

## **When the Cross Is about to be Wrapped in the Red Flag, How Should Churches under the Hong Kong National Security Law Resist?<sup>1</sup>**

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Under the dark clouds of the Hong Kong National Security Law, every heart is fearful. Judging from the incidents in mainland China, everyone—doctor, lawyer, or pastor—who has ever expressed an opinion deemed “subversive to the state” by the regime risks arrest. Recently, we have learned of a meeting held by the Chinese government’s Hong Kong Liaison Office<sup>2</sup> with 50 religious leaders, at which great emphasis was placed upon sympathy with and support for the National Security Law. We cannot help but worry that, after the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law, the regime will hasten its encroachment upon Hong Kong’s Christian circles.

Recently, Mission Citizens invited two scholars who have expertise in mainland state-church relations—Dr. Fuk-tsang Ying, Director of Chung Chi College, the Chinese University of Hong Kong; and, Dr. Wai Luen Kwok, Associate Head of the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University—to an online forum to offer their analysis of the Chinese Communist Party’s next steps in the suppression of Christianity in Hong Kong, and of how churches and believers should live and act in the face of imminent totalitarian rule.

**The National Security Law was passed because Hong Kong’s civil society is a force to be reckoned with.**

The two scholars first analyzed the reasons for the haste with which the Chinese Communist Party pushed the National Security Law [through the National People’s Congress]. Ying believed that through this law, Beijing was able to address several issues that the regime has wanted to address since the retrocession of Hong Kong in 1997, such as June 4, Falungong, [failed attempts to pass] article 23 of the Basic Law, citizenship education, last year’s revision of the “fugitive” [extradition] law, and so forth. He pointed out that in the 2003 withdrawal of article 23 of the Basic Law, it appears as if the Chinese Communist Party has compromised. In reality, it merely changed tactics and sought to extend its control through education. Who knew that a movement against the imposition of patriotism classes derailed the Party’s plans yet again, at the same time making the Party realize that the power of Hong Kong’s civil society cannot be taken lightly, for the people of Hong Kong have repeatedly derailed the Party’s plans by exerting their power as citizens. Therefore, Ying believed that the National Security Law is the tool that the Chinese Communists are using to “deal with Hong Kong once and for all,” abandoning its strategy of delay to avoid the mistake of 2003, when it allowed the opposition to grow, and to tighten its grip in governing Hong Kong.

In response, Kwok pointed out that the strength of Hong Kong’s civil society has made Chinese Communists lose confidence, to the point of seeing the democratic gains of last year’s district council elections (Bradsher, Ramzy, and May 2019) and the plan to get majority seats in the coming legislative council election<sup>3</sup> as an act of usurpation. He pointed out that this situation also reveals that the Chinese regime’s understanding of “one country two systems” is different

than Hong Kong's, for the people of Hong Kong will never consider democracy advocates' winning of a majority of seats in the district councils an act of usurpation.

### **The “politicization” of daily life instills fear.**

Kwok pointed out that incidents in mainland China make the people of Hong Kong realize that the regime's red line changes continually—even aiding the vulnerable will be criminalized, for example—making one wonder how many are in the “very small minority” targeted by the regime. Ying pointed out that the people of Hong Kong cannot trust the Chinese government's claim that the National Security Law targets only “a small number of individuals,” for there are many who have been criminalized for their speech; the single example of Pastor Yi Wang (Mozur and Johnson 2019) is enough to strike fear among Hong Kong Christians. Kwok argued that Hong Kong has entered the era of “politicization,” meaning that one constantly wonders if one's speech and actions are politically correct and self-scrutinizes; even before the National Security Law, fear had already invaded the daily lives of the people of Hong Kong.

