

## Church and State in Post-Handover Hong Kong

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### Abstract

This essay examines the politics of church-state interactions in Hong Kong after July 1, 1997, using Anthony Gill's political-economic model of religious mobilization and liberty and Max Weber's theory of priestly versus prophetic religion. How have local Christians reacted to the Communist-backed SAR government in Hong Kong since 1997? Do Catholic and Protestant leaders and their followers play a mainly priestly or prophetic role when dealing with the authoritarian Beijing government and its subordinates in Hong Kong? From their side, do SAR officials allow Christians freedom to worship and evangelize, or is the Church increasingly persecuted the way it is on the mainland? Based on our interviews with Christian leaders from Hong Kong and an analysis of available official statistics and Chinese- and English-language publications, this essay finds that church-state relations have become increasingly fraught as some Christian intellectuals and young people more and more support anti-Beijing, prodemocracy movements. At the same time, however, the government has tried to co-opt many other, less-activist laity and clergy into remaining politically quiescent, with at least some success. Within local congregations and denominations, this effort has resulted in increased polarization along generational, educational, and political lines. While rational-choice theory is thus partially supported in the case of Hong Kong, it needs to be informed by a Weberian approach that focuses on religious ideas.

**Keywords:** Chinese Communist Party, Christians, church-state relations, handover, Hong Kong, Hong Kong National Security Law, Max Weber, rational-choice theory, Umbrella Movement, 2019 Hong Kong Protests.

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Only a few days after the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China (PRC) set in motion the legislation that would become the draconian

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Hong Kong National Security Law, some Christian leaders in Hong Kong still felt morally obligated to commemorate the 1989 massacre of thousands of prodemocracy protesters in and around Tiananmen Square. Even though Hong Kongers were no longer authorized to participate in their annual memorial march, and the new law would give the state wide-ranging powers to suppress opposition, estimates are that thousands of Christian laity and clergy defied this ban, while other co-religionists found opportunities on social media to condemn the Communist regime. For example, the Hong Kong Pastors Network posted on Facebook an image of the iconic Tiananmen “Tankman” and reminded readers that people might have “chosen to forget” or even to view the tragedy in a “coldblood[ed]” fashion, but that God “remember[s] what happened on June 4, 1989,” and his “judgement will be greater,” when even discussing the topic is “taboo.”<sup>1</sup>

Hong Kong occupies a uniquely liminal political space between its colonial past and its future integration with the People’s Republic of China; and in that unsettled position nothing is more contested and uncertain than what democratic rights, if any, will be preserved for the citizens of Hong Kong after full unification with China in 2047. This uncertainty is a byproduct of ambiguity inherent in the “One Country, Two Systems” (OCTS) model under which Hong Kong supposedly operates. Born out of political necessity and pragmatism, the OCTS metaphor invites counter- and potentially conflicting narratives on what integration with China means for Hong Kong’s political future. As an example, under the terms of the Basic Law negotiated between Britain and the People’s Republic of China, religious freedom in Hong Kong is protected during the transition period, and in practice those freedoms have largely been upheld in Hong Kong since the handover in 1997. However, Christians in Hong Kong understandably question whether those freedoms will be guaranteed once religious believers are under the watchful eye of an authoritarian government, which firmly regulates religion and systematically violates religious freedom in China.

Concern about Hong Kong’s democratic future has been at the forefront of several political struggles in the two plus decades since the handover, the most notable of which were the 2014 Occupy Central and Umbrella movements and the 2019 Hong Kong protests. While these democratizing campaigns are not entirely surprising, what is noteworthy—at least from the standpoint of the Western press—is the degree to which Christians have been actively involved in those campaigns. In the midst of the Occupy Central Movement, the *Wall Street Journal* highlighted how deeply embedded Christian churches were in that effort,<sup>2</sup> while *Foreign Policy* rhetorically asked, “Do Christians make

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<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong Pastoral Network, “For the Tiananmen Square Incident” (June 3, 2020), <https://www.facebook.com/HKPastorsNetwork/photos/pcb.3085988951446915/3085988731446937/?type=3&theater> (accessed June 9, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Ned Levin, “Hong Kong Democracy Protests Carry a Christian Mission for Some,” *Wall Street Journal* (October 3, 2014), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hong-kong-democracy-protests-carry-a-christian-mission-for-some-1412255663> (accessed August 24, 2020).

good rebels?”<sup>3</sup> Five years later, during the Anti-Extradition Bill campaign, the *New York Times* noted the “army of pastors” behind the protests<sup>4</sup> and the “hymns and prayers” that were helping to drive the democracy movement.<sup>5</sup>

While many Hong Kong Christians have joined prodemocracy campaigns, others have taken an apolitical or even pro-Beijing position. Paul Kwong, Archbishop of the Hong Kong Anglican Church, has publicly chastised Christians who oppose Beijing and has openly supported the recently passed, controversial National Security Law. In contrast, forty Christian mentors and teachers of the Tung Fook Church (同福堂), one of Hong Kong’s largest evangelical organizations, resigned from their positions in an open letter to the leadership because senior church leaders were allegedly pressuring them to keep quiet about political matters.<sup>6</sup> What explains these divergent positions among Christians in Hong Kong who claim a shared faith?

This essay analyzes how Christians at both the mass and the elite levels have responded to democratic political movements in Hong Kong since the handover. Theoretically, the essay tests a rational-choice and a Weberian model of religion-state interactions in an understudied cultural, political, and social setting: East Asia. The two pioneering works<sup>7</sup> applying rational-choice models<sup>8</sup> to religion and politics have focused on the Americas and Eastern Europe rather than Asia or Africa. More lately, a couple of scholars adopted this perspective when analyzing China,<sup>9</sup> yet even the PRC deserves much more academic attention. Moreover, no one appears to have used self-interest to explain church-state relations in East Asia during centuries of Christian

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Caryl, “Hong Kong’s Religious Revolutionaries: Do Christians Make Good Rebels?” *Foreign Policy* (October 4, 2014), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/04/hong-kongs-religious-revolutionaries/> (accessed August 24, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Jacobs, “Behind Hong Kong’s Protesters, an Army of Volunteer Pastors, Doctors and Artists,” *New York Times* (November 11, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/world/asia/hong-kong-protests.html> (accessed August 24, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Javier C. Hernández, “With Hymns and Prayers, Christians Help Drive Hong Kong’s Protests,” *New York Times* (June 19, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/world/asia/hong-kong-extradition-protests-christians.html> (accessed August 24, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Yanni Chow, “Sheep without a Shepherd: Hong Kong Churches Torn by Politics,” Reuters (August 5, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-security-churches/sheep-without-a-shepherd-hong-kong-churches-torn-by-politics-idUSKCN25208H> (accessed August 25, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and id., *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1957), and Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Yang Fenggang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” *Sociological Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2006): 93-122, and Xie Xiaoheng, “Toward an Understanding of the Prosperity of Protestantism in Contemporary China” (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, Waco, TX, 2011).

presence in the region.<sup>10</sup> While widely referenced, Max Weber's work on religion—in particular, his distinction between priestly and prophetic religion—seems especially appropriate to the pre- and post-handover situation in Hong Kong. Our essay thus contributes to the political science, religious studies, and historical literatures by using these viewpoints to investigate the complex relationship between political and religious authorities in Hong Kong.

