

# Theological Controversies in the Anti-Extradition Movement in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

From June to December of 2019, the normally peaceful streets of Hong Kong were filled with demonstrators and on many occasions with violent clashes between protesters and police. Hong Kong society was rocked by the Anti-Extradition Movement. We will give a brief description of the movement. Then we will describe the ways in which churches and Christians have participated in this movement. Thirdly, we will go into various controversies generated within the churches of Hong Kong. We do not intend to provide practical solutions to those controversies. Our main concern is to demonstrate that the social background of Christians often intertwines with theological convictions and these controversies which create a challenge to the unity of the local churches.

## Keywords

*Hong Kong, China, blue and yellow Christians, Anti-Extradition Movement, church and state, civil disobedience, protest, Christians and violence, police*

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## I. *The Anti-Extradition Amendment*

**W**hen Hong Kong returned to China in 1997, the foundation of the legal and political system was laid down in the *Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China*, simply referred to as the *Basic Law*. It promises Hong Kong will have a democratically elected Chief Executive and Legislative. However, the *Basic Law* is vague about when and how these democratic elections should be held. When in 2014 the Hong Kong government finally proposed the procedure for Chief Executive to be democratically elected in 2017, most people regarded the procedure as not truly democratic. All candidates for the Chief Executive were to be vetted by an Election Committee. The political opposition to the government led to the “Occupy Central with Love and Peace” movement (usually shortened as the Occupy Central).<sup>1</sup>

Occupy Central was a mass movement of civil disobedience. Tens of thousands of citizens occupied the streets of the Central District (this is the central business district), intending to paralyze business activities and force the government to choose between submitting to the will of the people or using violence to disperse the crowds. Ideally, under moral conviction and international pressure, the government would submit to the will of the people. However, in reality, after initial attempts to disperse the crowd with tear gas, the government decided to simply wait until the movement lost momentum. After the Central had been occupied for 79 days, the streets were cleared out after a court injunction. The election plan proposed by the government was rejected in the Legislative Council, and the government has not proposed any alternative since.

In many ways, the Anti-Extradition Movement 2019 is a continuation of the Occupy Central (or Umbrella Movement) of 2014. In brief, the controversy began with a Hong Kong resident, Chan Tong-kai, killing his girlfriend in Taiwan in February 2018. Chan returned to Hong Kong and was later arrested for a minor offense. Since the murder took place in Taiwan, the Hong Kong government had no jurisdiction to handle the murder case. Since Taiwan and Hong Kong do not have an extradition agreement, there exists no legal mechanism for Hong Kong to surrender a wanted criminal

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<sup>1</sup> The Occupy Central Movement is often called the Umbrella Movement. Technically, Occupy Central refers to the original plan of Benny Tai, and the Umbrella Movement refers to the wider social movement generated by the debate about election reform, which went far beyond the scope of Occupy Central. However, since our concern is Christian involvement in social movements, we shall concentrate on Occupy Central.

to the Taiwan authorities. Of course, Taiwan police cannot come to Hong Kong to arrest Chan either.

In order to solve the legal conundrum, the Hong Kong government proposed the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matter Legislation (Amendment) Bill in February 2019 (hereafter called the Amendment). The Amendment allows the Hong Kong Chief Executive to initiate the extradition of citizens to face trials of crimes supposedly committed in other countries, even when Hong Kong does not have an extradition agreement with that country. Under the Amendment, the Government could legally send Chan to face the murder charge in Taiwan. It could also legally send citizens to mainland China (with which Hong Kong does not have an extradition agreement) to face court in the mainland for crimes supposedly committed there.

Despite certain provisions, there is much concern regarding the possible misuse of the Amendment. Many Hong Kong citizens fear that once the Amendment is passed, Beijing might use this law for the purpose of political persecution. Even though the Amendment supposedly will have explicit clauses to protect fundamental human rights, some people worry that the Chinese government would trump up fake charges to satisfy the requirements of the Amendment. Others worry that, even if there were a *prima facie* case for the accusation, the defendant could not have a fair trial in the mainland (as the Chinese government practically always wins in the mainland courts). When the Hong Kong government tried to push the highly unpopular Amendment through the Legislative Council, it triggered a massive protest movement.