Kwok mentioned that some teachers of church schools have been informed upon because of their political positions, and the regime uses the bureau of education to carry out “investigations” and monitor disciplinary measures, to the point that incessant correspondence between schools and the bureau of education due to a stream of informants' complaints will bring pressure to bear upon schools and educational organizations. Ying added that the regime does not only use the channel of the bureau of education but also manipulates public opinion, creating a situation of “the public against the public,” increasing pressure upon teachers, schools, and educational organizations, ultimately forcing schools to use fabricated reasons to stop renewing their contracts with the teachers involved. Kwok added that various institutions of society can also be targeted by the regime, and the means used can have endless variations. For example, official media recently accused *Breakazine* of inciting violence, and last year when there were conflicts [between demonstrators and the police] in various districts, they accused churches that opened themselves [to offer refuge to demonstrators] of tolerating violence. Moreover, in the social service sector, when the regime is dissatisfied with a particular organization in society, it can utilize internal discord and scandals as evidences of poor service quality, and then establish another organization with the same functions but a pro-regime stance, siphoning off government funding and establishing an organization in the community that can be used by the regime.

Ying argued that the greatest effect of the National Security Law has less to do with its specific provisions than with the destruction of the social fabric. Judging from the behavior of Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in China, they are adept at using political criminal allegations to achieve their personal goals. For example, if someone you dislike says anything politically incorrect in a casual conversation, you can inform on him, causing him to lose his reputation, position, and livelihood. Therefore, interpersonal trust will be lost; even in churches, one will no longer be able to trust another person, causing the collapse of interpersonal relationships.

### **The Liaison Office's invitation to the leaders of the six major religions to a forum is already an expression of political stance.**

In Ying's view, expressions of political stance are a common means for controlling religion in China. As revealed in the Three-Self Church Reform Manifesto<sup>4</sup> in Chinese history, Hong Kong

will face a similar situation soon, and it appears that under the National Security Law, “silence will not be an option.” According to Ying’s historical analysis, one sees that the Chinese Communist Party desires the loyalty of religious leaders, and at the same time the signature movement is a way to show that the policy enjoys popular support. Moreover, the Three-Self Reform Manifesto demanded that churches recognize their relationship with imperialism and agree to undertake reform; in the process, they had to publish their signatories periodically, placing the various denominations under enormous pressure, leading church leaders to ponder exchanging a declaration of loyalty for space to practice their faith. Ying also pointed out that in the process of promoting the Three-Self Reform Manifesto, the Chinese Communist Party “really knew how to talk,” using the name of patriotism to get the denominations to sign [the manifesto], promising non-interference in religious matters by the regime, and subsequently making partial allowance for religious practice, leading the denominations to comply for the sake of survival.

With regard to Hong Kong, Ying pointed out that the invitation recently extended to the 50 religious leaders to attend a forum on the Hong Kong Region National Security Law at the Liaison Office was itself a move [to get the religious leaders] to declare [their] political stance. Therefore, 21 individuals expressed their support; as for those who chose not to participate, [refusal to participate] was itself a declaration of a political stance. There were basically two responses [from the religious leaders at the forum] to Hong Kong’s situation: “Sympathize but wish to express concerns,” or “support” for the legislation. Ying agreed that the former “had done their best” given their position and hoped that the regime would indeed address the concerns that kept them from giving their “support.” Ying predicted that for now the Chinese Communist Party focuses on getting Hong Kong’s religious leaders to declare their political stance, ordinary believers probably would not have to declare their political stance yet, but he anticipated that such incidents would occur among more and more leaders.

Subsequently Kwok responded that, in manipulating [religious leaders] to declare their political stance, [the regime] divides people into supporters and enemies. He pointed out that in the history of the Three-Self Reform Manifesto, many thought that it was merely a patriotic manifesto; they did not expect to have to make endless compromises. He reminded believers not to underestimate declarations of political stance.

**The pastors who signed the Three-Self Manifesto in the 1950s were still criticized and denounced.**

Kwok asked in response [to Ying’s analysis], how do churches today avoid the same mistakes and falling into the situation of the Chinese churches in the 1950s? And how do churches help pastors find a reference point for discerning whether “to sign or not to sign” [a declaration of support for the Hong Kong Region National Security Law]? Ying pointed out that for now church leaders are bearing the brunt of suppression, which has not yet reached local congregations, but judging by examples from the 1990s, one can see that the Chinese Communist Party is still suppressing religion in the arena of international politics. He gave two examples: First, at the 1999 [sic? 1996?] Asian Conference of Religions for Peace, Taiwan [sent delegates] to participate as observers. When the Chinese delegation learned that Taiwan was participating as the Republic of China and using its national flag, China issued a public condemnation and strongly protested that Taiwan was flouting the “One China” principle. Ying expressed concern that should Hong Kong send delegates to these religious conferences in the future, its delegates