## Theories of Church-State Relations

Rational-choice theory explains the decisions of political actors by focusing on the interests behind their actions.<sup>11</sup> The theory contends that political actors are driven to stay in power and maximize resources, while religious actors desire greater spiritual influence over society. A majority religion frequently uses its influence over the government to restrict minority religions and to expand its social reach, and political leaders respond favorably if that religious group is politically powerful or if the authorities conclude that its spiritual goals are consistent with their secular ends. But religious and political interests might not always naturally overlap. For example, Anthony Gill explains the expansion of religious freedom in Latin America after the 1990s by examining a case in which political and religious leaders came to have divergent interests. National Catholic churches adopted a pro- or antigovernment policy based on what would maximize their support from the largely poor populace. Before it faced competition from socialists, spiritists, or evangelical Protestants working among the economically marginalized, the Catholic hierarchy had been content to ally with authoritarian leaders and their upper-class backers. Gill's theory suggests that a religious group would support or oppose the political authorities based on which option would maximize its number of adherents and resources. Money and other benefits from the government were welcome, he implies. But a rational group of believers would not seek such political capital at the cost of popular rejection of its religion—at least when ideological competitors were also seeking converts among the same people. Political leaders, on the other hand, expanded the scope of religious freedoms when doing so increased their ability to stay in power and enhanced the economic well-being of the countries which they ruled, regardless of the interests of the majority religion. Thus, religious freedom was the outcome of different combinations of actor strategies.

With its central focus on the strategic interaction between political and religious leaders, rational-choice theory largely ignores the role that ideas

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), and id., *A History of Christianity in Asia: 1500 to 1900* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Parts of this section draw on our earlier work published in "Church and State in Spanish Formosa," *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* (2014): 236-248.

play in political decisions. If one instead focuses on religious ideas, one key sociological theory belongs to Max Weber.<sup>12</sup> In his terms, a religion may play a “priestly” or a “prophetic” role. In the first, clergy are dependent on or are part of the political apparatus; they give religiously based advice and comfort to the monarch or other political leaders, support the government’s policies, at least in public, and try to persuade the masses to obey the state by convincing them that God is on the side of the status quo. Religious leaders do not see themselves as separate from or independent of the state. In the second role, a church or other religious entity opposes and criticizes the state for its deviations from justice and appeals to the government to return to God’s laws. Religious authorities see themselves as independent of political ones and in critical judgment of worldly practices that violate religious norms.

A rational-choice approach and a Weberian model have a unique application to Hong Kong. During the colonial period, many individual Christians were among the British elite, while churches and church-based service organizations served as a conduit between political officials and the native and expatriate communities. For our theoretical interests, this period saw a congruence between a rational-choice and a Weberian focus on priestly religion as a collaborative relationship developed between church and state that worked to the advantage of both. Because state and religious interests largely aligned, there was little space for the development of a prophetic religious tradition that would critique state practices from a religious perspective. Since the handover, however, connections between church and state have become much more tenuous, thus opening space for a more independent religious analysis of state practices that dramatically fail to live up to the ethical and political standards of Christians.

In the following pages, we argue that a rational-choice theory is partially supported in the case of Hong Kong, but it needs to be informed by a Weberian approach that focuses on religious ideas. Both the Hong Kong government and the PRC are largely acting in ways consistent with a rational-choice perspective. Political officials allow and even encourage religious life so long as churches align themselves with state interests. For the most part, the state has maintained religious liberty in Hong Kong in the post-handover period and has continued its financial support to church-based social and educational service organizations. Remarkably, at least from the standpoint of an officially atheist PRC, the last two Chief Executives of Hong Kong, Leung Chun-ying and Carrie Lam, have been Christians. Many Christians and their churches in Hong Kong have thus concluded that it is best to be supportive of, or subservient to, state interests. A strategy whereby the state enlists the active support or passive acquiescence of religious leaders clearly has been a rational step toward achieving Beijing’s secular ends.

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<sup>12</sup> Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952 [1921]), and Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963 [1922]).

While persuasive in explaining the position of political actors and some churches, a rational-choice theory is insufficient in explicating the motivations of all Hong Kong Christians. Many believers have chafed at state policies that violate deeply held theological principles as they relate to both religious freedom and democracy. Thus, the attempt by the political leadership in Hong Kong and Beijing to co-opt churches has been only partially successful. The increasingly heavy-handed tactics of the political leadership have encouraged some Christians to see their interests as distinct from those of the state. This change in attitude largely did not take place during the pre-handover period, when a priestly model of church-state connections prevailed. The religious impulse to transmit the gospel and transform Hong Kong's culture in the light of Christian values has caused tension with state officials and led some religionists to challenge practices that violate their religious calling. In Hong Kong, therefore, a Weberian focus on the importance of ideas—in particular, religious ideas that fundamentally challenge state legitimacy—improves upon rational-choice theory.

### **Church-State Relations in Pre-Handover Hong Kong**

An informal, cooperative relationship between Christian churches and political authorities characterized colonial rule in Hong Kong. Hong Kong lacked the fully de jure religious establishment of England, nonetheless a de facto multiple establishment developed in which the state provided various churches with land and financial subsidies for a wide variety of social-service endeavors. Christian churches, particularly Roman Catholic and Anglican ones, served as contractors for the government by taking on responsibility for educational, medical, and health services for the community.<sup>13</sup> From the standpoint of the churches, providing education and social welfare to those in need was fully consistent with their theological imperatives, moreover those points of access increased the opportunity for missionary activity. The churches in Hong Kong prospered under this arrangement.<sup>14</sup> Colonial authorities similarly benefited as the churches provided much-needed social services and facilitated efforts to train a Chinese elite who could be tapped to work for the Crown.<sup>15</sup> Until the end of the Second World War, the majority of the schools in Hong Kong were

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<sup>13</sup> Chan Che-po and Beatrice Leung, "The Voting Propensity of Hong Kong Christians: Individual Dispositions, Church Influence, and the China Factor," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2002): 297-306.

<sup>14</sup> Carl T. Smith, *Chinese Christians: Elites, Middlemen, and the Church in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 183.

<sup>15</sup> Sang Law Ming, *Collaborative Colonial Power: The Making of the Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 32.

run by Catholics and Anglicans.<sup>16</sup> An equally large percentage of the health and social-welfare agencies formed in the colony was Christian.<sup>17</sup>

Christian groups also have profited from their reputation as redoubts against Communism. When a large influx of refugees from the Chinese Revolution came to Hong Kong in the 1950s, the state naturally turned to the churches to provide emergency relief for the burgeoning population.<sup>18</sup> While Christians currently constitute a minority (approximately 10 percent) of Hong Kong's population of just over seven million, church-run schools continue to educate a disproportionate percentage of Hong Kong's business and political elite.<sup>19</sup> According to one estimate, 75 percent of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's (HKSAR's) leading officials have graduated from Christian schools.<sup>20</sup> As late as 2004, more than half (56.6 percent) of all schools were religious, and 88 percent of the religious schools were Christian.<sup>21</sup> Relations between the Christian churches and the state were, as one analyst notes, a "channeled partnership"<sup>22</sup> in which religious and political authorities worked in concert for shared ends.

It was within the cooperative church-government context that negotiations for the handover took place. There was little concern that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would interfere in Hong Kong's very successful economy, but there was greater uncertainty about what restrictions, if any, would be placed on religious and political expressions in the so-called OCTS model. Those were hardly unfounded concerns. The PRC was only a few decades removed from the Cultural Revolution, which used violence to try to eradicate all religious beliefs, and while policy toward religion had liberalized considerably over the subsequent decades, religious practices were still governed by the hardline Religious Affairs Bureau (宗教局). Under the current policy for the mainland, all legal religious groups must be formally

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<sup>16</sup> Ko Tinming, *The Sacred Citizens and the Secular City: Political Participation of Protestant Ministers in Hong Kong during a Time of Change* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), 28.

<sup>17</sup> Deborah A. Brown, "Hong Kong's Catholic Church and the Challenge of Democratization in the Special Administrative Region," 180-220, in *Religious Organizations and Democratization: Case Studies from Contemporary Asia*, ed. Tun-jen Cheng and Deborah A. Brown (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Mariske Westendorp, "Salvation and Rights in Hong Kong," 397-421, in *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies*, ed. Cheng-tian Kuo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Archbishop Paul Kwong, "The Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion*, ed. Ian S. Markham, J. Barney Hawkins IV, Justin Terry, and Leslie Nunez Steffenson (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 253-263.

