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SYMPOSIUM: DEBATING RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

SUBORDINATION, SEPARATION, AND AUTONOMY: CHINESE PROTESTANT APPROACHES TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND STATE

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ABSTRACT

In the history of the religion-state relationship in China, a model of subordination of religion to the state has been dominant for centuries. In recent years, some Chinese Protestant churches have advocated the model of separation of church and state. Through a historical and theological analysis, this study argues that in order to relieve the tensions between Chinese Protestantism and the contemporary Chinese government, a better conceptual alternative is to reconsider the issue in terms of autonomy rather than separation or subordination, and to argue for legally allowing the coexistence of both official and nonofficial churches and grant different degrees of autonomy to each.

KEYWORDS: China, protestant, church-state relations, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

Due to the phenomenal growth of religions in contemporary China and the complexity of the state-religion relationship, the state-religion relation in contemporary China has become an important research area for scholars of religious studies and those who study China.[1] Among the relations between the Communist government and the religions flourishing in China, the most complicated, confrontational, and controversial is probably the relationship with Protestantism. This article aims to offer an historical analysis of the tensions between Protestantism and the contemporary Chinese government and to explore possible options for relieving these tensions.

1 Studies include Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Renewal under Communist Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). For a survey of the issues involved, see André Laliberté, "Contemporary Issues in State-Religion Relations," in *Chinese Religious Life*, ed. David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive, and Philip L. Wickeri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 191–208. For a survey of the methods and approaches, see Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, "Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China: An Introductory Essay," in *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, ed. Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1–21.

I begin with a brief definition of key concepts used in this study. In contemporary China, Protestantism (*Jidu jiao* 基督教) and Catholicism (*Tianzhu jiao* 天主教) are considered two different religions, rather than two denominations of one religion. With Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam they are recognized as two of the five religions lawfully permitted by the Communist government. The term *religion-state relation* (*zheng jiao guan xi* 政教关系) is interpreted loosely by some as referring to the relation between politics (*zheng zhi* 政治) and religion (*zong jiao* 宗教) as two kinds or spheres of human activities, whereas others interpret it as referring specifically to the relation between the state or government (*zheng fu* 政府) and the church (*jiao hui* 教会) as two institutions or organizations. Since the term *church* usually implies an institutional religion, its applicability in the Chinese context needs to be considered carefully because religion in Chinese society includes both institutional religions and diffused religion.[2] It is often thus inadequate to use the term *church* when discussing Chinese religions. Accordingly, as the scope of this essay covers both Christian churches and traditional Chinese religions, I use the term *religion-state relation*, even though the focus of discussion is on the relation between the state and religion as a social institution or organization. I also use the term *church-state relation*, especially when the discussion is focused on Christianity.

It is common to classify the Protestant churches in Communist China into two major types. One is the government-recognized Three-Self churches (*san zi jiao hui* 三自教会)[3] and the other is the house churches or family churches (*jia ting jiao hui* 家庭教会). Largely due to the process of urbanization, there are many newly developed unregistered urban Protestant churches. While they refuse to join the official Three-Self Church, they differ significantly from the house churches in their relations with the state.[4] Some adherents of these unregistered urban churches, especially the intellectuals, have become deeply interested in the relevant public issues, including the rule of law, human rights, civil society, religion-state relation, and even public theology.[5] Some of them have been inspired by the theology of John Calvin (1509–1564) and have attempted to defend their own civil rights, including the exercise of their religious beliefs in the public sphere.[6] They tend to demand a model of separation of church and state (*zheng jiao feng nie* 政教分离), which is in

2 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1991), 20.

3 Three-Self Churches are those under the administration of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the National Christian Council.

4 See Brent Fulton, *China's Urban Christians: A Light That Cannot Be Hidden* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015); Jie Kang, *House Church Christianity in China: From Rural Preachers to City Pastors* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

5 For a review of public theology in the Chinese speaking world, see Pan-Chiu Lai and Zhibin Xie, eds., "Public Theology in the Chinese Context," special issue, *International Journal of Public Theology* 11, no. 4 (2017): 375–500; Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Xie Zhibin, *He yi gong gong? Wei he shen xue? Han yu gong gong shen xue de hui gu yu qian zhan* [Why public and theological? An overview and prospect for Sino-Christian public theology], CSRCS Occasional Paper No. 25 (Hong Kong: Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016). When referring to Chinese publications (except journal articles with abstracts in English), I place the family name of the author before the given name, according to Chinese custom; the name will be rendered in pinyin. If the author's name is also known in another way in English, the alternative name will appear in brackets after the pinyin. The English translation of the title is provided in square brackets after the pinyin.

6 Alexander Chow, "Calvinistic Public Theology in Urban China Today," *International Journal of Public Theology* 8, no. 2 (2014), 158–75.

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sharp contrast to the model of subordination of religion to the state (*zheng zhu jiao cong* 政主教从), which has been practiced in China for centuries—even millennia.

I start with a review of the religion-state relation in the Chinese tradition, highlighting the hegemony of the subordination model by showing that it not only was practiced by the government but was also knowingly accepted by various religions. Based on a brief review of church-state conceptions in the Protestant traditions, including the development of a separationist model, I attempt to show that Chinese Protestantism exhibits a variety of approaches to the church-state relationship, including both subordination and separation models. However, it is unlikely that the Chinese government will give up the subordination model easily, even though the Protestant resistance to the subordination model is expected to be perpetual and the hegemony of this model may be unsustainable in the long run and detrimental to a healthy religion-state relation. From a legal point of view, a more viable alternative is the coexistence of two models. According to this dual model, the existing official religions would continue to enjoy their respective established statuses and privileges with tighter control by the Communist Party. At the same time, religious organizations that refuse to be absorbed into the official religions would be allowed legally to exist with a higher degree of autonomy.