When the Legislative Council was going to deliberate on the Amendment, a group of Christian ministers held a prayer meeting outside the Legislative Council building in the early morning of June 12, 2019.<sup>2</sup> Many Hong Kong people spontaneously gathered around the building that morning, blocking all entrances. The prayer service turned out to be the only organized meeting outside of the Legislative Council, and it caught the attention of the crowd. Later in the morning, the crowd continued to block Council members from entering the building. When the police gathered inside the building and seemed prepared to rush outside and disperse the crowd, the

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<sup>2</sup> Two groups were the main organizers of this prayer meeting, and they organized many other events throughout the movement. One group is called the Hong Kong Pastors Joint Declaration Committee. The other is called Concerned Pastors. Both of them are networks of individuals with no paid staff. The first group was formed in May 2019. The latter was formed in 2014 during the Occupy Central Movement. Many individuals are members of both groups. I am a member of Concerned Pastors.

pastors who had stayed behind began to form a wall between the crowd and the police. To calm things down they began to sing the chorus “Sing Alleluia to the Lord!” They successfully brought a temporary truce. However, in the afternoon, riot police used tear gas indiscriminately to try to disperse the crowd surrounding the Council. It seemed, at least to many demonstrators, that the police were more interested in terrifying people than in dispersing the crowd.<sup>3</sup> The crowd ran away but returned.

For the next week or so, crowds gathered around the government headquarters, with police guarding the entrances to the buildings. During this beginning phase, one could often hear demonstrators (both Christian and non-Christian) singing the chorus to the police guarding the government headquarters, even for hours continuously. No one could have predicted that an explicitly Christian song would become a rallying song for a political demonstration. In this case (as is often the case), actions precede theological reflection, and events force the church to reflect: are the church and her pastors theologically justified in playing such a prominent role in a political movement?

The government did finally withdraw the Amendment. However, as the movement developed, the focus shifted to the force used by both police and demonstrators. In short, it is a sad story of escalating violence. The police gradually got more proactive in trying to disperse the crowd before it grew too big. In response, the protestors also got more aggressive. Tear gas was often used by police, and the protesters responded with homemade gas masks. They built roadblocks and hurled rocks at the police. Later on, police employed water cannons and even live ammunition.

The violence reached its peak on November 17, 2019, when demonstrators occupied the Polytechnic University and the entrance to the Cross-Harbour Tunnel (a major artery). Police tried to storm the campus, using lots of tear gas, water cannons, and armored vehicles. Protesters fought back with many petrol bombs and arrows. Hong Kong has never seen such a violent confrontation before and hopefully will never see one again. The Polytechnic incident convinced most protestors that direct confrontation with police is unproductive and dangerous. A landslide victory for the democratic camp in District Councils elections in November gave the demonstrators an

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<sup>3</sup> The strategy of the Hong Kong police during the whole Anti-Extradition Movement is another topic that deserves careful examination by experts in this area. It seems, to this author at least, that the police were intent on avoiding a repeat of the Occupy Central Movement. They were much more proactive this time, but that actually made violent clashes unavoidable.

important symbolic victory. With the onset of COVID-19, mass demonstrations came to an abrupt stop.

## **II. *Christian Involvement***

We shall list the main ways that Christians and churches have engaged in this social movement.

### **1. *Propaganda and Advocacy***

Even before June 12, 2019, as the controversy over the Amendment heated up, some denominations decided to issue public statements asking the government to stop pushing the Amendment. For example, the Baptist Convention of Hong Kong issued such a statement on June 7.<sup>4</sup> Why did the Baptist Convention, traditionally apolitical, enter into the Amendment debate? The statement cites the example of Ezekiel. God told Ezekiel that he was the watchman of Israel (Ezek 33:1–9). If Ezekiel remained silent while the Israelites indulged in sin, then the watchman shared the guilt of the Israelites. By implication, the Convention regarded themselves as watchmen over Hong Kong society. Why did the Convention regard the Amendment as a kind of evil? First, it led to fear in society and mayhem in the Legislative Council. Second, the fear was based on legitimate concerns about whether the Amendment provides sufficient protection of human rights and the integrity of the rule of law in Hong Kong. Based on these considerations, the Baptists asked the government to withdraw the Amendment and restart the consultation.