<sup>20</sup> Beatrice Leung and Shun-hing Chan, *Changing Church-State Relations in Hong Kong, 1950-2000* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 32.

<sup>21</sup> Roger H. M. Cheng, "Moral Education in Hong Kong: Confucian-Parental, Christian-Religious and Liberal-Civic Influences," *Journal of Moral Education* 33, no. 4 (2004): 533-551.

<sup>22</sup> Lap-yan Kung, "Politics and Religion in Hong Kong after 1997: Whether Tension or Equilibrium Is Needed," *Religion, State and Society* 32, no. 1 (2007): 21-36.

recognized by the state, and officials regularly try to suppress religious practice for those believers outside the official system. On paper, the policy's intent is to ensure the right of religious practice, but in fact, the state aims to control religion so that it will not threaten the Communist Party.<sup>23</sup>

During the period between the promulgation of the Joint Declaration in 1984 and the eventual transfer of power in 1997, religious organizations took the lead to ensure the formalization of their rights. Their principal mechanisms for doing so were the establishment of the Basic Law and the passage of a Bill of Rights. The former meant working with PRC officials, since the Chinese National People's Congress was responsible for drafting the Hong Kong Basic Law. The latter required pressing the London and Hong Kong governments for rights guarantees before the final transfer of power. Christian groups were at the forefront of both endeavors. In 1984, even before the Joint Declaration had officially been announced, Catholic Bishop John Baptist Wu issued a statement for the Catholic Church:

As the Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong, I assert unshakably the right to religious freedom. This is a basic human right, given by God, and is now enjoyed by all the people in Hong Kong. This right is demanded by man's dignity and is inherent in the very nature of man. It is essential that this basic right, and the free exercise of that right, be clearly enshrined, explicitly expressed and effectively guaranteed in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and in the Basic Law of Hong Kong.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to defining the contours of the right or religious freedom, Wu took the occasion to note the Church's contributions "in the fields of education, medical care and social welfare"; to remind officials that "95 percent of those who availed themselves of the services provided by the Catholic Church are non-Catholics"; and to affirm that the Church anticipated being able to "contribute actively to the well-being of the community in the same spirit of love and service within the limits of our competence and our resources."<sup>25</sup> Protestant associations adopted similar statements during the transition period. In 1984, the ecumenical Hong Kong Christian Council, which included the major Protestant churches, adopted "A Manifesto on Religious Freedom." This declaration affirmed "that genuine religious freedom must be based on the human rights which God bestows on all people at birth. Religious freedom

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<sup>23</sup> Siu Chau Lee, "Toward a Theology of Church-State Relations in Contemporary Chinese Context," *Studies in World Christianity* 11, no. 2 (2005): 251-269.

<sup>24</sup> Hong Kong Bishop John Baptist Wu, "Statement on the Future of Hong Kong" (August 15, 1984), [https://catholic.org.hk/v2/en/message\\_jw/y1984\\_4\\_sfhk.html](https://catholic.org.hk/v2/en/message_jw/y1984_4_sfhk.html) (accessed August 27, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*



has been and still is part and parcel of the rights the people of Hong Kong are enjoying and exercising.”<sup>26</sup> As with the Catholic statement, the Protestants similarly claimed that the right to religious freedom included a right to “set up social welfare and medical service organizations as an expression of the Church’s holistic concern for the community and individual [and] to run educational institutions.”<sup>27</sup>

Several features of the Basic Law protect religious rights and preserve the contractual relationship between religious organizations and the state. Article 141 states: “The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall not restrict the freedom of religious belief, interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations or restrict religious activities which do not contravene the laws of the Region.”<sup>28</sup> Article 144 promises that the “Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall maintain the policy practiced in Hong Kong in respect of subventions for nongovernmental organizations in fields such as education, medicine and health.”<sup>29</sup> However, the Basic Law is legally in effect for only fifty years, and other language in the document could be interpreted as a potential warning to religious groups. In particular, the somewhat ambiguous language of article 148 reads, “The relationship between...religious organizations in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and their counterparts on the mainland shall be based on the principles of non-subordination, non-interference, and mutual respect.”<sup>30</sup>

Positively, the provision regarding religious institutions in article 148 suggests that religious groups in Hong Kong will be free from the administrative control of China’s Religious Affairs Bureau. But the language also implies that religious groups in Hong Kong cannot be involved with religious or political activities on the mainland.<sup>31</sup> This double-edged sword, in short, is something that PRC officials potentially can use to limit the activities of Hong Kong religious officials on the mainland. This provision is particularly a problem for Roman Catholics, who by definition constitute a transnational organization, have long battled with the Communists over the ordination of bishops in China, and informally have assisted Catholics on the mainland for decades.<sup>32</sup> But the principle of noninvolvement potentially could be a similar barrier for Protestants, as they provide the bulk of the missionaries who evangelize on the mainland and are very involved in the underground, house-church movement.

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<sup>26</sup> Hong Kong Christian Council, *Historical Documents of the Hong Kong Christian Church* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Council, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1991), 71.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Leung and Chan, *Changing Church-State Relations in Hong Kong, 1950–2000*, 71.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

The years between the drafting of the Basic Law and the transfer of power confirmed some of the worst fears of those who supported democratization. In particular, the military suppression and massacre of student protestors and their supporters in and around Tiananmen Square in 1989 did little to convince skeptics that the Chinese authorities, in fact, would guarantee basic political and human rights. The student protestors had received significant support from the people of Hong Kong, and the aftermath of the massacre led to a movement, largely supported by Christian groups, for the passage of a Bill of Rights.<sup>33</sup> The interim period also saw the formulation of additional declarations by the major churches on the transfer of power to the PRC in 1997. A 1994 document from the Hong Kong Christian Council, for example, called on the Church to “exercise its prophetic duty...and work hard for Hong Kong in promoting democracy, human rights, freedom, and lawfulness.”<sup>34</sup> In anticipation of the criticism that Christians represented a “foreign” religion, the document also noted that “believers should identify with the citizens of Hong Kong and work hand-in-hand with them for a highly autonomous, prosperous, stable Hong Kong.” While it noted that “many people leave this place for various reasons, we shall firmly remain here to guard, to help, to comfort, and to take care of this place.”<sup>35</sup> Those were not hollow words; among the 500,000 people who left Hong Kong before the handover, some 20 percent were Christian.<sup>36</sup> The Catholic Church’s most detailed commentary on the transfer of power came in Cardinal Wu’s 1989 pastoral letter, “A March into the Bright Decade.” The document established a blueprint for the Catholic community as it prepared for the transition. It encouraged the faithful to be guided by Christian principles and to become more involved in Hong Kong’s political affairs. It urged its readers to “know Hong Kong and love Hong Kong,” but also called on Catholics to assume a prophetic role in which it would “pay serious attention to human rights.” As if to tweak Communist authorities, the letter also stated that “we believe that the Hong Kong Church has a special and historic mission in the task of reconciliation with China and the Church in China.”<sup>37</sup>

Christian churches benefited in many ways from their ties to political leaders during the colonial era. In that context they were, in Weberian terms, serving a priestly or legitimating role. This behavior was also “rational” insofar as the churches and the state benefited from the arrangement. After

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<sup>33</sup> Steve Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 250.

<sup>34</sup> Hong Kong Christian Council, *Historical Documents of the Hong Kong Christian Church*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Chunwah Kwong, *The Public Role of Religion in Post-Colonial Hong Kong* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 131.

<sup>37</sup> Hong Kong Cardinal John Baptist Wu, “A March into the Bright Decade” (May 14, 1989), [https://vgoffice.catholic.org.hk/doc/diocese/English/diocese\\_BrightEng.pdf](https://vgoffice.catholic.org.hk/doc/diocese/English/diocese_BrightEng.pdf) (accessed August 27, 2020).

those relations were threatened as Hong Kong moved toward the handover, however, Catholic and Protestant leaders demonstrated a greater willingness to critique state officials, particularly regarding their effort to protect religious rights.