PREMODERN CHINA AS A RELIGIOUS STATE

In the history of China, religion played an important role in the legitimatization of the traditional Chinese government.[7] It is fair to say that the state in premodern China was a religious state rather than a secular state.[8] In this religious state, the emperor was the chief diviner, chief priest, and the chief shaman of the state religion.[9] The worship of Lord-on-High (*shang di* 上帝), the Supreme Being and ruler over all, was at the center of the state religion, and this figure was surrounded by a pantheon of nature deities, sages, ancestors, and deified human beings.[10] The emperor as the head of state was called the Son of Heaven (*tian zi* 天子) and regarded as a sacral king who received the divine mandate (*tian ming* 天命) from heaven to govern. The divine mandate was supposed to be earned and maintained not by birth but by good deeds or merit, the proper performance of the relevant religious rituals, and efficient governance of the empire.[11] If an emperor behaved extremely badly, it was possible for him to lose the mandate of heaven and thus to lose political legitimacy. In this case, a revolution, understood in Chinese literally as "change the mandate" (*ge ming* 革命), was legitimate and necessary. The religious legitimization of power based on the concept of divine mandate endured throughout history.

The ancient Chinese concepts of divine mandate and sacral kingship provided a religious support to the divine right of the emperor. It is rather ironic that with the religious justification of the divine right of the emperor, the emperor was believed to have the right (which could be extended to the relevant government officials) to monitor and control religious matters. In other words, instead of pursuing a neutral policy toward religions or promoting the free exercise of religion, the Chinese government tended to regulate, control, and even exploit religions for the benefit

7 Wang Shunda, *Shen sheng zheng zhi: Zhongguo chuan tong zheng zhi de xing cheng* [Divine politics: The formation of traditional Chinese politics] (Beijing: Zhongguo wen shi chubanshe, 2005).

8 See John Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2010).

9 Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 43–46.

10 William Edward Soothill, *The Three Religions of China*, 3rd. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), 229.

11 See K. C. Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

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of the state.[12] The state was even believed to possess the right to decide what is the true or correct religion and thus which religions were permitted, and to suppress or destroy all heresies, false religions, indecent worship, and licentious cults (*yin ci* 淫祠), which are more or less equivalent to what are even today labeled evil cults (*xie jiao* 邪教) by the Chinese government. In the history of China, in addition to the occasional suppressions of Buddhism, some minor religious sects were also suppressed by the government because they were suspected of engaging in political rebellion. In addition to oppressing Christianity, the Chinese state also attempted to suppress Islam.[13]

SUBORDINATION OF RELIGION TO THE STATE

Some Chinese scholars attempt to summarize the mainstream of the religion-state relation in premodern China in terms of the subordination of religion to the state.[14] This subordinationist model had been established in China long before the arrival of Buddhism. Some Buddhists attempted to uphold the independence of the Buddhist *Sangha* and to argue that following the Indian Buddhist tradition it was neither necessary nor appropriate for the Buddhist monks to pay respect to the emperor. However, eventually the Chinese government got the upper hand in the power struggle with Buddhism. Religious leaders, including Buddhist monks, were required to identify themselves as "subjects" of the emperor rather than as sacral persons above the mundane world.[15]

The subordinationist model was expressed not only in the state's establishment of a particular department to supervise and control religions, but also in the state's incorporation or absorption of religions. Apart from conferring certain political positions and honors to religious leaders in order to incorporate them into the state system, the state could also absorb the worship of certain deities originating at the local level into the pantheon of the state cult. For example, Mazu 妈祖 was originally a goddess believed to protect and save people when fishing or traveling by sea and was widely worshipped among the coastal villages in southeast China. The state approved the worship of Mazu by conferring various honorary titles associated with the function of protecting the nation, even making Mazu an official object of the state cult.[16]

A result of this strategy of political absorption is that the three major religions, or teachings, in premodern China—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—accepted the authority of the emperor and state on religious affairs, and the three competed among themselves for the ears and thus patronage of the emperor and state. In other words, the subordination model was accepted not only by the indigenous traditions of Daoism and Confucianism but also by a religion of foreign origin, namely Buddhism, which had initially attempted to resist this model. It is rather ironic that the best known articulations or affirmations of this subordinationist model are from a Buddhist monk named Dao'an (道安, 312–385), who said, "without relying on the emperor, it

12 Anthony C. Yu, "On State and Religion in China," *Religion East and West*, no. 3 (2003), 1–20, especially p. 3. See also Anthony C. Yu, *State and Religion in China: Historical and Textual Perspectives* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).

13 Ren Jie and Liang Ling, *Zhongguo de zong jiao zheng ce* [China's policy on religion] (Beijing: Min zu chubanshe, 2006).

14 For example, Zhang Jian, *Zhongguo gu dai zheng jiao guan xi shi* [History of state-religion relation in ancient China] (Beijing: Zhongguo she hui ke xue chu ban she, 2012), 1209.

15 Zhang Jian, *Zhongguo gu dai zheng jiao guan xi shi*, 1211.

16 See Chen Xiao-li and He Wen-ze, "Local Religion and National Identity: A Case Investigation and Study on Mazu Belief in Guangdong-Hainan Region," *Journal of Qinzhou University*, no. 2013-09 (2013): 97–100 (in Chinese).

