

[Working Draft]

Critical Engagement: Methodism and Politics in Post-1997 Hong Kong

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Christianity and Methodism in Hong Kong

Christianity in Hong Kong has a unique situation. Its social presence is out of proportion to the percentage of Christians in Hong Kong. Surveys conducted by me in 2009 and 2012 show that the percentage of Catholic was 5.6 percent and 3.6 percent respectively, while the percentage of Protestants was 18.7 percent and 15.8 percent respectively (see Table 1). This is already much more than the figures provided by the government.² In any case, the percentage of Christians in Hong Kong is less than 25 percent of the total population. It is still a minority. On the other hand, Christian churches and organizations have been significantly involved in education and social service.

From the end of the Second World War to the early fifties, China underwent first a civil war and then the establishment of a communist regime. Hong Kong, still under British rule at that time, became a haven for Chinese who fled from political turmoil and economic hardship. The population of colony doubled during this period. The British colonial government found it hard to cope with the surge in demand for education and social service. It sought help from mission bodies and churches, encouraging them to provide relief for refugees and to build schools for children. Based on this partnership between the church and state, Hong Kong government in the sixties began to provide financial support to school education and social services run by “voluntary organizations,” many of which were Christian, and a few were Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucianist.

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² For example, according to a government fact sheet, the number of Catholics and Protestants in Hong Kong in 2016 is 379,000 and 480,000 respectively, which is approximately 5.16 percent and 6.53 percent respectively of the total population (7.347 million) in that year. See <https://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/religion.pdf>. Since religious affiliation is not included in the Hong Kong government’s population census, the figures about Christians shown in the fact sheet are probably reported by church organizations.

Table 1: Adherents of Major Religions in Hong Kong

Religion	Jan 2009 (N=2,002; age ≥ 18)	May 2012 (N=1,505; age ≥ 15)
No Religion	57.5%	66.9%
Buddhism	11.3%	8.4%
Traditional Chinese Religions (incl. Taoism)	6.5%	4.1%
Catholicism	5.6%	3.6%
Protestantism	18.7%	15.8%
Telephone surveys (using territory-wide random sampling) on Hong Kong residents commissioned by the Centre for Christian Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong [CUHK] and conducted by (i) Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, CUHK (2009) and (ii) Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, School of Journalism and Communication, CUHK (2012); sponsored by CWM/Nethersole Fund. Since the sampling criteria are slightly different in terms of age and language spoken), the two surveys are not directly comparable.		

Today, more than half of the primary and secondary schools (54.6 and 51.9 percent respectively) in Hong Kong are run by Christian churches or organizations (see Table 2 and Table 3). Most of these Christian schools are “aided” schools. They are fully funded by the government. Each of them is governed by an Incorporated Management Committee. Students do not need to pay tuition fees. Many kindergartens and nurseries are also Christian. At the same time, at least one-fourth of social service organizations in Hong Kong are run by Christian bodies, providing various types of services to address social needs. Many of these services are wholly or partly funded by public money. Some others are self-financed. Christian bodies also established some hospitals and clinics.

Table 2: Types of Primary Schools in Hong Kong in 2017 (by religious background)³

	No Religion	Protestant	Catholic	Buddhist	Other Religions	Total
Government	34	0	0	0	0	34
Aided	146	151	95	16	15	423
Direct Subsidy	11	9	1	0	0	21
Private	19	21	13	0	0	53
<i>Total</i>	210	181	109	16	15	531

³ Source: <https://www.schooland.hk/post/psa04>

Table 3: Types of Secondary Schools in Hong Kong in 2017 (by religious background)⁴

	No Religion	Protestant	Catholic	Buddhist	Other Religions	Total
Government	31	0	0	0	0	31
Aided	122	125	82	20	13	362
Direct Subsidy	60	22	6	1	0	60
Private	5	6	0	0	0	11
<i>Total</i>	189	153	88	21	13	464

Besides the social presence of Christianity in Hong Kong, which is quite unique, there are of course churches and denominations. For the Catholic community, there are 52 parishes. For the Protestant community, there are at least 1,450 congregations and more than 70 denominations. In terms of the number of congregations (local churches), the largest three denominations are Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China [hereafter as “HKCCCC”]. These three denominations are also the largest three in terms of the number of members. Yet many Protestants belong to independent churches with no denominational affiliation.