After June 12, many churches and Christian organizations, or even groups of Christians (usually with names like “A group of [a particular denomination Christians]”), published statements criticizing the government. Most of these express support for the so-called Five Demands: withdrawal of the Amendment; retraction of calling (by the government) the protests “riots”; unconditional release of all demonstrators; setup of an independent commission to investigate political violence; and genuinely democratic elections. Many Christians wrote political comments or passed on news and others’ comments in social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

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<sup>4</sup> Original Chinese text on <http://www.hkbaptist.org.hk/acms/content.asp?site=bchk&op=showbyid&id=75451>. It should be noted that this statement generated a lot of controversy within the Baptist Convention. Some leaders believed that there was not sufficient consultation before the chair of the Convention put the statement to a vote. The vote among the leaders produced a small majority for putting out the statement.

These Christians in the democratic or antigovernment camp became known as *yellow Christians*.

Of course, the *blue Christians* in the progovernment camp on the other side of the political spectrum also engaged in political advocacy. Some of their messages focus on the violence of the demonstrators (particularly from August 2019 onwards); other messages are prayers that implicitly encourage people to support the government; still others are messages advocating conspiracy theories (mainly that the demonstrations are an American scheme to disturb the social stability of China).

## **2. Participation in Demonstrations**

During the protests, many Christians participated in Christian services (both indoor and outdoor) around the demonstration areas.<sup>5</sup> Most, if not all, of these Christians also took part in the demonstrations. Besides ordinary Christians, some pastors demonstrated and dressed in ways that identified them as pastors. During the early stage (in June and July 2019), the pastors would occasionally try to mediate between demonstrators and police. For example, they would ask the police to leave a way for demonstrators to disperse, or they would ask demonstrators to stop throwing bricks at the police. Sometimes they talked to demonstrators and encouraged them to be cautious and to protect themselves. As the demonstrations became more violent later on, the pastors concentrated their ministry on caring for the wounded, both physically and psychologically. From a relatively safe location, they would look for anyone who needed comfort or help them to move to a safe place. They would also spread information through social media on where demonstrators were waiting for cars to pick them up.<sup>6</sup>

## **3. Organizing Prayer or Worship Services or Marches**

Some Christians organized smaller marches or sit-ins with explicit Christian symbols (e.g., the cross). While the secular marches were often understood to be an expression of the people's power, the Christian marches often featured the tone of lament. Christians considered their marches as a plea for divine intervention and as a witness to the government's injustice.

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<sup>5</sup> However, none of these prayer meetings openly advocated a strategy of violence in the demonstrations.

<sup>6</sup> Starting around August 2019, the government began to stop all public transportation to and from the area of the demonstrations. The stated goal was to stop people flooding to the demonstration and to protect passengers. The yellow camp claims that this was the government's way of hindering the demonstrators from leaving, thus rounding up more protestors and letting the police impose terror.

Instead of shouting slogans such as “Five demands, not one less,” they often marched in silence.

Various churches and Christian organizations held prayer services or workshops addressing social unrest. The political tone of these meetings was pro-government or prodemocracy, depending on the organizers. The yellow Christians were especially active in organizing interchurch services. Many churches also invited outside speakers to speak on social justice and related issues.

#### **4. *Petition***

As a particular kind of advocacy, petitions provided traceable records for participants to register their opinions. Compared with a march, the time commitment of a petition is minimal. However, since most petitions require a traceable email address, it made the signer identifiable by others, including the Beijing government. In the struggle between an open society and state-controlled public discourse (supposedly Beijing’s desire), petitions became a remarkable symbol of protest, a channel for building solidarity and self-identification. With its low entry barrier (anyone can put out a Google Form), many Christian groups (usually not local churches) issued petitions throughout the period. The yellow camp put out the most petitions.

#### **5. *Church as Shelter***

During the Occupy Central Movement in 2014, a few churches opened their doors so that demonstrators, particularly those who slept on the street, could access their toilets, have shelter during heavy rain, or have drinking water. Given this precedent, some churches promptly opened their doors to the public during the Anti-Extradition Movement. As the movement later evolved into simultaneous small demonstrations in various areas (instead of one big demonstration in the central business district) and public transportation during demonstrations began to get more difficult, so churches in different areas faced this question: should we open our doors to the demonstrators? Scores of churches did open their doors, though still a small fraction of the more than a thousand churches in Hong Kong. Then, on November 11, 2019, the police entered a Catholic church to arrest people without the permission of the church staff. Afterward, churches stopped opening to the public for fear of legal ramifications.