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is difficult to launch the matters of the Dharma" (*bu yi guo zhu, ze fa shi nan li* 不依国主, 则法事难立) and "the Emperor is the lord of religion" (*jun wei jiao zhu* 君为教主).[17] Furthermore, even after the establishment of the Republic of China, with the government's official policy of religious liberty and no state religion, some Buddhists continued to ask for the support or intervention from the government, in their attempts to reform Buddhism.[18]

One of the most important consequences of the state's absorption of the three traditions is that since the religious leaders' statuses in their respective hierarchies were controlled by the patronage of the state, they tended to accept the authority of the emperor on religious matters. In other words, the leaders of these traditions usually were loyal supporters of the emperor and had no incentive to develop an alternative conception of politics, including regarding the religion-state relationship.

With the absolute authority of the political monarchy in China, it is quite understandable that the "subordination of religion to the state" was the dominating model of the state-religion relationship in pre-modern China for centuries if not millennia. Borrowing the western terminology related to the medieval political theory of the two swords, this subordination model was similar to Caesaropapism. The contrary theory of Papal Monarchianism was not properly developed in China. The best known case of a religious leader becoming an emperor is perhaps that of Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全, 1814–1864), founding emperor of the short-lived Heavenly Kingdom of Ultimate Peace (*tai ping tian guo* 太平天国, 1851–1864).

As Zhang Jian summarizes and comments, under the influences of Confucianism and the sociopolitical system of patriarch lineage, religions were expected to be obedient to the emperor, who represented the pinnacle of this hierarchical system, and to contribute to the continuation and fortification of the prevalent sociopolitical system of lineage. One of the serious problems was that based on the theory of the divine right of the emperor, it was believed that the emperor had the authority to rule anything within his kingdom, and there was no effective mechanism of checks and balances to limit the totalitarian authority of the emperor. As the only organizations to be found which did not depend on this sociopolitical system of lineage, religions were often subject to suspicion, control, and even suppression. This was especially true of religions of foreign origin. In actual practice, there were many problems in the political management of religions, including (1) ineffectiveness, (2) over-management, (3) obsession with administrative power and misuse of violence, (4) the determination of national policy on religion on the basis of the political leader's individual beliefs, and (5) political power without checks and balances. Addressing these issues would require developing the rule of law, legally guaranteeing the civil rights of religious freedom, constraining administrative power, and managing religious matters with proper regulations.[19] However, the problems of the subordinationist model developed in ancient China are magnified rather than solved in contemporary China.

RELIGION-STATE RELATIONS IN MODERN CHINA

The subordinationist model developed in premodern China was adopted by the Republican government (1911–1949). Although religious freedom is guaranteed by the constitution, the Republican government attempted to take back the right of education from religious organizations through

17 Zhang Jian, *Zhongguo gu dai zheng jiao guan xi shi*, 1211–12.

18 See also Lai Pinchao [Pan-Chiu Lai] (ed.), *Jin dai Zhongguo fo jiao yu Jidu zong jiao de xiang yu* [Buddhist-Christian encounter in modern China] (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2003), 108–10.

19 Zhang Jian, *Zhongguo gu dai zheng jiao guan xi shi*, 1202–27.

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legislation, especially during the 1920s. Similar to comparable cases in various Western countries around that time, this policy affected the subsequent developments of various religions, especially the Christian churches in China. Moreover, under the influence of modern Western culture, including the demarcation between religion and superstition, the Republican government also established several regulations on religion and superstition.[20] These regulations or policies, including the conversion of local temples into schools or other more practical or secular usages, resulted in the suppression of Chinese popular religion.[21] With a more powerful, centralized, and totalitarian government, Communist China practiced the subordinationist model in a much more radical way after it came to power in 1949.

The People's Republic of China is basically a party-state. With its atheistic and anti-religious ideology, it is quite understandable that the Communist Party might tend to suppress religions through the state. However, the Communist Party also adopts an instrumentalist or pragmatist approach to religion. For example, in view of the strategic need to "unite" religious believers and make use of religions to strengthen its regime, the Communist Party announced a "Common Program" (共同纲领) on September 27, 1949, allowing freedom of religious belief on the one hand (Article 5) and confiscating the rural lands belonging to the churches or temples on the other hand (Article 3).[22] Similarly, according to Article 36 of the Constitution (1982), freedom of religious belief is guaranteed and "normal religious activities" are protected, but religious organizations and affairs should not be interfered with by foreign powers, and it is illegal to make use of religion to disturb social order, harm people's health, or sabotage the state's education system. It is important to note that the religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution is restricted to "belief" and does not necessarily include its "exercise," and it is up to the Communist Party to define what are "normal" religious activities. In fact, the Communist regime issued many regulations related to religious affairs, including some covering all religions and some others specifically on particular religion(s).[23]

Apart from the legal aspect, the subordinationist model is also exhibited in the government's administration. In addition to the Religious Bureau, a governmental department overseeing the religious affairs, the Communist Party also made use of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the National Christian Council to control the Protestant churches. The term "Three-Self" refers to the principles of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation, which had already been developed before 1949. Soon after 1949, some Protestant leaders appealed to the government, claiming that in order to disassociate the Chinese churches from foreign powers, they would run the Protestant churches according to the principles of Three-Self, but under the supervision of the Communist Party. Regardless of how well these church leaders could represent the Protestant Christians in China, their appeal was accepted by the Communist government, which made these self-appointing church leaders the official representatives of the Protestant churches.[24] As

20 Ma Li, *Xian dai xing shi yu xia Minguo zheng fu zong jiao zheng ce yan jiu* [Study of republican China's policies on religions in modern perspective] (Beijing: Zhongguo she hui ke xue chu ban she, 2010); Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009).

21 See Paul Katz, *Religion in China and its Modern Fate* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2014), especially chapter 1.

22 Donald E. MacInnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China: A Documentary History* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 21.

