an example of Christians’ permissive attitude toward the “thugs” by *Wen Wei Po*, a pro-Beijing newspaper (*WWP* 2019e).

#### 4.2 *Practicing Hospitality to Strangers: Churches as Rest Areas*

Initially the demonstrations were mostly confined to Hong Kong Island (from Victoria Park to Central). As the movement flourished, demonstrations began to erupt in all parts of Hong Kong (such as Kowloon, Sheung Shui, Yuen Long, Sheung Wan, Mong Kok, Tseung Kwan O, Tai Po, Sham Shui Po, Hung Hom and To Kwa Wan, Kwun Tong, Tsuen Kwai Tsing, Hong Kong International Airport,



Figure 1  
“Children, are you tired?! Come to me!!”

etc.). During the district protests, many churches opened their premises as rest areas where marchers were provided with medical assistance, prayer spaces, and spiritual counseling.

In response to the churches' involvement, on June 12, *Ta Kung Pao* (another pro-Beijing newspaper in Hong Kong), condemned the Chinese Methodist Church and the Salvation Army Education and Development Center as “warehouses for rioters” (TKP 2019c). In August, *Wen Wei Po* lashed out again, this time at Saint Vincent's Chapel in Wong Tai Sin Primary School. The newspaper suspected that “the chapel was a shelter for rioters under the guise of religion” (WWP 2019e). It also cited a netizen's comment: “Condoning violence and achieving justice by illegal means—is that the goal of our school bodies?” It went further to denounce the school, citing another netizen's words: “The school couldn't hide its sinister motive when it turned a sacred site into a refuge for the rioters: it was clearly in cahoots with rioters in attacking residents and vandalizing facilities in Wong Tai Sin” (WWP 2019b). In September, *Wen Wei Po* accused Missionary Alliance Tin Chung Nursery School, Missionary Alliance Riviera Gardens Church, and Saint Vincent's Catholic Chapel in Wong Tai Sin of providing “refuges” for “rioters.” In early October, *Ta Kung Pao* twice attacked the Chinese Methodist Church and Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Catholic Church, calling them “private dens” and “rest places for rioters” (*TKP* 2019a; *TKP* 2019d).

Apparently, the opening of church premises to marchers had drawn concerns from the authorities and the leftist media. According to a local newspaper, the Hong Kong Education Bureau had met with the superintendent of Wong Tai Sin Catholic Primary School to express its concerns (*Apple Daily* 2019b). Meanwhile, *Wen Wei Po* quoted a lawyer as saying, “Religious beliefs should never be above the law.... Religion is no excuse” (*WWP* 2019c). The pro-Beijing newspaper’s tactic was clear: by repeatedly accusing the church schools of “covering up for the mob” and calling all participants “rioters,” it was using public opinion to coerce the church into “self-censorship” along Beijing’s “red line.”

The church also came under pressure from its own members, who held different views about opening premises to marchers during demonstrations. There were reports of disgruntled members saying that they had “stopped donating” to the church as a result. Still, many churches were willing to meet the needs of the community and show “hospitality to strangers” (*Apple Daily* 2019d). I interviewed a Protestant pastor who opened her church as a rest area for the first time. The pastor pointed out that although church members had divided views on this issue, she still decided to support the opening (Interview 2020a).

Initial statistics from June to early October show that at least 150 churches (including Catholic and Protestant denominations and churches) and other Christian organizations had opened their premises as rest stops for protesters. The actual number is believed to be even higher. As the *Union of Catholic Asian News* quoted a member of its congregation as saying, “The Catholic Church is a church for all. We accept everyone and offer help whenever it is needed. We won’t label anyone” (*UCAN* 2019).