#### **6. *Pastoral Work***

Many Christians experienced psychological and material difficulties during the social unrest. Some pastors opened their homes to young people who

had temporarily run away from home because they had irreconcilable political differences with their parents. Many pastors preached Sunday sermons on trusting in the Lord in times of difficulty. They counseled individual Christians who were deeply disturbed by social unrest. Some churches hosted healing sessions, where counselors led Christians to reflect on their experience in the social movement. Often, someone would break down in tears as they reflected on the violent scenes. Churches also conducted seminars on healing relationships, particularly across different generations. Christian fellowships and even family relationships were often broken due to political differences. Broken relationships are inevitable collateral damage of any divisive social movement, and mending relationships was an urgent pastoral task during the movement.

### **III. *Theological Controversies***

Fervent theological controversies were raging in the church throughout the movement. Rather than trying to settle them, we will attempt to give an objective picture of both sides.

#### **1. *The Separation of Church and State***

Both blue and yellow camps claimed that there should be a “separation of church and state,” though they interpreted the phrase differently. Below are the major interpretations.

##### **a. Church Involvement in Political Issues**

Some (usually blue Christians) claim that the church is a place where one talks about spiritual matters and builds up Christian fellowship. Since politics is not spiritual and creates strife among Christians, the church should avoid touching any political topic. Sermons should not mention politics, and the church should not hold seminars or discussion groups focusing on political topics. Silence is golden here, as the only way to preserve the unity of the church.

The yellow camp responds by questioning the separation of spiritual and secular matters. Taking an extreme example, is the Holocaust merely a political topic? Or any atrocities committed by a secular government? Are the controversies around same-sex marriage political or spiritual matters? Since evangelical churches have not remained silent in the issue of same-sex marriage, why is there a gag order when it comes to democracy? If the government acts in contradiction to biblical ethical principles, the church should voice her protest. There should not be a separation of discourse into

one about faith and one about politics; the Bible is full of political discourse, for example, the Exodus story, the Old Testament prophets denouncing corrupt kings, and Jesus challenging the Pharisees' authority.

As for harmony, does gagging political discourse lead to genuine peace among Christians? Yellow Christians claim that the prohibition of political discourse is a performative contradiction, as the suppression of political discourse within the church is itself a political action. In other words, when church leaders insist that there should be a separation of political from religious discourse, their authoritarian proclamation is already a political discourse. Instead of peace, the gagging approach leads to anger in the dissenting party.

One way we can interpret this conflict is to contrast modern culture with postmodern culture. Blue Christians often implicitly assume a modernist conception of society, where distinctive institutions exist for different functions.<sup>7</sup> A religious institution should therefore should confine itself to religious activities. Political actions, including discussion about politics, should be avoided. The yellow camp takes a postmodernist conception of society, where different groups engage in antagonistic games. They see political struggles in every sphere of life, including within the church. Yellow Christians see Jesus's denunciations of the Pharisees as political discourses challenging the authority of the Jewish leaders, while blue Christians usually ignore their political dimension. There cannot be separation of religious discourse and political discourse because all religious discourse is inherently political discourse, and all political discourse makes claims about orthopraxis in society.

Many of the younger generation expected pastors to give guidance on how to respond to the movement from a Christian perspective.<sup>8</sup> However, most of them do not expect them to endorse a definite political position. Other Christians find it offensive when pastors even mention the Amendment in their sermons. They would challenge the pastors openly if they heard political messages in a sermon. We need a pastoral theology for a politically explosive situation.

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<sup>7</sup> Such dichotomous thinking is based on a division between the spiritual and secular realm. This division can be traced theologically to early twentieth century American fundamentalism.

<sup>8</sup> The Ray Bakke Centre for Urban Transformation in Hong Kong has conducted a survey of several thousand Christians and indicates that Christians have a strong yearning for pastoral teaching on the movement. However, since the survey was done through snowballing and the Internet, it is likely to be skewed towards the younger and more educated population. See the press release on its website: <http://rbc.bethelhk.org/index.php?lang=en>.

### b. A Pragmatic Approach

According to the blue camp, the church should leave the state alone so that the state leaves the church alone. Following Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 2:1–2, we should bless the government (even when it is morally corrupt), in the hope that Christians can live peacefully and evangelize in freedom.<sup>9</sup> If someone invokes the name of the church or Christian faith in political resistance, the government may legitimately regard the church as a political opponent (or an unpatriotic organization). The church will then suffer in evangelistic work. Anyway, the church in Hong Kong carries little weight in the political arena. If we cannot do much to address injustice in society, why not let the church concentrate on her evangelical task?