would have to go along with the Chinese government's condemnation in order to avoid the label of being in support of such positions [against the "One China" principle]. Second, when the Dalai Lama attended a world religions conference, the Chinese delegates present left immediately. In Ying's view, Hong Kong delegates will likely "turn in their assignment" by leaving [such events in the future] for the sake of self-preservation and avoiding the violation of national policy.

Currently, churches generally respond to the National Security Law in two manners. Some take a hard line and resist; others accommodate while "expressing concerns." So should the church be "as clever as a snake" or "gentle as a dove"? Ying responded that answering this question involves an assessment of the current situation, and that many factors should be considered. Some choose to exchange flexibility for space; others believe that there is no room to give. Ying drew lessons from the experiences of the churches in mainland China in the 1950s and explained that the Chinese Communist Party would also give [Hong Kong] churches that "sign the Three-Self Manifesto" some room [for maneuvering], but it would all depend on the actual political situation of the moment. Churches may obtain some room for maneuvering by adopting a moderate stance and making some compromises, but they may also become the target of concerted attacks. Moreover, compromise can only obtain an additional five to six years of time; many of the pastors who signed the Three-Self Manifesto lost their lives in the criticism-and-denunciation meetings of the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign. On the other hand, Mingdao Wang (Harvey 2002), who took a hard line and initially refused to join the Three-Self Church, was eventually forced to confess and was imprisoned in 1955. The Communist Party believed that killing one served to warn a hundred, and Wang's supporters joined the Three-Self Church in the end.

Kwok expressed the view that no one knows which is better, to compromise or to take a hard line, for no one can foresee the future. Ying agreed: in the torrent of history it is hard to know if a decision is right or wrong at the time. He sadly said that one must take one step and see [with every decision]. The people of Hong Kong have already lost their freedom to live without fear; [they now] have to consider how to live under Red terror. If a church member is arrested, what position should the church take? Should the church support the member or keep a distance for the sake of self-preservation? In addition, will the church now self-censor its speech? In Ying's view, church fellowship is a place where believers share struggles and worries, but some may also fear being "informed upon."

### **Churches can practice democratization and be an alternative community.**

In Kwok's view, should it one day be necessary to face such situations, Hong Kong churches should "democratize" their institutional decision-making processes; in other words, the decisions made by leaders should be reached through a process of input from and consultation with their congregations. Whether such an "alternative community" chooses to "kneel" or "not kneel" [before the regime], believers will have a better understanding of every decision and even be able to share in bearing the pressure, thereby decreasing the possibility of mutual denunciation and hatred. Kwok emphasized that the most frightening aspect of the National Security Law lies not in its actual provisions but in its bringing out the worst in human nature, causing the loss of trust between individuals and resulting in hatred, informing on one another to the regime, pleasing the regime and hurting others out of self-interest, and so forth. He mentioned that in the history of the Chinese church, Watchman Nee had no sympathizers when he suffered political persecution;

some even thought that he deserved what came to him. In Kwok's view, such tragedies reveal the importance of democratic decision making. Kwok stated, in dealing with contentious issues, churches should support their pastors; whether they choose to sign the declaration of support for the National Security Law or not, they should not be left to make these decisions alone; instead, it should be a democratic decision, and believers should therefore communicate frequently with their church leaders.

Some in the audience brought up the fact that when believers with different political views cannot reach a consensus, pastors cannot easily speak on behalf of their churches to the government. In Kwok's view, consensus does not mean unanimity. The minority should concede to the majority in the church as in a civic process; this is something Christians should learn. He characterized the government's actions in the past as suppressing the will of the majority for the purpose of achieving its own goals. Kwok described the situation of general politicization, in which the regime can infiltrate every dimension [of life] at will; on the contrary, the advantage of an alternative community is its independence, which can restore people to their dignified status. At the same time, a tight-knit community where people can confide in each other will provide space for interpersonal trust, alleviating the pressures attendant on circumstances marked by the worst in human nature and broken relationships, allowing believers to live an authentic life. Kwok said with a smile that in essence this is the oldest teaching of the Bible, calling people back to "the basics" of loving God and loving man.