In October, the four Catholic and Protestant Churches named and shamed by some left-leaning newspapers issued a rare open letter to their members, reiterating that their churches were “an urban oasis in the community” that welcomed people from all sectors and provided “physical, psychological, and spiritual care, humanitarian services, and a place of rest” for those in need: “These were what motivated our churches to remain open during the protests.” The letter ended with a biblical quotation: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).<sup>12</sup>

12 The letter, dated October 3, 2019, was signed by Father Law Kwok-fai 羅國輝, the parish priest at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church; Rev. Wong Chun-ting 王震廷, minister-in-charge of the The Church of Christ in China Congregational Church; Rev. Poon Yuk-kuen



### 4.3 *Participation of Young Christians*

According to a survey conducted by researchers from four local universities between June 9 and August 31, 77.9% of the 12,231 respondents from 19 demonstrations had a tertiary education. Among all participants, 11.8% were under 19 years of age, 49.2% were between 20 and 29, 19.7% between 30 and 39, and 19.3% were over 40 (Lee et al. 2019:13). Evidently the movement since June has taken root deep in the community, with growing support from all ages.

Given that young people were at the core of the Hong Kong protests, the role of young Christians should not be overlooked. In early September, an online survey of Christian youth revealed that up to 80 percent of them had participated in certain demonstrations in the anti-extradition bill movement. They believed the most important responsibilities of the church were (1) to stand with and pray for people in Hong Kong (73.7%); (2) to fight against unjust regimes (65.3%); and (3) to care for others (60.7%) (Shum 2019). In addition to this, the Hong Kong Fellowship of Evangelical Students surveyed the protest experiences of 12 Christians from tertiary institutions who took part in the June 12 protest. Respondents said that “their actions and responses were driven not only by righteous indignation, but by their desire to pursue Christian faith” (FES 2019:5).

I interviewed a Christian who had been actively involved in the movement since the end of May. As the movement evolved, the interviewee also moved steadily forward—bit by bit—and finally became a frontline “radical” protester. Admitting that violence may go against Christian beliefs, the respondent nevertheless decided to fight for the future of Hong Kong unflinchingly (Interview 2019). The young generation in the anti-extradition bill movement have shown the world how much they embrace universal values such as democracy, freedom, and justice<sup>13</sup> while asserting their aspirations for Hong Kong’s future (Stakeholders 2019).

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潘玉娟, minister-in-charge of the Chinese Methodist Church; and Rev. Eden Fletcher, minister-in-charge of the Methodist International Church.

13 According to a survey conducted by Breakthrough Limited, 80 percent of the young people surveyed said that they “went into the streets to uphold justice.” See Breakthrough 2019.

## 5 Religion in the Midst of “Stop Violence and Curb Disorder”

### 5.1 *Internal Strife and Split*

The movement has seen the Christian community caught in conflicts within and outside the church. First, pro-government voices in some churches are still loud and clear. On June 11, for instance, one pastor warned that the anti-extradition bill movement was incited by “troublemakers with malicious intent.” He alleged, “These agitators have been stirring up troubles—one after another—and wave after wave. Using the imperfections of ‘one country, two systems,’ they colluded with foreign forces, turning a Hong Kong issue into an international political challenge against the Beijing and Hong Kong governments.” He then called on his congregation to pray: “As a church in Hong Kong after its reunion with China, we ask the Lord to help us to keep watch on Hong Kong, instead of making things worse. We ask that the Lord support our young and growing government to govern effectively, and to introduce measures that truly benefit Hong Kong people.” He added,

This is how we should pray for our churches.... I, as a servant of the Lord, call upon the pastors, as well as other Christian brothers and sisters, NOT to make any misleading statements in the name of a denomination, institution, seminary, or church, as they deviate from the purpose of the Christian community and undermine the principle of church-state separation, and can be easily exploited by those with untoward motives. Of course, it is a different story if they are making such statements in their own names. We also urge Christians to stay in their churches today and tomorrow for prayers and stay away from the streets to avoid danger and being exploited. This is our prayer. (Ng 2019)

Apart from those who interpreted the movement as a “political struggle,” many more simply opposed the use of violence. For instance, the Anglican House of Bishops had on several occasions issued pastoral letters to express its “anguish” and its “rejection” of violence in the protests (Pastoral Letter 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Further, on August 10, a group of pastors and other believers launched a petition called “Say no to violence of any kind,” explicitly stating the Christian principle of nonviolence (Shum and Law 2019).