## **Church-State Relations in Post-Handover Hong Kong**

In its relatively short history as a Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong has experienced a remarkably large number of mass-mobilization campaigns to preserve the core values of democracy, freedom, and the rule of law. These protests include annual prodemocracy marches and vigils on June 4 (the anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre) and July 1 (the date that commemorates the handover), demonstrations against the implementation of an antisubversion National Security Bill in 2003, a campaign opposing a National Education Bill in 2012, the 2014 Occupy Central and Umbrella Movements, and the 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Bill protests.<sup>38</sup> Church-state relations that were reasonably straightforward during the colonial period have become much more complicated since the handover, and Christian responses to these various political campaigns run the gamut from enthusiastic support, to indifference, to mild opposition.

The data for this portion of the essay come primarily from personal interviews with Hong Kong Christians and from those official documents or statements by churches that speak to the political situation on the ground. These are mainly elite sources. Between January and April 2020, we conducted fifteen interviews in various locales using a snowball sample of those Hong Kong Christian clergy, political activists, and intellectuals who were willing to speak with us. The main sources for the institutional churches are the official web pages of the two largest denominations (Roman Catholic and Anglican), both of which are hierarchically structured and have a consistent online presence; the web or Facebook pages of evangelical-Protestant megachurches that are locally independent; and media reports about Christian engagement in democracy demonstrations.

The Roman Catholic Church has consistently supported democracy in Hong Kong, and no single Christian leader has been more central in this advocacy than Cardinal Joseph Zen. When asked to name a prominent Christian democracy activist, each of our interviewees named Zen; one described him as a democracy “icon.” Zen was the Bishop of the Catholic Hong Kong Diocese from 2002 to 2009, elevated to Cardinal in 2006, and has been at the forefront of virtually every democracy campaign in Hong Kong’s handover period.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mariske Westerndorp, “Belonging to a Global Family of God in Hong Kong: The Relevance of Religion in Facing an Uncertain Future,” *Asian Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2017): 121.

<sup>39</sup> Cheng-tian Kuo, *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 39.

His predecessor as Bishop, Cardinal Wu, had staked a somewhat subtle claim for democracy and the Church in Hong Kong; there was nothing subtle about Cardinal Zen's political position. In response to the proposed National Security Bill in 2003, Cardinal Zen called for protest on July 1 and led prayers at the start of a demonstration that brought more than half a million people into the streets.<sup>40</sup> His 2005 Easter Pastoral Letter opened with the expected words of joy as the Church celebrated the "Risen Lord," but it also noted, "We [the Church] care for society. We defend justice and democracy without reticence but in return we get misunderstanding and rejection."<sup>41</sup> In 2009, he preached a sermon commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Tiananmen. Calling the uprising a "patriotic movement for democracy," Zen proclaimed that the "martyrs of Tiananmen died with Jesus Christ on the cross," and asked his listeners if they were similarly ready to "take up the banner from the hands of the martyrs to go forward bravely to continue the struggle for democracy, for the renewal of our country?"<sup>42</sup> Zen has continued to appear and speak at demonstrations since retiring as bishop in 2009, and he staged a three-day fast in 2011 to protest the government's proposed national education bill, which he claimed would limit the autonomy of Catholic schools from political control.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, Zen's successor, Cardinal John Tong, has allied the Church to political democracy. He took the occasion of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin in 2014 (in the midst of the Occupy Movement) to release a pastoral letter on electoral reform. In it, Tong all but affirmed the position of the activists when he wrote that the "mechanism and procedures for nominating candidates for election to the office of Chief Executive must be truly democratic so as to facilitate the right of the citizens to choose their leaders and fully realize the principle of universal suffrage."<sup>44</sup> The frequent statements by the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, which is responsible for implementing the social teachings of the Church, have been equally significant at an institutional level. Describing the implementation of an emergency antimask law as "shameful and totalitarian," the Commission condemned the "violent suppression by the police" during the 2019 demonstrations, called for the "immediate withdrawal"

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<sup>40</sup> Kung, "Politics and Religion in Hong Kong after 1997."

<sup>41</sup> Cardinal Joseph Zen, "Easter Pastoral Letter 2005" (March 27, 2005), <https://catholic.org.hk/en/简体中文-二零零五年复活节牧函-让祂再给我们带/> (accessed August 27, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Cardinal Joseph Zen, "Mass in Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of 'June 4' Homily by Cardinal Zen" (May 29, 2009), [https://catholic.org.hk/v2/en/message\\_cardinal/y2009\\_64.html](https://catholic.org.hk/v2/en/message_cardinal/y2009_64.html) (accessed August 27, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Cardinal Joseph Zen, "My Struggle and That of Kong Kong for Catholic Schools," *Asia News.IT* (October 25, 2011), [http://www.asianews.it/news-en/\(Hong-Kong\)-Card.-Zen:-My-struggle-and-that-of-Hong-Kong-for-Catholic-schools-23003.html](http://www.asianews.it/news-en/(Hong-Kong)-Card.-Zen:-My-struggle-and-that-of-Hong-Kong-for-Catholic-schools-23003.html) (accessed August 27, 2020).

<sup>44</sup> Cardinal John Tong, "In Support of Earnest Dialogue and Responsible Action: Pastoral Letter on the Electoral Reform and Livelihood" (August 15, 2014), [https://www.catholic.org.hk/v2/en/message\\_bishop/y20140815.pdf](https://www.catholic.org.hk/v2/en/message_bishop/y20140815.pdf) (accessed August 27, 2020).

of the extradition bill,<sup>45</sup> and urged the government to “carry out political reforms outside the framework of the 831 of the People’s Republic of China and implement universal suffrage for the election of the Chief Executive and Legislative Council in order to resolve social problems.”<sup>46</sup>

There has been a Protestant presence in various democracy campaigns, as well. A number of analysts noted that some of the key leaders of the Umbrella Movement were themselves Protestant, including Benny Tai and Pastor Chu Yiu-ming, and that many co-religionists joined in the demonstrations.<sup>47</sup> In 2015, the Reverend Tin Yau Yuen, president of the Methodist Congregations of Hong Kong, released a statement in which he defended the opening of Methodist churches to provide “shelter, medical care, and supplies to protestors” during the Occupy Central demonstrations. In response to critics in his denomination who claimed that the Church ought to be “politically neutral,” the Reverend Yuen maintained that it was “impossible to be politically neutral,” that Christians should “take sides according to Bible teaching and church tradition,” and that the political reform he advocated was “true universal suffrage in Hong Kong.”<sup>48</sup> The ecumenical Hong Kong Christian Council collected three thousand signatures on a petition which urged the SAR government to withdraw the 2019 extradition bill. Similarly, a group of thirty pastors formed a “Hong Kong Pastoral Network.” Committed to “responding to the dilemmas and challenges in front of Hong Kong with the gospel” and to “protecting the truth and refus[ing] to lie,” the group likewise called on the government to withdraw the extradition bill.<sup>49</sup>

After Beijing announced its intention to pass a national security bill for Hong Kong in May 2020, this now growing group of eight hundred members of the Pastoral Network issued a manifesto that explicitly linked the mission of the Church to the political reality on the ground in Hong Kong. Reading very

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<sup>45</sup> Legislative Council of Hong Kong, “Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019” (2019), <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr18-19/english/bills/b201903291.pdf> (accessed July 10, 2020).