23 For the relevant primary documents, including the government's regulations and statements from relevant political leaders, up to the end of 1960s, see MacInnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China*.

24 See also Liang Jialin and Xing Fuzeng (Ka-lun Leung and Fuk-tsang Ying), *Wǔ shí nián dài sān zì yùn dòng dí yán jiū* [The Three-Self patriotic movement in 1950s], 2nd. ed. (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1996).

religious activities are required to be held at places designated for religious purposes, all religious places must be registered. Eventually, all the legally registered churches were administered by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement or National Christian Council and subject to the government's control, whereas those refusing to register became illegal and subject to political suppression.[25]

In addition to the administrative structure, the Communist Party also sent undercover members to join the church leadership in order to monitor and control the Protestant churches. The best known case is probably Li Chuwen (李储文, 1918–2018), who had become a Communist Party member during the second Sino-Japanese War and was sent to receive theological training at Yale during 1949–50. He then served as pastor of the Community Church (*Guó jì lǐ bài tang* 国际礼拜堂, literally "international chapel") in Shanghai. After the disclosure of his party membership during the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), he ceased to work as a church pastor and began to serve as a government official with various political appointments. In 1983, he was appointed vice director to the Hong Kong Branch of Xinhua News Agency (*Xīn huá shè* 新华社), which served as the de facto Chinese embassy in Hong Kong before 1997, and his previous role as undercover agent to the Protestant churches was publicized.

Though the Chinese Communist Party clearly adopts a subordinationist approach in a very thorough way, its practice as a whole can be described as a mixture of suppression and control. From time to time, religious policy swings between the two poles of ideology-based suppression and soft control driven by pragmatic consideration. When China was involved in the Korean war (1950–1953), which was also interpreted as a war against "American imperialism," harder suppression was applied to the churches. The Three-Self churches shifted their emphasis from "Three-Self" to "Patriotic" in order to highlight their anti-imperialistic stand. But when the Communist Party began to implement the open and reform policy in the late 1970s, it adopted a more tolerant approach to religions and tended to make use of religions to develop relationships with foreign countries. In response, the Three-Self churches supported the government's new policies and parroted the new political slogans, such as mutual adaptation between religion and socialist China.[26] In recent years, especially after the rise of Xi Jinping, tighter control and even harder suppression became increasingly the norm. The Religious Bureau is now directly under the Communist Party instead of the government. Since the house churches and unregistered urban churches do not have legal authorization, they cannot legally build their own chapels. These unregistered churches, such as Shouwang Church (守望教会) in Beijing, are not even legally allowed to rent or purchase nonreligious properties for their religious gatherings. However, it is also important to note that there are significant regional differences in terms of the implementation of religious policy. For example, the destruction of chapels and crosses happened in Zhejiang and a few other provinces, but not in other provinces. In fact, many church buildings and crosses were "legally" destroyed in the name of demolishing illegal construction, rather than as an official attack on religion. Furthermore, some Buddhist statues which had been built with the permission of the related local governments were demolished later by some other authorities for various reasons. The lack of consistency in the implementation of religious policy indicates not only a "rule by law" system rather than one of "rule of law" in Communist China, but also suggests that the implementation of

25 See also Xing Fuzeng (Fuk-tsang Ying), *Dāng dài zhōng guó zhèng jiào guān xì* [Church-state relations in contemporary China] (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1999).

26 See also, Deng Zhaoming, *Cāng sāng yǔ jì jìng: sì shí duō nián lái dí sān zì ài guó yùn dòng* [The vicissitudes of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the 1950s and its predicament today] (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 1997).

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religious policy can be affected by both the changing sociopolitical circumstances and the personal preferences of political leaders.

SUBORDINATION AND SEPARATION IN PROTESTANTISM

In order to understand the relations between Protestantism and the Chinese Communist government, including the Chinese Protestant responses to the subordination model in China, it is important to review state-church relations in Protestantism. It is well known that Protestant approaches to the church-state relationship were shaped largely by the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Instead of being a unified movement, the so-called Reformation should be understood as a set of "Reformations" in recognition of its plurality, and of the fact that politics played a crucial role in its plural development. Regarding the church-state relation, the principle of "whose reign, whose religion" (*cuius regio, eius religio*) assumed by the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 might imply that rulers had the right to decide the religions for their respective territories. This seems to resemble the subordination model in China. In fact, the magisterial reformers, such as Martin Luther (1483–1546), seemed to accept this model by attempting to solicit support from political authority in order to implement the proposed reform and to resist military threats from political leaders who were against the reform, even though Luther also proposed to set limits on secular authority. In contrast to the magisterial reformers, the radical reformers, especially the Anabaptists, preferred to uphold the autonomy of the church, which should consist of believers only, and to advocate for a model of separation of the church from the state. The case of the Calvinist or Reformed church is quite complicated. Whereas some Reformed churches came closer to the position of radical reformers and advocated for the independence or autonomy of the church vis-à-vis the state, some others came closer to the position of magisterial reformers by making use of the government to implement the reform and even projecting a vision of theocracy.[27] In a sense, the Protestant churches have exemplified different models of church-state relation, and they have struggled for church autonomy in different ways—inside or outside the structure of a state church. Partially due to the insistence of the radical reformers and some other religious minority groups in various countries, religious tolerance was eventually implemented in many countries. In these countries, churches of different denominations, with diverging views of church-state relation, came to coexist peacefully in one country or even one city.[28]

Consider England as an example. The Church of England appears to be a typical case of the subordinationist model. In addition to its recognition of the king or queen as its supreme governor on earth, the Church of England also allows the influence of the state on certain church matters. For example, regarding the appointment of senior clergy, the church authority is expected to forward two candidates with its own preference to the prime minister, who has the right to reprioritize the candidates and appoint the second candidate in the original priority list. At the same time, many other Christians refused to join this state church. Apart from the Roman Catholics, there were also the Non-Conformists, who preferred a separationist model. Their refusals to join the Church of England exposed a serious problem concerning the subordinationist model; namely,

27 See Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 7–22, especially 11–12; Lai Pinchao (Pan-Chiu Lai) and Gao Xin, *Shui di zong jiao? he zhong gai ge? shi liu shi ji zong jiso gai ge di duo yuan xing yu zheng zhi xing* [Whose religion? Which reform? Pluralistic and political characters of the Reformation in the sixteenth century] (Hong Kong: Dao feng shu she, 2017).