But since the church is a microcosm of society, discord within the church is inevitable. In fact, tensions within the church during the anti-extradition bill movement were not uncommon. In some churches, for instance, believers interrupted sermons to confront their pastors about their active involvement in the social movement. Some churches simply told their pastoral workers to avoid “politicizing” sermons (HKCRM 2019:19–23) or “sharing their political views” in their preaching. Instead they were reminded to “focus on the teachings of the Bible” to avoid “hurting the feelings of members with different political views, or destroying the fellowship and unity among believers” (Lam

2019). The anti-extradition bill campaign has caused a rift in the church far deeper than what was seen in the 2014 Umbrella Movement.

### 5.2 *External Political Criticism*

In a rare move, the left-leaning media launched a barrage of criticism at Christianity in Hong Kong. Christian individuals and organizations involved in the movement suddenly found themselves targeted in a smear campaign spearheaded by the online media and pro-Beijing newspapers.

In early August, a widely circulated video in Mandarin linked Christianity in Hong Kong with CIA infiltration. In the ten-minute program, the host purported that the CIA had “at least 300 to 500 outsiders” in Hong Kong Protestant and Catholic churches. These “outsiders” were “controlling and influencing 10,000 clerics and other Christian leaders.” Allegedly, “more than 80 percent of the so-called Protestant and Catholic churches in Hong Kong are agencies with political purposes, not real churches” (*Daguo boyi* 2019).

In mid-September, *Wen Wei Po* named and condemned a few churches that had opened their buildings as rest areas during the protests, accusing them of “shielding the thugs” (*WWP* 2019a, *WWP* 2019c). Meanwhile, *Global Times* published an article entitled “These Religious Scammers Are More Toxic to Hong Kong Than You Can Imagine.” The provocative article decried the churches’ involvement in the anti-extradition bill campaign as “extremely toxic,” claiming that “certain religious institutions and clergy” were “sparing no effort to sow poison in the minds of young people in Hong Kong,” and asserted that “now is the time to extract the poison” (*Global Times* 2019).

Apparently the CCP was nervous about the impact of Christianity during the city’s transition to democracy. Their fears were indicated by their penchant for linking all democratic demands with “foreign forces,” “color revolutions” (Duan 2016), or even “Hong Kong independence.” In an editorial on September 20, *Wen Wei Po* stated its position:

Hong Kong has been devastated by violence and cannot afford further chaos. Anyone and any institution that truly loves Hong Kong has the responsibility to do its best to stop violence and curb disorder. The government respects and protects the right and freedom of the public to express their opinions. Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor 林鄭月娥 has conducted dialogues to communicate with the public with sincerity and goodwill. She hopes that dialogues will replace confrontation and resolve conflicts. At this time, the religious community should, with more love and tolerance, help the government promote greater social reconciliation, so as to free Hong Kong from violence and restore order as soon as possible. (*WWP* 2019d)

Some scholars point out that the Beijing and Hong Kong SAR governments have employed a mixed strategy of “hard and soft repression” against different sectors that have supported the movement, such as civil servants, media people, firefighters, lawyers, journalists, and educators (Hui 2020). The same ploy has been used in their dealings with the Christian community. This reflects the influence of the China factor and the united front tactics on the city’s religious circles (Ying 2018).

## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 *The Church in the Protests*

This paper has reconstructed the different levels of participation of Christians in the anti-extradition bill movement in Hong Kong from April to September 2019. Throughout the mobilization and protest stages, it can be seen that Christian actors played an active and supportive role in the protest movement. During the mobilization stage, the joint statements initiated by various “groups of denominations” not only awakened many Christians but also attracted wide attention in the public sphere. Particular emphasis must be given to the unique roles played by Christians in the protest stage. For instance, Christians on the front line of the protests singing the hymn “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” added a spiritual dimension to resistance. Christian churches opening their premises as rest areas also constructed “hospitality spaces” at scenes of protest across various districts. Nevertheless, the role of Hong Kong Christians in the movement of 2019 should not be overstated. Divided opinions within the Christian community and external political pressure have both strained church-state relations and presented challenges to the community during the social movement.