<sup>46</sup> Catholic Social Justice Commission, “Open Statement of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese: Condemns the Violent Suppression by Police in Several Districts on August 31, 2019” (September 2019), [http://www.hkjp.org/statement\\_en.php?id=31](http://www.hkjp.org/statement_en.php?id=31) (accessed August 27, 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Shun-hing Chan, “The Protestant Community and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong.” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 16, no. 3 (2015): 380-395, and Wai-luen Kwok, “Reconsidering Public Theology: Involvement of Hong Kong Protestant Christianity in the Occupy Central Movement.” *Journal of Dharma* 40, no. 2 (2015): 169-188.

<sup>48</sup> Reverend Yuen Tin Yau, “A Church at a Crossroads: Pastoral Letter from the President to the Methodist Congregations of Hong Kong” (October 4, 2014), [https://www.methodist.org.hk/media/filehotlink/2014/10/06/Pastoral\\_Letter\\_to\\_MCHK\\_congregationsEng.pdf](https://www.methodist.org.hk/media/filehotlink/2014/10/06/Pastoral_Letter_to_MCHK_congregationsEng.pdf) (accessed August 27, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> Hong Kong Pastoral Network, “Pray for Our City. Pray for Peace and Deliverance from the Fear of Slavery” (July 10, 2019), <https://www.facebook.com/HKPastorsNetwork/posts/2341201049259046> (accessed August 27, 2020).

much like the 1934 Barmen Declaration in which a handful of German pastors stood against the racial ideology of the Nazis, the deeply theological statement of the Hong Kong pastors affirms that the Church “obeys and pledges allegiance only to the King of the Kingdom of Heaven—the Messiah, not to any political or economic rulers and powers on earth.” Noting that “spirituality and actions are inseparable,” the statement claims that the Church must “not be fearful of persecutions and oppressions from hell,” but must instead “courageously reject all falsehood and point out what the regime has done wrong.” It concludes that the Church will “defend human dignity, freedom, and life, demonstrating the values of the Kingdom in Hong Kong: equality, justice and love.” As of June 12, 2020, more than 3,400 had signed the manifesto.<sup>50</sup>

But not all Christians have enthusiastically embraced Hong Kong’s various democracy campaigns. One of our interviewees, a seminary professor, noted: “Most Christians and churches do not actively oppose or support the government. Even now, most churches would claim that they are politically neutral, and few churches actively oppose the government.” The views articulated by leaders of the largest and most historically important denomination in Hong Kong, the Anglican Church, have been symptomatic of this “neutral position.” Archbishop Paul Kwong, Bishop of the Hong Kong Province since 2007, has vacillated between taking a pro-Beijing position and showing some sensitivity to the concerns raised by the demonstrators, some of whom are members of his own Anglican Church.<sup>51</sup> In a 2013 interview published in a church journal, Kwong said that universal suffrage was “not a panacea nor a matter of life and death,” and that in addition to a right to vote, citizens have the obligation to ensure social stability.<sup>52</sup> At the height of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, Kwong preached a sermon in which he ridiculed protestors who had been arrested and urged prodemocracy activists to keep quiet “just as Jesus remained silent” in the face of the crucifixion.<sup>53</sup> Reflecting on the Umbrella Movement in a speech he delivered three years later, Kwong acknowledged that the movement had divided members of the Church, and that while “we did not entirely agree with them [the demonstrators], we attempted to be with them.” He further urged his audience to seek “to promote mutual understanding in a spirit of dialogue through both a recognition of differences

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<sup>50</sup> Hong Kong Pastoral Network, “Hong Kong 2020 Gospel Declaration” (2020), [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdtWNMhEUarfeqEy\\_zmkk78Pycfpfu\\_p0EV92WZuchBkdw0wvviewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdtWNMhEUarfeqEy_zmkk78Pycfpfu_p0EV92WZuchBkdw0wvviewform) (accessed August 27, 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Chan, “The Protestant Community and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong,” 385-386.

<sup>52</sup> Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui, “普選不是萬靈丹” [Universal elections are not a panacea], *Echo* (September 1, 2013), <http://echo.hkskh.org/issue.aspx?lang=2&id=131> (accessed August 27, 2020).

<sup>53</sup> Tony Cheung and Ying-kit Lai, “Reverend Paul Kwong Tells Congregation That Pro-Democracy Advocates Should Keep Quiet,” *South China Morning Post* (July 8, 2014), <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1549485/reverend-paul-kwong-tells-congregation-pro-democracy-advocates-should> (accessed August 27, 2020).

and a commitment to the common good.”<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein, Kwong used the occasion of his Christmas message in 2019 to urge the government and protestors to “take Christmas as an opportunity to start a dialogue with courage, sincerity, and humility, and to...explore ways to break out of the current dilemma because this is more effective than resorting to violence or shouting slogans.”<sup>55</sup>

Without any prompting on our part, two of our interviewees pointed out that Kwong is a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, an advisory body for the PRC that has assigned seats for religious leaders. While this position does not necessarily reflect an unthinking pro-Beijing stance by Kwong or any of its other members, it does suggest a political strategy by the regime to co-opt and thereby control religious organizations in Hong Kong. As we noted earlier in the essay, the Anglican Church historically aligned itself with the British government. Interpreted in this light, Kwong’s position is consistent with a church that worked closely with London for decades, hopes to collaborate with Beijing in a similar fashion in the future, and is concerned that threatening the PRC government will undermine those connections. Collaborative links in the current context come with expectations from both sides. Beijing seems willing for now to allow religious practice in Hong Kong, so long as believers do not use that freedom to criticize the government. When asked about the status of religious liberty in Hong Kong, one of our respondents, a seminary professor, suggested that “religious practice is broadly assured. If the church or Christian leaders would refrain from political activities critical of the government the church is generally left alone.” That statement can be read either as a promise or a warning. In a political situation such as Hong Kong’s, it is not surprising, as one of our interviewees, a Hong Kong pastor, noted, “Some churches practice self-restraint and become more pro-China in order to get access to the ministry in China.” A supposedly “apolitical” stance by the churches, in short, guarantees some form of religious liberty and possibly greater access to potential converts in the mainland.

At other times, Beijing seems more proactive in working through sympathetic church leaders on an acceptable position vis-à-vis the government. One of our respondents, a Hong Kong pastor, noted that there “are Christians in Hong Kong who are actually pro-PRC.” At the height of the 2019 demonstrations, a group of eighty-eight religious leaders, including Archbishop Kwong, signed a statement which urged Christians to “pray together for the Hong Kong we love and ask God to fill the land with his love. We call on the government and citizens to work together to resolve conflict and

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<sup>54</sup> Archbishop Paul Kwong, “Journeying Together: Mission as Prophetic Accompaniment through Dialogue and Engagement,” *Echo* (December 2017), [echo.hkskh.org](http://echo.hkskh.org) (accessed July 10, 2020).

<sup>55</sup> Archbishop Paul Kwong, “The Archbishop’s Christmas Message 2019,” *Echo* (December 2019), <http://echo.hkskh.org/issue.aspx?lang=1&id=15428> (accessed August 27, 2020).

rebuild Hong Kong.”<sup>56</sup> There is nothing offensive about this prosaic statement, but in a situation in which other Christian leaders are challenging the regime’s legitimacy on theological grounds, this affirmation seems purposefully tame. One of our interviewees claimed that he knew “for a fact” that the statement was formulated by the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in Hong Kong and that Christian leaders were urged to support it. If true, this genial call affirming a need for all parties to work to resolve the conflict is a purposeful attempt by Beijing to reframe the debate among religious leaders away from the government’s culpability. This appeal seems like the Chinese equivalent of the attempt of some conservative American politicians to reframe the slogan “Black Lives Matter” as “All Lives Matter” in an effort to avoid acknowledging the reality of racial inequality in the United States.