This pragmatic concern is particularly important for Christian organizations or denominations that have significant ministries in mainland China. The Beijing government has a well-known tendency to kick out any non-governmental organization (NGO) that is critical of the Communist Party. Even indirect support, such as opening the church to the public during demonstrations, is noted by the mainland government. For example, *Tai Kun Pao*, a newspaper representing Beijing's interests, named specific churches that gave shelter to the so-called rioters. For the sake of the good work that Christians are doing in China, should not Christians remain silent?

The yellow camp answers by asserting the importance of being faithful to the gospel, particularly in facing oppressive political powers. If the church loses its courage to speak the truth, has she not become just another do-good organization? If political reality dictates the message of the church, then the church has forgotten that the crucified Lord is her head. Moreover, compromising the truth will cause the younger generation to leave the church in droves. Would not this be a terrible price to pay for keeping some optional ministries in the mainland?

This debate hinges on a judgment as to how evil the Hong Kong and Beijing governments are. Even blue Christians acknowledge that the church should not, for example, obey Hitler by sending Jews to concentration camps. The yellow camp often raises the slogan of *the banality of evil*,<sup>10</sup> comparing silence during the Anti-Extradition Movement to silence during the Nazi regime. However, is the Communist Party comparable to the Nazis? The complexity of evaluating the moral status of a political regime makes unanimity among Christians an impossible goal.

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<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, we cannot explore how this viewpoint is related to Luther's two-kingdom theology.

<sup>10</sup> Referring to the famous phrase of Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

### c. Unconditional Submission to the Secular Government

In Romans 13:1–7, it seems that Paul advocates unconditional submission, as he asserts that all governments (even evil ones) are ordained by God. Blue Christians also point to Jesus, who “was led like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isa 53:7 NIV). Another example is David, who refused to kill King Saul even when Saul unjustly persecuted him. An eschatology that emphasizes the irredeemable corruption of the existing world may also encourage passivity in social movements. Unconditional obedience is also a form of separation in the sense of excluding political discourse from church life. Many blue Christians may actually dislike the Hong Kong government but think that citizens should be submissive anyway.

The yellow camp would emphasize the contextual limit of the passage: Paul’s concern is that Christians should obey Rome, even if it is pagan. In addition, Paul mandates that the government punish wrongdoers, not political opponents. They point to the Old Testament prophets, who announced divine judgment on the unrighteous kings of Israel and the nations. Jesus did not hesitate to denounce publicly the sins of the Pharisees. Moreover, the book of Revelation shows the need to resist evil governments.

It is clear that in general the Old Testament and the New Testament have different contexts and focuses. The New Testament assumes that the church is a small minority and seldom talks about Christians transforming wider society. The Old Testament takes for granted that the laws of God should judge the legitimacy of a ruler. What is the more appropriate model for the church today?

### d. A Separation of Financial Interests

The yellow camp claims that denominations that have received significant financial assistance from the government for their social services, or those that have significant financial and land assets, often take a progovernment position to protect their income. On the other hand, blue Christians sometimes accuse the yellow camp of accepting foreign financial help. Some even claim that the Anti-Extradition Movement was an American or Western product designed to unsettle China. In our postmodern culture, the hermeneutics of suspicion is widespread. The separation of church and state becomes a convenient banner for accusing opponents of having ulterior motives.

### e. The Separation of the Clergy from Political Activities

Some blue Christians claim that a pastoral calling means separation from all secular calling, including political activity. Just as journalists should

refrain from political advocacy to maintain objectivity, so pastors should be apolitical so they can pastor people of any political position and avoid antagonizing them.

Yellow Christians respond by saying that political positions often reflect core moral values. A pastor's silence in political issues can be seen as indifference to fundamental moral issues. Should not pastors give moral guidance on burning contemporary issues? Otherwise, preaching will be irrelevant to reality. Moreover, should not a pastor model political discernment in our complex world? If the pastor is sincere and humble, they may serve as a model to facilitate dialogue between opposite political camps. The gagging of political issues would mean that the congregation might never learn to speak the truth in love on political issues.