28 For a detailed analysis, see Wayne P. Te Brake, *Religious War and Religious Peace in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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that there are Protestants who refuse to accept the authority of the state (especially on religious matters), or the doctrinal position of the state church, or both. However, with the eventual introduction of religious tolerance, and without revoking the Church of England's status as the state church, other Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church came to be legally permitted. Both the state church and the non-state church could maintain their own autonomy in their respective ways. The end result was a sort of coexistence of two different models; the Church of England could continue to practice its autonomy under a subordinationist model, while other Protestant churches could maintain their autonomy under a separationist model.

CHINESE PROTESTANT ACCEPTANCE OF SUBORDINATION

Considering the precedent established by the Church of England, it is theoretically possible for Chinese Protestantism to accept the subordination model. Given the relation between the Church of England and the British government, it is not surprising to find that the colonial government of Hong Kong, especially during the initial period of its colonial rule, used the Chinese Christians as the middlemen for the government's communication with and thus governing of the local Chinese.[29] In fact, the colonial government ranked the Anglican and Catholic bishops very high on the list for official ceremonies (without including the leaders of other religions or denominations), and saw the Christian churches (and, to a lesser extent, some other religions) as potential partners or collaborators in providing education and other social services.[30] In mainland China, the best-known leader of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council was Bishop Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting, 丁光训, 1915–2012) who was consecrated by the then Chinese Anglican church as bishop of the Zhejiang Diocese in 1955 and later held various prominent political positions at both provincial and national levels, including the vice chairmanship of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Similarly, Bishop Kong Baoluo (Paul Kwong, 邝保罗), the present Anglican archbishop of Hong Kong, accepted the political appointment to serve as a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. The political appointments of Ding and Kong are comparable to Anglican bishops sitting in the House of Lords in the British Parliament. The cases of Ding and Kong seem to be *prima facie* evidence of the possibility of accepting the Chinese model of subordination in an Anglican way. However, in China, there are also some theoretical and practical challenges to the Anglican approach to subordination.

In an essay on John Henry Newman (1801–1890) and the Oxford Movement (1833–1845), I challenge the viability of the Anglican approach to church-state relation. As I argue, since the king or queen of England must be a member of the Church of England, it is legitimate for the supreme governor of the Church of England to intervene into church matters and this should not be regarded as a threat to the autonomy of the church. However, after the Glorious Revolution in 1688, the actual political power shifted from the throne to parliament. Unlike the king or queen, the members of parliament are not necessarily members of the Church of England, especially after the implementation of policies related to religious tolerance. In other words, the state to which the Church of England was subordinated is no longer necessarily Anglican. The protest made by the Oxford Movement against the Irish Church Act of 1833 raised

29 See Carl T. Smith, *Chinese Christians: Elites, Middlemen, and the Church in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005).

30 See Beatrice Leung and Shun-hing Chan, *Changing Church and State Relations in Hong Kong, 1950-2000* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003).

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questions not only about the apostolicity of the church and the legitimacy of the state's intervention into church matters, but also about the danger of Erastianism, which affirms the superiority of the state to the church in ecclesiastical matters, especially when the parliament becomes less friendly to the Church of England. I conclude the essay with the suggestion that contemporary churches do well to follow Newman's approach of upholding the church's apostolicity in an increasingly secular or hostile environment.[31] The essay makes no explicit reference to the Chinese context, but the implication for China should be obvious. Newman's leaving the Church of England and joining the Roman Catholic Church can be interpreted as a vote of no confidence for the Church of England's ability to maintain its autonomy vis-à-vis the state. This a rather serious challenge to the subordinationist model from an insider and long-time supporter.

Regardless of whether the model of the Church of England works well in England, one has to query its applicability to the Chinese context. Theoretically speaking, the model of the Church of England is acceptable to neither the Communist party nor the Protestant churches in Mainland China. In principle, the head of state of Communist China should be a member of the Communist party and is required to be an atheist and not a Christian or practitioner of any religion. It is rather difficult to conceive how, from either the Communist or the Christian perspectives, an atheistic person or political party could be proclaimed "Supreme Governor on Earth" of the churches in China. Though some leaders of the official churches might have tried very hard to construct a theological justification for their acceptance of the subordination of the church to the state or the Communist party, this acceptance is based mainly on the present political reality rather than on any Christian theological tradition.