The 2018 negotiations between Beijing and the Vatican on the long-simmering dispute over the appointment of bishops is a likely harbinger for what Hong Kong might anticipate for the future of religion-state relations. The very existence of unofficial, underground Catholic churches with priests and bishops not sanctioned by the Religious Affairs Bureau threatens the logic of a PRC policy that aims to neutralize any independent religious voice. After decades of conflict between the Vatican and Beijing, Pope Francis decided it was important to reach an accord, a decision that was bitterly opposed by the now-retired Archbishop of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong, Cardinal Joseph Zen, as a betrayal of Catholic worshippers in China.<sup>57</sup>

Many Protestant churches in Hong Kong have a theological predisposition toward evangelism and away from political action. At times these congregations reference Romans 13 with its admonition from the Apostle Paul for every person to be “subject to the governing authorities, which have been “instituted by God.” More often, however, they are either silent about the protests or make only oblique references to them. For example, we looked closely at the Tung Fook Church as representative of this relatively apolitical stance among many churches. Tung Fook is affiliated with the Evangelical Free Church of China, one of the largest Protestant denominations in Hong Kong. Tung Fook has five places of worship in Hong Kong, including a large facility in Causeway Bay, a district which has been a prime location for many protests over the past several decades. We searched the church’s webpage using the terms Umbrella Movement (雨傘運動), Occupy Central (和平佔中), and bill/law (法例), and

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<sup>56</sup> Yanrong Chen, “八十八位資深教牧及信徒聯署登報指締造復和全港基督徒有責” [Eighty-eight pastors and believers sign a joint statement on the responsibility of Christians in Hong Kong], *Christian Times* (September 3, 2019), [https://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=159409&Pid=102&Version=0&Cid=2141&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](https://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=159409&Pid=102&Version=0&Cid=2141&Charset=big5_hkscs) (accessed August 28, 2020).

<sup>57</sup> Gerry Shih, “Retired Cardinal Criticizes Vatican Negotiations with China,” *America: The Jesuit Review* (February 8, 2018), <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/02/07/retired-cardinal-criticizes-vatican-negotiations-china> (accessed August 28, 2020).



found nothing. There were a few subtle references to the political turmoil. A link to the “Pastor’s Words” for Pentecost Sunday on May 31, 2020, noted that “Hong Kong and the church are facing unclear but very critical moments, and there is a rush of secrets everywhere. The People of God should look up to God and raise Jesus Christ as the king of kings and lord of lords, proclaiming that God’s power is completely won in Hong Kong and the church!”<sup>58</sup> An “Epidemic prayer” on the church’s homepage acknowledges that “Hong Kong is facing social unrest and economic recession. The people of Hong Kong need true peace. May the Spirit rekindle the enthusiasm of brothers and sisters for the gospel, and strive to testify to the Lord in these difficult times.”<sup>59</sup> A link on the page to a newsletter with an associated organization has various short pieces by ministers of the church. One from October 2019, penned by the Reverend Luo Xijian, admits that “Hong Kong is experiencing severe tearing.” The prescribed answer to this social and political turmoil, however, is more spiritual- than policy-oriented: “May our believers practice the teachings of the Bible and love, forgive and walk with one another, so that our fellowship in Christ can be a beacon and attraction to others.”<sup>60</sup> The point of these missives, it appears, is to advocate spiritual transformation at the individual level rather than systemic changes in the political realm. As we noted at the opening of this essay, forty junior leaders of Tung Fook Church resigned from their positions saying they felt pressure from the pastoral leadership to keep quiet about political matters.<sup>61</sup>

## Mass-Level Attitudes toward Democratization

Our research has demonstrated that Christian leaders and churches in Hong Kong were and are divided in their attitudes toward the various democratization campaigns, running the gamut from open support, to mild opposition, or silence. Thus far, our research has focused on elites and institutions. We turn now to consideration of support for democracy among Hong Kong Christians at the mass level.

Relying on data from four waves of the Hong Kong subset of the Asian Barometer,<sup>62</sup> we estimated regression models of the effects of religious

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<sup>58</sup> Tung Fook Church, “Pastor’s Words” (May 31, 2020), <http://www.tungfook.com/project/pastormessage/> (accessed June 12, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Tung Fook Church, “Prayer Matter” (Summer 2020), <http://www.tungfook.com/ncovprayer/> (accessed June 12, 2020).

<sup>60</sup> Reverend Xijian Luo, “Do You Long for Good Fellowship?” (October 2019), <https://www.efcc.org.hk/newsletters/view/6672#.XuPMjUVKhaQ> (accessed June 1, 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Chow, “Sheep without a Shepherd.”

<sup>62</sup> The Asian Barometer was produced by the Hu Fu Center for East Asia Democratic Studies at National Taiwan University. Although we are grateful to these parties for allowing us to use their data, we are solely responsible for all analyses and interpretations in this essay.

identity and several control variables on two liberal-democratic values and on Hong Kong identity (see tables 1–3). Because of the relatively small number of Christians in the SAR, we combined all Christian denominations into a single category. Similarly, we created a dummy variable for “traditional Chinese religion” that included “Buddhism,” “Taoism,” and “Confucianism.” In this culturally Chinese community, such religious categories are highly permeable, if not fully intermixed, and typically manifest themselves in such “folk” religious practices as burning incense in the memory of ancestors, tending to their graves, and praying to local deities. We measured our dependent variables for table 1 with an item on whether “democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government,” and for table 2 with a Likert scale for “the government should decide whether certain ideas should be discussed in society.” Table 3 relied upon questions which asked whether respondents identified as Hong Kongers, Chinese, or both (2001), or how proud they were to be Hong Kongers (last three waves).

As tables 1 to 3 demonstrate, being Christian does not consistently shape political attitudes. Yet, in 2007, Christian respondents were demonstrably more favorable to democracy and freedom of speech, even after controls for other relevant regressors. Education also tends to push sentiments in a more liberal-democratic direction. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is a dramatic change in how Christians responded to each of the three variables. In less than a decade, Christians in Hong Kong moved from being disproportionately in favor of democracy and free speech to being relatively supportive of authoritarianism and restrictions on freedom of expression (see figure 1). Figure 1 maps these over-time changes for Christians among the three main dependent variables. As the graph shows, strong liberal-democratic convictions and pro-Hong Kong identity rose from 2001 to 2007 but have declined ever since.

Several scenarios might have caused this transformation. First, the population in Hong Kong has changed greatly since the handover.<sup>63</sup> It is quite possible that Christians who abandoned the SAR were more democratically inclined and that the PRC Christians who replaced them are more tolerant of authoritarianism and less familiar with democratic norms. Second, earlier Christians would have been educated at the tail end of British rule, when both government-affiliated and religious schools promoted greater respect for liberal values. Religious institutions continue to play a significant role in educating young Hong Kongers, but both they and their state-run counterparts are under increasing pressure to promote mainland Chinese nationalism and political norms. Finally, the Occupy Central and Umbrella Movements seem to have

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<sup>63</sup> Brandon Alexander Millan and Joel S. Fetzer, “Support for Democracy and Willingness to Emigrate from Hong Kong,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 2 (2019): 195-212, <http://www.tfd.org.tw/export/sites/tfd/files/publication/journal/195-212-Support-for-Democracy-and-Willingness-to-Emigrate-from-Hong-Kong.pdf> (accessed July 17, 2020).

had a dramatic, polarizing effect on Hong Kong residents, including Christians. Perhaps many older Christians viewed the protests as “lawless actions” that required a decisive police response and that even soured their attitudes toward freedom of speech and democracy, in general. If true, that effect might be magnified in the aftermath of the more violent 2019 demonstrations.

The relative absence of support for democratic values at the mass level among Hong Kong Christians provides context to explain Christians’ diverse social and political views, which we previously highlighted. Pastors, ministers, and priests are no doubt well aware of the polarizing effect that political divisions can have on congregations. One of our respondents, a seminary professor, commented that “evangelical churches in particular recognize the diversity of opinions in their own churches, and they try to avoid political confrontation.” In that environment, it is safer for some churches to neglect any discussion of politics. It is also possible that a realignment is reshaping religious life in Hong Kong as Christians sort themselves into churches based on where people stand on their attitudes toward Beijing. Because the number of Christian respondents in the survey was relatively small, we could not run regressions by denomination or individual churches, but we imagine that there is a strong correlation between the political views expressed by the church leadership and those of the members sitting in the pews.