As compared with previous social movements, the Christian community has played a more active part in the anti-extradition movement. It is worth noting that a broad theological spectrum has been on display in this protest movement, ranging from Catholicism to Protestantism (including mainline ecumenical as well as evangelical denominations). However, no obvious theological factors can be identified as motives for the “going public” of Hong Kong Christianity. The different levels of Christian participation in the protest movement may not be driven by any specific theological discourse (such as Minjung theology in Korea, or liberation theology in Latin America), but may rather reflect a political awakening experienced by Christians and Hong Kong people in the unusual and turbulent year of 2019.

Following the Umbrella Movement in 2014, social movements had been sluggish due to constant political repression. No one could believe that the

anti-extradition bill movement would have inspired a strong and lasting resistance far exceeding what was witnessed in the Umbrella Movement. One commentator points out, “The Umbrella Movement five years ago was one with a forward-looking goal. It’s a battle for something not yet there—democracy; the anti-extradition bill movement is a struggle to protect our core values—something that is in us—freedom and the rule of law” (Zhang 2019). The movement reflects people’s concerns over the extradition amendment bill, particularly its threat to the judicial “firewall” of “one country, two systems.” Despite the violent crackdown and “white terror” since June 2019, the resistance has shown no sign of abating. The slogan “liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our time” (*guangfu xianggang shidai geming* 光復香港，時代革命) is still widely chanted in protests.<sup>14</sup> While there are different interpretations of the slogan, it evokes a feeling many can identify with: the visceral pain of witnessing the imminent fall of Hong Kong. Another rally favorite, “Glory to Hong Kong” (*yan rongguang gui xianggang* 願榮光歸香港), which expresses the deep yearning for democracy and freedom, has become the movement’s theme song since September 2019.

Under these circumstances, many pastors and believers have been awakened by the movement. Like many other people in Hong Kong, they have gone through various phases of awareness (Ma 2020). This awakening experience shows their determination to walk with the people of Hong Kong, reflecting the introspection and appeal of the church as they refuse to be “detached from real life” (*lidi* 離地). Indeed, the anti-extradition bill movement has caused the churches to grapple with church-state relations in the post-handover era. How should an awakened church confront the looming totalitarian era? How should the church deal with internal contradictions while responding to its external political pressures? All these will surely herald a new chapter of church-state relations in Hong Kong.

## 6.2 Reflections on Church-State Relations

Church-state relations has always been a challenging subject in the Chinese context. Conceptually, church-state relations in China is four-dimensional: it consists of relationships on the axes of politics–religion, state–religion, church–state (or church–government), and church–politics (Ying 2019b:131). Given its bewildering complexity, the subject needs constant clarification even

14 According to a statement issued by the Hong Kong SAR government on July 2, 2020, this slogan violated the newly enacted National Security Law: “The slogan ... nowadays connotes ‘Hong Kong independence,’ or separating the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) from the People’s Republic of China, altering the legal status of the HKSAR, or subverting the State power” (Hong Kong SAR Government 2020).

at the theoretical level. In practice, church-state relations is far more complicated, as evidenced in the four tiers of relationships that are inextricably intertwined in the current situation.

The political and religious entanglements presented in the anti-extradition bill movement mean that contention over church-state relations is unavoidable for the Christian community in Hong Kong. The church in Hong Kong has long been in a close “partnership” with the government, thanks to its participation in education and social services. The anti-extradition bill movement shows that what really determined Christians’ attitudes and positions was not only the policy (such as the extradition bill) itself but also one’s judgment of whether the city is under a totalitarian regime. Should the church continue to work with the government, or be more proactive in the fight for democracy and justice against totalitarianism? This leads to questions about the relationship between church and politics: How does the church understand its social responsibility and mission? Is the gospel primarily about individual salvation, or does it also have social meanings? Should Christians support civil disobedience? Are radical protests acceptable? On reviewing the church disputes over the anti-extradition and anti-totalitarianism protests, it is clear how the church has been deeply divided and impacted in the face of social and political agitation. In fact, the active participation of many Christians, pastors, and churches in the protest movement has somewhat strained the relationship between religion and the government. Although it is well understood that the social resistance has been directed against the HKSAR government, no one should neglect the fact that the Chinese government is the fulcrum in the incident. To this day, these questions have yet to be answered: How does Beijing understand the civil unrest in Hong Kong, especially the involvement of Christianity? While the protests will likely prompt the Beijing government to adjust its policy toward Hong Kong, will this also mean further tightening its grip on religion? And finally, with the unlimited expansion of state power, will Hong Kong experience a new paradigm shift in church-state relations?