The Anti-Extradition Movement brought into focus the difficulty of pastoring in today's fragmented society. Can pastors be principled but also objective and understanding in addressing social and political issues? Alternatively, should blue Christians and yellow Christians form different congregations led by pastors with the corresponding political positions? Or should there be a physical congregation as well as a virtual congregation, the latter specializing in pastoring Christians' political spirituality? These are all solutions being practiced in Hong Kong right now.

#### f. Separation between National and Christian Identity

The debates here are more implicit than explicit, and they are loaded with emotion. If people identify the nation (with its ethnocultural identity) as equivalent to the existing government, and if the church encourages people to love their own nation, is the church getting too political? When blue Christians claim that Christians should not publicly voice criticism of the government, should they also refrain from praising the achievements of modern China and going to public rallies celebrating the national state? Some blue Christians note that Jews were proud of their country in the Old Testament, so we should cherish our nation. They feel that criticism of the Beijing government would bring shame on China. People should support their own nation and not idolize the values of the post-Christian West.

Yellow Christians are usually more ambivalent about patriotism. On the one hand, they tend to emphasize the inherent ecumenism of the Christian faith. Christ must claim our deepest loyalty. If we put patriotism before truth and justice, we are in danger of worshiping the state (portrayed as a beast in Revelation). Separation of church and state means that Christians should act as a witness against such idolization in the public square. However, yellow Christians also emphasize the importance of local community.

They believe neighborly love means cherishing local relationships and identities. They foster local culture and local interests, contrasted with national interest. Some blue Christians regard this mentality as encouraging local resistance to the Beijing government, thus a form of political meddling. The line between healthy and idolized patriotism is far from clear.

We conclude by noting that the Bible does not explicitly teach the separation of church and state. Israel in the Old Testament was a theocratic state, and the New Testament simply assumes that the tiny apostolic church has no political power in the Roman empire. Since the Enlightenment, the Western world has developed an ideology of separation in the process of secularization. We now understand that there is such a thing as a naked public square.<sup>11</sup> In the majority world, many Christians face the pressure of the domestication of religion for political purposes. What is our theology for Christian involvement in the public square? What is a Christian theology of the national state? These are pressing issues in our times.

## **2. Christians and Violence**

Violence is the second major area of theological debate. As the Anti-Extradition Movement turned more and more violent after August, the debate about Christian involvement heated up in the church. Is not Christ the Prince of Peace? What role can Christians have in a violent social movement?

Postmodern philosophers such as Michel Foucault have taught us that violence comes in many forms. Stabbing a person with a knife is certainly a form of violence, but so is abusive language, and so is an abusive asymmetric power relationship (as the #MeToo Movement and BLM emphasize). Taking this broadly, it is not clear that the Christian faith rejects violence in a blanket way. Did not Jesus denounce the Pharisees with abusive language (cf. Matt 23:1–36)? Or, is not Jesus's cleansing of the temple (John 2:13–17), using strips of leather, another example of violence? The Old Testament sometimes seems to glorify violence. Obvious examples include the ten plagues, the conquest of Canaan (particularly the *herem*), and the imprecatory psalms. Does the Bible condone violence, particularly when people fight against tyrants?

Can the increasing violence of the police be justified? According to Romans 13:3–4, God grants secular governments the sword to punish the wicked. Blue Christians claim that the Hong Kong police were doing their

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<sup>11</sup> Richard J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

God-ordained job. But did the police use excessive violence? Blue Christians often circulate on social media clips about the violence of the protestors. Supposedly, police violence was necessary to deal with a small bunch of hooligans who threatened the safety of policemen. Blue Christians claim, and perhaps truly believe, that the police did not intentionally inflict harm on peaceful demonstrators, except for a few rogue police. The yellow Christians, on the other hand, believe that the police did use excessive force most of the time. They claim that the force against the protestors was vindictory rather than self-defensive. The tactics of the police were aimed at terrorizing protestors rather than dispersing the crowd. For yellow Christians, the police were acting criminally. Evaluating the nature of police violence during the movement is an important step towards reconciliation. However, this issue is not a theological question. If the blue Christians' view that the police acted only against violence is correct, even yellow Christians have to agree that police violence can be justified.