Considering the case in a more practical perspective, the actual experience of the Church of England clearly indicates that the subordination of the church to the state may risk allowing church matters to be interfered with or manipulated by a government which may not respect the autonomy of the church. If the Church of England, which is legally established as the state church and widely recognized as an embodiment or patron of the cultural heritage of England, may have problems in maintaining its autonomy vis-à-vis the state, it is quite unrealistic to expect that the Chinese Communist government will fully respect the autonomy of the Christian churches, especially when Christianity is often regarded as a religion of foreign origin associated with imperial powers. Furthermore, the subordination of religion to the state required by the Chinese Communist party is very comprehensive and fundamental. Although the government is proclaimed to be atheistic with an infamous track record of hostility to Christianity, it also tends to influence or even control the churches on practical, personnel, and theological matters. The political slogan "Love the nation, love the religion" (*ai guo ai jiao* 爱国爱教), which is stressed by the Communist party/government and promulgated by the official churches in China, places patriotism above one's religious identity. In a sense, the political demand of the Communist party is itself "religious": one has to love the nation (together with the Communist party) more than anything else, including one's own religion. Chinese Christians may have to ask themselves whether this price is too high and whether the subordination model may amount to an idolatry of the state. The recent events of destroying churches and crosses in Zhejiang Province might further undermine the subordination model because some of the churches demolished actually belong to the official Three-Self churches. One has to ask if the

31 Lai Pinchao [Pan-Chiu Lai], "Cong Niuman kan shi su hua chu jing zhong de Jidu zong jiao" [Christianity in context of secularization: Viewed from the perspective of John Henry Newman], in *Jidu zong jiao yan jiu, di liu ji* [The study of Christianity], vol. 6, ed. Zhuo Xinping and Xu Zhiwei (Beijing: Religious Culture Publishing House, 2003), 21–41.

subordination model can really bring forth a stable and peaceful state-religion relationship in Communist China.

CHINESE PROTESTANT DEMANDS FOR SEPARATION

The inadequacy of the subordinationist model is shown not only in the relationship between church and state, but also in the relationship among the churches. As the case of Church of England indicates, the existence of a state church can be a divisive issue among Christians. Similar problems can be found in China. For example, Wang Mingdao (王明道, 1900–1991), a famous preacher who worked in Beijing, refused to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement because he found many of its leaders theologically unorthodox. Instead of being an isolated case, Wang Mingdao is recognized as the representative or pioneer of a nonconformist tradition flourishing in Chinese Christianity up to the present day.[32] Considering the doctrinal diversity among the Protestant churches as well as the diversity of their positions on church-state relations, it is by no means easy to establish a state church that can subordinate itself to the state and unite all Protestants at the same time.

Although the official Three-Self churches have declared from time to time that the Chinese churches entered into a post-denominational period after 1949, "post-denominationalism" seems to be more of a hope advocated by some church leaders than a present reality. Apart from the "cultural Christians" (scholars of Christianity who refrain from becoming church members) there are also some indigenous Christian groups which refuse to join the official churches. A notable example is the indigenous church known as Small Flock Church (*xiao qun jiao hui* 小群教会), which is inspired by the theological, spiritual, and ecclesiastical tradition associated with Ni Tuosheng (倪柝声, 1903–1972, also known as Watchman Nee).[33] Although there is no church proclaiming itself as Lutheran, Anglican, or Baptist in mainland China today, there are some Chinese Protestant churches identifying themselves with the Reformed tradition by calling themselves churches of *gui zheng zong* (归正宗, literally, return-correct-denomination) or *gai ge zong* (改革宗, literally, change-transform-denomination). These Reformed churches challenge both the "post-denominational" vision as well as the subordination model of the church-state relationship adopted by the official churches.

A famous example is the Blessings of Autumn Rain Reformed Church (*Qiu yu zhi fu gui zheng jiao hui* 秋雨之福归正教会) in Chengdu, Sichuan, which attempted to articulate a Reformed approach to church-state relations, with emphases on the ideas of religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and rule of law, in its "Reaffirming our Stance on the House Churches: 95 Theses" issued in 2015.[34] As Chloë Starr perceptively points out, the 95 Theses as a whole demands the absolute separation between church and state, condemns the Three-Self Patriotic Movement as the "anti-Christ," and proposes to replace the idea of "sinicization" (*Zhongguo hua* 中国化) of Christianity with a vision of the "evangelization of China" (*Zhongguo fu yin hua* 中国福音化),

32 Hao Yuan, "Chinese Christianity and their Tradition of Disobedience: Wang Mingdao, Tanghe Church and Shouwang Church as Examples," *Logos & Pneuma*, no. 44 (2016): 87–122 (in Chinese with abstract in English).

33 See Chloë Starr, "The Chinese Church: A Post-denominational Reality?," in *The Changing World Religion Map: Sacred Places, Identities, Practice and Politics*, ed. Stanley D. Brunn (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 2045–58, at 2052–53.

34 See Qiu yu zhi fu gui zheng jiao hui [The Blessings of Autumn Rain Reformed Church], "Wo men dui jia ting jiao hui li chang de zhong shen (jiu shi wu tiao)," *Sheng ming ji kan*, no. 75 (September 2015), https://www.cclifefl.org/View/Article/4248 (accessed February 19, 2020).

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"kingdomization of the church" (*jiao hui guo du hua* 教会国度化), and "Christianization of culture" (*wen hua Jidu hua* 文化基督化).[35] There are several problems with the theses. First, the absolutist position on church-state relation they support is heavily dependent on American interpretations and experience as opposed to European modes of church-state relations, which were more complicated and allowed a greater acceptance of state authority as well as a more flexible approach to state-church relations. Second, the theses might make the reconciliation between the registered and unregistered churches almost impossible. Third, the possible political implications of the theocratic vision articulated by the theses may attract the Chinese government's suspicion.[36]

Regarding the position of the 95 Theses, perhaps one may question whether absolute religious freedom and/or absolute separation of church and state are conceptually possible.[37] One may further ask whether there is a tension between the Calvinistic theocratic vision and advocacy for absolute separation of church and state. In the contemporary Chinese context, a rather paradoxical problem is whether the Reformed churches should demand the imposition of the separationist model on the relations between the government and the other religions. If yes, does this demand betray a hidden theocratic agenda in which Christianity intervenes in the state and even dictates its relations with other religions? Of course, one may clarify that the principle of separation of church and state means the mutual independence of the church and the state, but this does not prohibit the adherents of religion to exercise their own political influences as individual citizens. However, if "evangelization of China" means a massive conversion of the majority of Chinese people to Protestantism or even more specifically to Calvinism, this may imply the end of the domination of Communist ideology and the religiously pluralistic tradition in China. In the eyes of the government and the religions preferring the subordinationist model, this Reformed demand for separation, if imposed on other religions, might contradict the principle of separation of church and state, and violate the religious freedom of non-Christian religious persons, including their free exercise or expression in institutional form as state religions.