### 6.3 *Contesting for Public Religion in Hong Kong*

The role of Christianity in Hong Kong in the anti-extradition bill movement in 2019 helps us examine Casanova’s concept of public religion. When explaining the “deprivatization” of modern religion, Casanova points out that it is “the process whereby religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, discursive legitimation and redrawing of boundaries” (Casanova 1994:65–66). What is referred to here is the border between the public and private spheres. According to Casanova, by crossing

boundaries, public religions may help to mobilize people to challenge the public's claims and contribute to a public debate about such issues. Regardless of the outcome of the debate or the historical impact, religions will have played an important role in the public sphere (Casanova 1994:43).

Hong Kong Christianity also witnessed this kind of boundary crossing in its response to disputes over the bill amendments. We can see that the major demand of Christian activists who support the protest is to safeguard not just their own freedom of religion, but all modern freedoms and rights. The wide range of Christians in Hong Kong, including Roman Catholics and Protestants (both mainline ecumenical and evangelical ones), strive to express their determination to defend the "one country, two systems" policy, worrying that proposed changes to the extradition law will seriously damage Hong Kong's judicial autonomy and endanger basic human rights in the city. This kind of opposition to state intervention shows concern for the common good and is exactly in line with what Casanova calls the publicness that religion assumes at the level of civil society.

The participation of Hong Kong Christian actors in this protest movement might well be understood as an attempt to redraw the boundaries in a quest for the public role of Christianity. However, this attempt has also brought unprecedented tensions and rifts both within the church and between the state and the church. On the one hand, there are voices in the church that support the amendment of the extradition bill and favor a counter-mobilization against the protest movement. This move has further deepened the internal splits after the Umbrella Movement. On the other hand, as the anti-extradition bill movement evolved over time, the protest against the HKSAR and Beijing governments became a fight against totalitarianism that was joined by many more Hong Kong citizens. Therefore, Christian actors are among those targeted by criticisms from the state and its peripheral organizations. Such external political pressures added fuel to the antagonism within the church and gave political legitimacy to the voices urging counter-mobilization. In this regard, although Hong Kong does not have national churches according to Casanova's definition, religion has entered the public sphere at the state and political levels in the mobilization in support of the bill's amendment and the counter-mobilization against the protest movement. Of course, this kind of "publicness" is different from public religion at the level of civil society.

The anti-extradition bill movement, with its internal and external contradictions and challenges, has witnessed the efforts of Hong Kong Christianity to "go public." The religious mobilization and participation in the protest movement may not have yielded the expected results, as the Beijing government labels the movement a "color revolution" and is determined to exercise full and

totalistic control over Hong Kong. However, from a long-term perspective, the fierce debates that have arisen from the movement prove to be a contribution to the quest for the public role of Christianity in Hong Kong.

#### 6.4 *Postscript: Toward a National Security Era*

The summer of 2019 has marked an extraordinary chapter in the history of Hong Kong, a city whose people have been fighting against totalitarianism and defending freedom with their lives. “How will this end?” Presently this question raised by *The Economist* (2019) in its August 2019 issue is still relevant, given that the unprecedented mass protest is not yet over.

In May 2020, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress decided to promulgate the National Security Law in Hong Kong in response to the year-long protest movement. When the new law came into effect on July 1, 2020, the question whether the “one country, two systems” policy only exists in name became even more pressing for Hong Kong. The overwhelming climate of fear brought by the National Security Law has also permeated the Hong Kong Christian communities. What roles might Christians play in the post-2019 situation? There is no doubt that the National Security Law will have an unprecedented impact on religio-political relationships in Hong Kong in general and reshape church-state relations in particular. How will Christian churches deal with their relations with the HKSAR government with the new law in place? In what ways is Hong Kong Christianity responding to the looming totalitarian era, theologically and pastorally? Will the Christian churches, in the face of enormous political pressure, “re-privatize” themselves? All of these questions must be addressed in future studies.

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