### **The past view of the separation of politics and religion is no longer valid.**

How should the church respond to persecution by the regime and pervasive politicization? Ying pointed out that religion could not avoid politics. Hong Kong churches should learn from the historical experiences of churches in other countries, such as Eastern Europe, China, South Korea, and Taiwan. Believers also need to alter their mindsets, for the current political situation has changed; it is now a new era. He also mentioned that before 1997, some had worried that the government would use the "Fire Service Ordinance."<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, this did not happen; nonetheless, one should still prepare for the worst eventuality now. Ying pointed out that a distorted view of the separation of politics and religion used to be Hong Kong's way of resisting the challenge of political engagement, but now politics has encroached upon the church, and the "separation of politics and religion" of the past is no longer possible; Christians must face the problem directly and start reflecting on how they will live under totalitarianism. Churches may be forced to give up their right to establish educational institutions and places of worship. Moreover, with the maturation of the development of big data, the government may gather such information and use it to erode the freedoms of civil society. Therefore, churches must think about their future directions; whether past church planting strategies are [still] suitable is but one example....

Ying also responded to one final question regarding whether churches will leave Hong Kong. He stated that after the establishment of the Communist regime, there were churches and missionaries who left [China], but it is not possible for a denomination to completely withdraw its presence. Kwok added that in the current situation, the continual emigration of believers does decrease the financial resources of churches, but there are also people from overseas who enroll in courses offered in Hong Kong and continue to support Hong Kong churches. Moreover, the Bible teaches that churches ought to consider ways to serve the society in which they find themselves; therefore, it is not possible for the church to completely withdraw its presence.

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<sup>1</sup> [This and all other endnotes, as well as citations and references, have been added by the GM Editorial Team.] This article is a translation, provided by the GM Editorial Team, of a report published in *Christian Times* 時代論壇 on July 3, 2020, available online at [https://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=162610&Pid=103&Version=0&Cid=2017&Charset=big5\\_hkscs#.XwQA1L7luW4.link](https://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=162610&Pid=103&Version=0&Cid=2017&Charset=big5_hkscs#.XwQA1L7luW4.link) (accessed September 22, 2020). The report was on a forum held by Mission Citizens<sup>#</sup> on June 25 at 8 p.m. (local Hong Kong time), entitled “The Cross Tyrannized by the Red Flag—Hong Kong Version,” live streamed on its Facebook page (<https://bit.ly/2Z9vGrn>; accessed September 22, 2020) and moderated by Mission Citizens member Herman Wai Chung Tang [鄧偉棕], an attorney. At its height, over four hundred people participated; as of noon on June 26, there had been over 8,500 views cumulatively. Mission Citizens is a movement of Christian pastors and lay persons who believe that the Christian faith can be lived out in the current reality of Hong Kong and can inform Hong Kong’s search for a way forward after the Umbrella Movement and subsequent reform efforts. Begun in 2015, its mission statement appeared in *Christian Times* on September 8, 2015, [https://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=91025&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](https://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=91025&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5_hkscs) (accessed July 21, 2020); its Facebook page is located at <https://www.facebook.com/missioncitizens/> (accessed July 21, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> 中央人民政府駐香港特別行政區聯絡辦公室 (Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region).

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the authorities postponed the election for a year, which had been scheduled for September 6 (Bradsher, Yu, and Myers 2020).

<sup>4</sup> “The Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China” (“中国基督教在新中国建设中努力的途径”) (1950), also known as “The Christian Manifesto” or “The Three-Self Manifesto,” drafted under the leadership of Y. T. Wu, was a declaration by Chinese Protestants of their support for the newly established Communist regime. It gathered about half a million signatures.

<sup>5</sup> Many churches are located in multi-story buildings in Hong Kong and therefore are easily subjected to allegations of not meeting the government’s fire safety regulations.