After all, no matter how many Christian churches demand separation of church and state and how many intellectuals support religious freedom and human rights, it is very unlikely that the Chinese government will give up the subordinationist model in its relationship with religion. First, from a rhetorical point of view, the concepts of "separation" and "independence" are associated with the movements for the independence of Xizang (Tibet), Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. As discussion of each of these are politically taboo in mainland China, any talk about "separation" or "independence" is already politically sensitive. For the Chinese government, the Protestant demand for separation or independence calls for ever-tighter control. Second, considering its totalitarian or even "religious" characters, as well as the dominance of the subordinationist model in the Chinese tradition, it is not realistic to expect that the Communist Party will voluntarily give up control on religious matters. The Communist government will interpret the separation of church and state as a warning forbidding religious intervention in the government's administration, rather than as a reminder to the government not to be involved in the internal affairs of religion.

35 Chloë Starr, "Wang Yi and the 95 Theses of the Chinese Reformed Church," *Religions* 7, no. 12 (2016) (article no. 142), at p. 11, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7120142.

36 For a more detailed analysis, see Starr, "Wang Yi and the 95 Theses of the Chinese Reformed Church."

37 See, for examples, Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper, *The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 1997); Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). For an immanent critique of Sullivan's study, see Joshua T. Mauldin, "Contesting Religious Freedom: Impossibility, Normativity, and Justice," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 5, no. 3 (2016): 457–81.

Thirdly, considered from a legal and practical point of view, Protestantism is merely one among the five lawful religions in China. In addition to the adherents of the official Three-Self Church, the subordinationist model is adopted by the other religions, especially the religious leaders who benefit from the prevalent system and support it with vested interests. There is thus no compelling political reason for the Communist government to accept the separationist model and give up the subordinationist model simply because of resistance from some (but not all) Protestant churches. The recent severe suppressions of the Blessings of Autumn Rain Reformed Church in Chengdu and some other Reformed churches, including destroying or confiscating their properties and imprisoning their pastors and leaders, demonstrate clearly that this separatist model is not acceptable to the party-state.

CHINESE PROTESTANT NEGOTIATION FOR AUTONOMY

Recognizing the theoretical and practical problems related to the demand for absolute separation, Chinese Reformed churches could consider the alternative of restricting the demand for separation to their own relations with the government. In other words, the Chinese Reformed churches could negotiate for their own autonomy vis-à-vis the government, while letting other religious organizations consider and negotiate with the government on their own—whether in terms of subordination, separation, or autonomy. This would leave open the possibility of the coexistence of different models. In addition to the acceptance of subordination and the absolute demand for separation, there is a third Protestant approach to church-state relations, that of negotiating with the government for the autonomy of the registered and unregistered churches as well as their coexistence.

Wang Aiming (王艾明) is a pastor who graduated from Basel University with a doctoral thesis on the heritage of the Reformation for the future of the church in China.[38] Though Wang was vice president of the Nanjing Theological Seminary and recognized as one of the prospective leaders of the Three-Self churches, he is now serving as a pastor in North America and is a vocal critic of the actual practices of the Three-Self churches. In a monograph recently published in Chinese, Wang makes use of the concepts of magisterial church (*ti zhi jiao hui* 体制教会) and free church (*zi you jiao hui* 自由教会) to analyze the history of Christianity as well as the present situation of Protestant churches in China.[39] Though Wang was inspired by Calvin's thought, his approach is radically different from that of the 95 Theses analyzed above. For Wang, both the magisterial church and the free church are legitimate church types in the Protestant tradition. For him, the Three-Self churches belong to the magisterial church type and the house churches are examples of the free church. While the former should not force the latter to join them, the latter should not denounce the former. Instead of antagonism, Wang recommends reconciliation between the Three-Self and House churches.[40]

As an insider of the Three-Self churches, Wang perceptively points out that due to political intervention, many church practices were chosen because of political considerations. The church order of the Three-Self churches badly needs to be reformed through re-connecting with the apostolic and ecumenical tradition. However, many leaders of the Three-Self churches tend to be loyal to the

38 Wang Aiming, *Church in China: Faith, Ethics, Structure—The Heritage of the Reformation for the Future of the Church in China* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).

39 Wang Aiming, *Ti zhi jiao hui yu zi you jiao hui* [Magisterial church and free church] (Hong Kong: Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, 2017).