Can the increasing violence of the protestors be justified? This question is indeed a theological conundrum. There was a spectrum of violent acts: shouting abusive language at police, using umbrellas as cover to charge at police, throwing rocks at police, vandalism in subway stations, destroying traffic lights, blocking major traffic arteries, throwing petrol bombs. Each form of violence can be debated.

Let us consider abusive language first. Jesus teaches us that words coming out of a person's mouth can defile them. Presumably, foul language makes a person foul. Yet Jesus himself used seemingly abusive language against the Pharisees. For Martin Luther, invective is a tool to defeat the devil. Yet few Christians today would argue that abusive language is necessary to defeating evil. Rather, yellow Christians usually adopt a postmodern perspective on language, arguing that the line between foul and normal language is a socially constructed reality. By adopting the socially censored language, the protestors carry their protest against the status quo into the realm of language. While impotent to literally dethrone the established political power, abusive language is a symbolic dethroning of power. This is a form of verbal terrorism to counter police terrorism. As Jesus was harsh against the religious and political terror of the Pharisees, so yellow Christians believe that they are following Jesus in using harsh language against political tyranny. We will leave it to biblical scholars to decide the true implications of Jesus's denunciation of the Pharisees.

Then there is nonbodily violence. Setting up roadblocks or smashing ticketing machines in subway stations are acts of defiance, but they do not harm other people. If destruction of nonliving objects could actually

promote social justice, few Christians would argue that those objects have inviolable rights. The real issue here is civil disobedience: can we rip apart regular social life and break the law in order to build a better society? Blue Christians claim that there is no Christian justification for such vandalism in civil society. While the Bible explicitly says that we should submit to the government, it never commands us to promote democracy. Civil disobedience is permissible only when the government forces us to go against the explicit commands of the Bible, such as forbidding evangelism. Moreover, disruption of social order brings hardship to many people (e.g., damaging subway facilities causes hardship to many who depend on the subway to go to work). The Bible teaches us to love our neighbors, and disrupting their lives is unloving.

The yellow camp justified acts of vandalism by appealing to the foundation of social order and the law. They would agree that vandalism per se is immoral, but an oppressive political order is an even greater evil. The meaning of Romans 13:1–7 is that the secular government should promote justice. If the laws are unjust, they cease to be lawful in God’s eyes. Civil disobedience is justifiable if it arouses people’s anger towards unjust government and laws. When protestors destroy public facilities, they are fighting for a just society, a state of affairs that is beneficial to all. From this perspective, vandalism is an act of sacrificial love, in that some protestors risk their personal safety and career (if they are indicted) to strive for a common good on behalf of all.

However, are the police really so evil as to have lost their legitimacy to defend public order in Hong Kong? Are acts of vandalism useful in uniting people in their will to fight social justice? How do we judge whether the action of a minority truly represents the will of the majority? These theoretical and practical questions are left unanswered.

Finally, bodily violence. Many protestors did not deliberately try to hurt the police, but nobody will deny that petrol bombs can cause serious harm. The Christian rationale against such violence is clear: human life bears the image of God and should not be trampled upon. No Christian leader would explicitly encourage bodily violence. For the yellow Christians, the main question is whether we can silently condone it. Their justification is similar to the just war tradition. Basically, violence is an action of last resort against oppressive power. Against police brutality, the violence of protestors is self-defense. In fact, some Christian leaders described the movement as a civil war. The war imagery may sometimes help to arouse sympathy among the public for protestors, but whether such military rhetoric is helpful for the movement is debatable.

## Conclusion

The conflict in Hong Kong is not an idiosyncratic event. There was a time when people believed in a set of universal values (liberty, equality, human rights, etc.) and a set of universal processes (e.g., the multiparty system and one-person-one-vote elections) to resolve differences in the society. Past Western theologians were eager to advocate these universal values as representative of Christian values. During the financial tsunami of 2008, the ideal of liberal democracy was called into question, and the Chinese model (authoritarian politics with a market economy) became more attractive. The Enlightenment project is losing its credibility. In the West, there are more polarized elections and contentious legal decisions. In the developing world, there is a rebellion against Western individualism and a tendency to glorify the power of the state.

How should the church respond in this increasingly divided world? Should the church join the power struggle in the name of achieving some Christian ideals? Or should churches try to rise above the divisiveness? And how can churches maintain their unity? What does unity really mean? All these issues deserve careful theological reflection, and hopefully our contribution helps deepen conversations on these issues.