Table 1. Determinants of Support for Democracy

|                           | 2001     | 2007       | 2012     | 2016       |
|---------------------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|
| Christian                 | -.273    | .461*      | .260     | -.654*     |
| Trad. Chinese Rel.        | -.050    | .085       | -.082    | .259       |
| Female                    | .029     | .139       | -.041    | .412**     |
| Age                       | -.004    | .027**     | .006     | -.004      |
| Education                 | .067     | .007       | -.014    | .061       |
| Income                    | -.178**  | -.043      | -.035    | .028       |
| Constant1                 | -1.902** | .171       | -1.544** | -1.160*    |
| Constant2                 | -.182    | 1.377*     | -.102    | .062       |
| N                         | 632      | 659        | 869      | 777        |
| Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> | .017     | .060       | .009     | .029       |
| $\chi^2/df.$              | 9.517/6  | 35.576**/6 | 6.870/6  | 19.098**/6 |

Notes: \* = p < .05. \*\* = p < .01. Coefficients estimated with ordered Logit. All regressors are dummy variables except for Age (range = 20 to 75 [2001], 18 to 90 [2007], 18 to 96 [2012], or 18 to 91 [2016]), Education (1 to 10), and Income (1 to 5). Listwise deletion of respondents with missing values.

Table 2. Determinants of Support for Freedom of Speech

|                           | 2001       | 2007       | 2012        | 2016       |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| Christian                 | .452       | .638**     | .342        | -.482      |
| Trad. Chinese Rel.        | .152       | -.170      | .126        | -.276      |
| Female                    | .019       | -.196      | -.213       | -.137      |
| Age                       | -.006      | -.013*     | -.013**     | -.010*     |
| Education                 | .225**     | .053       | .142**      | .063       |
| Income                    | .121       | .255*      | .067        | .020       |
| Constant 1                | -5.210**   | -4.314**   | -2.204**    | -4.837**   |
| Constant 2                | .495       | .066       | -.034       | -.997*     |
| Constant 3                | 4.789**    | 3.374**    | 2.202**     | 1.340**    |
| N                         | 616        | 656        | 915         | 847        |
| Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> | .124       | .103       | .098        | .035       |
| $\chi^2$ /df.             | 63.410**/6 | 59.359**/6 | 886.059**/6 | 26.563**/6 |

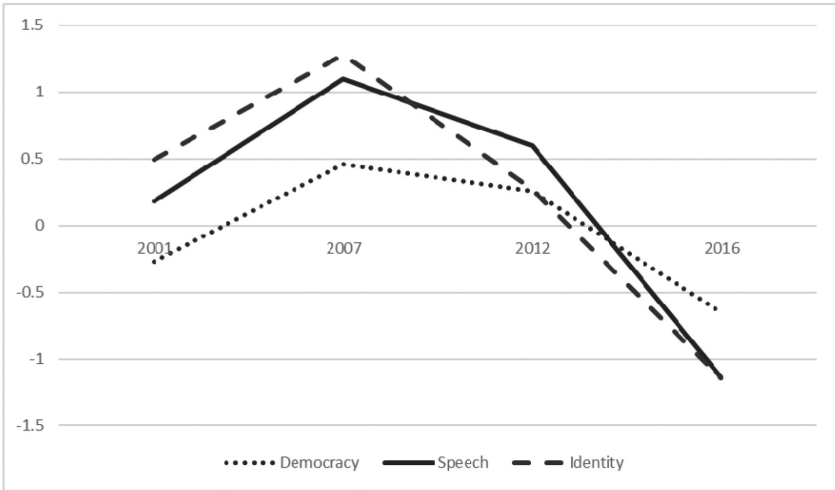
Notes: \* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .01$ . Coefficients estimated with ordered Logit. All regressors are dummy variables except for Age (range = 20 to 75 [2001], 18 to 90 [2007], 18 to 96 [2012], or 18 to 91 [2016]), Education (1 to 10), and Income (1 to 5). Listwise deletion of respondents with missing values.

Table 3. Determinants of Hong Kong Identity

|                           | 2001       | 2007     | 2012       | 2016       |
|---------------------------|------------|----------|------------|------------|
| Christian                 | .317       | .180     | -.333      | -.009      |
| Trad. Chinese Rel.        | -.035      | -.074    | .080       | -.340      |
| Female                    | .670**     | -.136    | -.362**    | -.094      |
| Age                       | -.015*     | .017**   | .028**     | .009       |
| Education                 | -.033      | .096*    | .010       | -.012      |
| Income                    | .175**     | -.064    | -.076      | -.137**    |
| Constant 1                | -.510      | -4.755** | -1.554**   | -3.937**   |
| Constant 2                | .330       | -1.935** | -.464      | -2.417**   |
| Constant 3                |            | 2.636**  | 2.551**    | 1.137*     |
| N                         | 686        | 701      | 927        | 844        |
| Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> | .073       | .020     | .088       | .023       |
| $\chi^2$ /df.             | 45.205**/6 | 10.371/6 | 75.066**/6 | 16.326**/6 |

Notes: \* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .01$ . Coefficients estimated with ordered Logit. All regressors are dummy variables except for Age (range = 20 to 75 [2001], 18 to 90 [2007], 18 to 96 [2012], or 18 to 91 [2016]), Education (1 to 10), and Income (1 to 5). Listwise deletion of respondents with missing values.

Figure 1. Effect of Being Christian on Political Attitudes



Notes: Scale is unstandardized, ordered Logit coefficients for effect of Christian identity after controlling for independent variables in tables 1–3.

### Political Authorities' Interactions with Religion

The logic of rational-choice theory can be usefully applied to the decisions made by political officials in Beijing toward religion in both the mainland and in Hong Kong. The Communist Party was once committed to the elimination of religion as an opiate of the people, but as religion did not disappear even in the face of severe restrictions, the party concluded that it would be less costly to tolerate religion but to regulate and circumscribe it through the State Administration for Religious Affairs.<sup>64</sup> In return for some degree of autonomy in religious practice, religious groups had to accept that they were accountable to the state, that they accepted the legitimacy of one-party rule, and that they were willing to work with state officials to promote theological interpretations of religious doctrines consistent with state interests. State policy on the mainland, in short, was driven at least in part by a rational calculation of costs and benefits, as political officials behaved in ways that they concluded would benefit the secular aims of the party and the state. For the most part, this policy meant that they allowed religious practice among Christians so long as it posed no discernible threat to state interests.

<sup>64</sup> Kuo, *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies*, 30-36, and Ryan Dunch, *Chinese Religiosities: Affiliations of Modernity and State Formation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 163-174.

The PRC appears to be pursuing a similarly “rational” policy in Hong Kong, where it tolerates but increasingly seeks to co-opt and thereby control religion. This approach explains the behind-the-scenes effort by PRC officials to work with sympathetic religious leaders to issue a statement on the recent demonstrations, to place supportive religious leaders in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, and to assign spots for the religious sector in the 1,200-member Election Committee that appoints Hong Kong’s Chief Executive. In many ways, this policy seems to be “working.” As we noted in our analysis of the public-opinion data, Christians were more prodemocratic shortly after the handover, but now they are less supportive of democracy and free speech. At the elite level, Christians are deeply divided. Shortly after the passage of the new security law introduced by Beijing, Archbishop Kwong wrote a letter in the *Church Times*, an Anglican newspaper based in London, in which he said that he “welcomed the law” and thought it was “necessary” in light of the unrest in Hong Kong. He also said he refused to “support anti-China political views” and took the occasion to assert that opposition to the law in “western countries” was not an expression of “Christian charity but of anti-China sentiment.”<sup>65</sup>

Both the Hong Kong and Beijing governments also seek to coerce churches by threatening to withhold resources if they fail to acquiesce to the political status quo. Numerous secondary schools have been at the forefront of protests in recent years as students have joined in demonstrations, failed to show the proper respect during the playing of the national anthem of China, and increasingly sung the popular local alternative, “Glory to Hong Kong.” Not only has the Hong Kong government banned these practices, but the state has also threatened to withhold funding to schools, including Catholic and Anglican schools, that fail to comply with the new rules. Even the Roman Catholic Church, which has consistently opposed limitations on religious liberty, felt the need to send out a memorandum to its institutions reminding them to “promote a correct understanding” of national security and anthem laws.<sup>66</sup> And, of course, it is impossible for churches in Hong Kong not to interpret actions against independent religious groups on the mainland as a not-so-subtle warning about what could happen to them if they do not fall in line.