The Methodist Church (officially called “The Methodist Church, Hong Kong”; hereafter abbreviated as “MCHK”), with 25 congregations, ranks the 10th in terms of the number of congregations. Church membership is 11,986, and the number of those joining worship services is 6,731. MCHK runs 8 secondary schools, 11 primary schools, 14 kindergartens and nurseries, 5 social service institutions, 3 dental clinics, and 1 retreat center. Before the 1970s, there were a Methodist denomination established by the Methodist Church in Britain and another established by Methodism in the United States. The two denominations merged in 1975, forming the MCHK.

Hong Kong after the 1997 handover

“one country, two systems”

the China factor – actual or perceived tightening of control

The Basic Law of Hong Kong promises that the Chief Executive and the Legislative Council can eventually be elected by universal suffrage after 2007; but China, using its power to interpret the Basic Law by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, effectively made it more and more difficult to achieve this goal.

The Umbrella Movement in 2014 was a protest against China’s restriction of the development political democracy in Hong Kong.

⁴ Source: <https://www.schooland.hk/post/sspa04>

basic freedom of religion remains intact

MCHK and Social Engagement

The Methodist Church, Hong Kong, has been one of the most outspoken Protestant denominations in Hong Kong. While its school education and social service ministry receive the government funding, it still express critical opinion against the governments of Hong Kong and China. In the “Social Service Mission Manifesto” it states that it should not remain silent in an unjust and exploitative society. The Methodist church as a whole and its individual members should take up responsibilities of being prophet, priest, and servant. As a prophet, the MCHK would not compromise with any unfair, unjust, oppressive, and sinful forces, and would not be afraid to voice out stern criticisms.⁵ I would argue that in several cases the MCHK has upheld the social principles in the Manifesto.

School-Based Management Controversy

Starting from 2000, the HKSAR government proposed to change the governance of aided schools by setting up a Incorporated Management Committee (IMC) for each school under the spirit of school-based management. The Legislative Council eventually passed in July 2004 the amendment to the Education Ordinance, requiring that each aided school should establish an IMC with members representing different stakeholders—the sponsoring body (such as the church), teachers, parents, alumni, and the community. Members appointed by the sponsoring body would form a slight majority (60 percent). Pushing for the legislative change, the government appealed to principles of visibility, accountability, and democracy.

The Catholic Diocese and mainline Protestant denominations, including the Anglican church, HKCCCC, and MCHK, objected to the legislation. In their view, decentralizing school management to the IMC of each school has significantly reduced the ability of the churches to run their schools with their religious goals and values, while it allows easier intervention of each school by the government, to which each school is accountable. This would amount to a breach of article 141 of the Basic Law of Hong Kong, which guarantees that religious organizations may, “according to their previous practice,” continue to run schools and other institutions. MCHK added that it had already implemented the principles of school-based management as the governing board of each school already had elected representatives from teachers, parents, and alumni. MCHK voiced out its views in various channels. It also gave moral support to the Catholic Diocese as the latter was filing a judicial review against the legislation. The lawsuit was defeated successively in the Court of First Instance, the Court of Appeal, and

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eventually the Court of Final Appeal in October 2011. During the legal battle and even after the defeat, the tone of MCHK remained defiant: claiming that the legislation has stifled the diversity in implementing the spirit of school-based management; pointing to the fact that establishing IMC has nothing to do with democratic school management, as no government-run school has established IMC; and claiming that the courts have upheld the legality but not the reasonableness of the legislation. All the schools of MCHK have now established IMC. The denomination implements a procedure in a way that candidates for school principal should be screened by the School Education Division of MCHK before being approved by the school's IMC.

Political Issues

1. The MCHK organized a mock voting for church members in each election of the Chief Executive of the HKSAR. The reason was for democratic education. It tried to be more democratic than the real election, as the latter involved only a 1,200-member electoral committee.
2. The Ministerial Session of the MCHK Conference issued statements criticizing the curtailing of the development of democracy by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. It also issued pastoral letters to members explaining their views.
3. On September 28, 2014, many pro-democracy protesters rushed into main highways in Admiralty (near the government headquarters), starting a 79-day long protest, which is called later as the Umbrella Movement. Police used tear gas against the protesters. The MCHK church in the nearby district of Wanchai opened its doors, making the church building a haven for the protesters.
4. During the Umbrella Movement, various bodies of MCHK issued statements condemning violence and defending a teacher of its kindergarten against criticisms for using a story tale to express its political stance.
5. A survey of members of MCHK after the Umbrella Movement reveals ...

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