40 Wang Aiming, *Ti zhi jiao hui yu zi you jiao hui*, 149–50.

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political party and are more interested in power struggles among one another and in seeking political favors than in engaging in pastoral work. Given their lack of academic qualifications and spiritual formation, it is foreseeable that many people, especially intellectuals, will not accept the authority or teachings of the leaders of the Three-Self churches, and would prefer to join house churches, especially the urban churches. What the house churches need is legal recognition from the government, providing them legal toleration and guaranteeing their religious freedom.[41]

Unlike the 95 Theses, which focuses on church-state relations almost exclusively from its own theological perspective, Wang considers the state-church relation also from the government's perspective and argues that it is in the best interest of the government to grant autonomy to the unregistered Protestant churches. The affirmation of the religious freedom and legal status of the house churches may contribute to the development of rule of law in China. The official churches would have a better chance to restore proper church order and serve the society in a more effective way if the government were to grant them a higher degree of autonomy. For Wang, what the Three-Self and house churches need is autonomy (*zi zhi*自治), which is the solution to the present problems of the state-church relationship and to the future of the Christian churches in China.[42] In short, Wang's approach is to negotiate for greater degrees of autonomy for the official and nonofficial Protestant churches, instead of simply accepting a subordinationist model or demanding a separationist model. In effect, Wang advocates the coexistence of the magisterial and free churches as well as their respective autonomy vis-à-vis the state.

To conceive of the relationship in terms of autonomy instead of separation or subordination has the following advantages. First, it is more acceptable from the government's point of view. Unlike "independence" or "separation," which are politically sensitive for the Chinese government, "autonomy" or "self-governing" are more acceptable concepts. In fact, the Communist government confers the status of Autonomous Regions to provinces with a strong presence of ethnic minority groups, including Guangxi, Ningxia, Xizang (Tibet), and Xinjiang, allowing them a level of effective self-government. An even higher degree of autonomy is conferred to Hong Kong and Macau, the two special administrative regions, which were established for special historical and political considerations different from those of the Autonomous Regions. Second, the concept of autonomy reflects more accurately the common concern among various Protestant churches that church matters should be decided by church members alone, with minimal (if any) interference from the state. Unlike the concept of separation, which tends to exclude the official churches, the concept of autonomy is applicable to both Three-Self and house churches. For the churches which accept the subordinationist model, the question of how to maintain the church's autonomy within the system of official religions is a critical issue. For those advocating the separationist model, the primary concern is the autonomy of their churches outside the system. Third, the concept of autonomy allows for a relative interpretation, so that we can conceive of differing degrees or forms of autonomy. Unlike the concepts of subordination and separation, which tend to be all or nothing affairs, the concept of autonomy allows for negotiations between different degrees and forms of autonomy. In some recent studies of religion-state relations in contemporary China, scholars also tend to adopt "domination-negotiation" instead of "domination-resistance" as the key concept for the analysis of concrete cases in church-state relations in contemporary China.[43] In other words, by

41 Wang, 221.

42 Wang, 85–187, 195, 208–15.

43 See Carsten T. Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?* (London: Routledge, 2018), chapter 1; Teresa Zimmerman-Liu and Teresa Wright, "Protestant Christianity in

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employing the concept of autonomy, there is a greater chance for reaching solutions agreeable to both the government and the relevant churches through negotiation.

CONCLUSION

The monopoly of either the separationist model or the subordinationist model cannot relieve the tensions between the government and Chinese Protestant churches. The most viable way to relieve these tensions is through the coexistence of the official churches (which may prefer the subordinationist model) and the nonofficial churches (which may prefer the separation model). The coexistence of a state church alongside other denominations is practiced in various European countries, including the United Kingdom, and is thus not foreign to the Protestant tradition. For the Chinese Communist government, the coexistence of official and unofficial organizations is not entirely impossible. For example, for the sake of economic development, the Communist Party legally allows the coexistence of state-owned enterprise (*guó qǐ* 国企) and private enterprise (*mín qǐ* 民企). Both are ultimately under the control of the Communist Party with different degrees of autonomy. Competition between the two may occur, though the former may receive stronger support or even protection from the government. This "secular" example may imply that the legal coexistence of official and unofficial Protestant churches is not entirely unthinkable. In fact, this legal coexistence can be found in contemporary China, though not within Mainland China.

The Basic Law, which is the official document providing the legal basis for the idea of "One Country, Two Systems," grants a "high degree of autonomy" to Hong Kong and allows the practice of an economic, political, and social system radically different from that of Mainland China. Article 148 of the Basic Law states:

> The relationship between non-governmental organizations in fields such as education, science, technology, culture, art, sports, the professions, medicine and health, labour, social welfare and social work as well as 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.[44]

According to the Basic Law, the Protestant churches in Hong Kong are legally recognized by the People's Republic of China regardless of being registered with or subordinated to the official Three-Self churches in Mainland China. Furthermore, the relationship between the Hong Kong Protestant churches and those in Mainland China is understood in terms of "non-subordination, non-interference and mutual respect." The case of Macau is similar to that of Hong Kong. In other words, the Chinese government, due to certain pragmatic considerations, legally allows the coexistence of the separationist and subordinationist models of religion-state relations. It is thus theoretically possible to consider applying or extending the principle of "non-subordination, non-interference and mutual respect" to the relation between the official and unofficial Protestant churches in Mainland China.

Considering the question from the Chinese government's point of view, with the coexistence of these two models, the vested interests of the existing leaders of the five official religions need not be

China, Urban and Rural: Negotiating the State and Propagating the Faith," in Brunn, *The Changing World Religion Map*, 2059–74.

44 Basic Law, chapter 6, http://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/chapter_6.html, last modified April 2017 (in English).

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affected, while antagonism from religious people outside the scope of the five official religions will be reduced. The problem concerning the legal status of religions with relatively few adherents in China (such as Jainism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Christian Orthodox churches) could be addressed in a similar way. This would have the effect also of benefiting China's diplomatic relations. However, the most crucial problem remains, which is whether the Chinese government prefers to adopt a more pragmatic or a more ideological approach to managing the state-religion relationship. It remains also the responsibility of the relevant religious organizations to negotiate with the Chinese government for their respective autonomy.

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