Despite its anti-colonial rhetoric, in many ways the PRC is trying to mirror Britain’s colonial policy of having religious and political authorities in Hong Kong work together to achieve shared goals. The aim is not to eliminate

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<sup>65</sup> Rebecca Paveley, “Hong Kong Archbishop Welcomes Security Law,” *Church Times* (July 9, 2020), <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/10-july/news/world/hong-kong-archbishop-welcomes-new-security-law> (accessed August 28, 2020).

<sup>66</sup> Chan Ho-him, “Hong Kong National Security Law: Catholic Church Tells Its School in City No Room for Any One-Sided Political Message in Classroom,” *South China Morning Post* (August 7, 2020), <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3096401/hong-kong-national-security-law-catholic-church-tells-its> (accessed August 28, 2020).

religion, but to use it. The difference between now and then, however, is that not all religious leaders in Hong Kong believe their interests or values align with those of Beijing in the way those of their spiritual predecessors largely did with the policies of London.

### **Religious Leaders' Interactions with the State**

If the behavior of political officials vis-à-vis religious groups can largely be explained in rational-choice terms, what of the actions of religious leaders concerning the state? A rational-choice theory posits that religious leaders want to maximize their spiritual influence over society, and one way that they can do so is to work with state officials to expand religious influence in society. During colonial rule, as previously noted, Christian churches cooperated with state-building elites by opening schools, churches, hospitals, and providing relief to the poor. In the post-handover context, however, the symbiotic connections between state and religion are more tenuous. In order to expand their evangelistic reach or retain access to state resources, some Christian churches and leaders accept the limits on their political activism that are imposed by political officials. Given the rising costs of angering Beijing, this decision is in some sense rational. One of our interviewees, a Hong Kong pastor, noted, "Under a fear of being persecuted, some churches practice self-restraint and try not to touch the bottom line of the Communists." From the standpoint of these churches' clergy, Christian outreach is possible only if Beijing approves. It is not the mutually supportive relationship that prevailed during the colonial era, but, for some, cooperation with Beijing is a necessary compromise to advance the gospel.

### **A Weberian Perspective**

The primary goal of state officials is political control over Hong Kong, but political stability is only a means to an end for Christians in the region, many of whom also prioritize living according to the dictates of their faith. There are various ways in which the political interests of the PRC and the religious values of many Christians in Hong Kong diverge, and in those instances the rational-choice model is not the only, or even the best, way to explain why so many Christians have decided to oppose a regime that increasingly penalizes them for that choice. A better model for understanding the actions of these religious persons is Weber's idea of a prophetic religion. What Weber understood is that religious values are always potentially in tension with worldly ones. The degree to which believers perceive that a gulf exists between temporal and spiritual values waxes and wanes, and in different contexts those values can legitimize or fundamentally challenge the dominant order. The promotion of democratic values and practices and the critique of one-party rule by many Christians in Hong Kong is the latest in a series of historical cases in which

believers feel a divine call to transform the existing political order based on their religious convictions. These Christians are rediscovering theological resources to recognize evil in worldly powers and to urge believers to do something about it.

What is particularly interesting is the changing role of Christian churches in pre- and post-handover Hong Kong. Structurally and ideologically, the clergy and churches largely fit the Weberian ideal of priestly religion during British colonialism; they were essentially part of the state's administrative apparatus that they largely defended. Post-handover, however, many Christians are moving away from a legitimating role and toward a prophetic one that evaluates state policy in terms of its overlap with religious values. This evaluative role has become possible because some religious groups have recognized that a gulf exists between their spiritual concerns and the secular aims of the state. A Hong Kong professor whom we interviewed highlighted the 2014 Umbrella Movement as a key event that transformed a church that largely "avoided issues of political life" to one that "wrestled with the theological question of Christian engagement in the world." With its recently passed National Security Law, the PRC is raising the costs of open opposition to the Communist regime. The results, however, are likely to be paradoxical. Some Christians will use this increased repression as an occasion to disengage from the world of politics further or to accept the new political status quo, but others will see it as confirmation of their prophetic denunciation of a Communist regime that has always felt threatened by a truly independent religious sector that can stand in judgment of the state.

## Conclusion

Until the recent passage of the National Security Law, Beijing largely upheld religious freedom in post-handover Hong Kong.<sup>67</sup> None of the Christian professors, activists, and ministers we interviewed for this project said that the Chinese government had actively suppressed religious freedom. But those interviews all occurred just before the most recent and serious crackdown by the PRC on religious and political freedom. As Beijing takes greater control over religious and political life in Hong Kong, through co-optation or repression, Christians in the SAR are likely to be polarized into prodemocracy and pro-Beijing camps. When asked about the current conditions for religious freedom, one of our interviewees, a Hong Kong pastor, perceptively noted that "religious freedom or freedom in general are enjoyed in Hong Kong...until they are gone." Many Christians in Hong Kong are also considering whether

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<sup>67</sup> Kung, "Politics and Religion in Hong Kong after 1997," and Kung Lap-yan, "The Post-Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong Identity and Christians," in *Interactive Pluralism in Asia Religious Life and Public Space*, ed. Simone Sinn and Tong Wing-Sze (Geneva: Lutheran World Fellowship, 2016), 89-98.



they themselves should be “gone” as emigrants, given the dramatic curtailment of freedoms since 2019.<sup>68</sup>

The PRC would be delighted with a modified version of the collaborative model that prevailed during colonial times, when religious groups and leaders justified the political status quo and worked with state officials toward shared ends. Perhaps the United States serves as something of a “positive” model for the PRC. Donald Trump received overwhelming support from white evangelical Christians, who legitimated his actions at all costs; Xi and other party leaders would be delighted to get that kind of acquiescence from Chinese Christians. But the American story can also be a warning to Xi; Christians in the United States were polarized into a pro-Trump camp that embraced the President’s cynical use of their faith and an anti-Trump camp that rejected the President’s views on theological and moral grounds. Hong Kong is experiencing a similar divide between religious groups accepting limits on their faith as a practical necessity in order to survive, and other believers who are loath to give up their religious freedom without a fight.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Millan and Fetzer, “Support for Democracy and Willingness to Emigrate from Hong Kong,” and Mai Jiayin, Hu Wenjie, and Li Zhiying, “2020移民潮: 教會應如何看待去留? [The 2020 tide of immigration: What should churches think about emigrating or staying?], 基督教時代論壇 [Christian Times], p.1716 (July 17, 2020), [https://www.christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=162798&Pid=2&Version=1716&Cid=589&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](https://www.christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=162798&Pid=2&Version=1716&Cid=589&Charset=big5_hkscs) (accessed July 17, 2020).

<sup>69</sup> “Catholic-Anglican Churches Divide over China Extradition Law,” *Anglican Ink* (June 2, 2019), <http://anglican.ink/2019/06/02/catholic-anglican-churches-divide-over-china-extradition-law/> (accessed August 28, 2020).