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**From Extradition Law Amendment Bill Protest to COVID-19 virus**

Dear friends and supporters,

May peace be with you all in 2020! At the time of writing, Hong Kong as well as the world, is suffering from the spread of the COVID-19 virus. I pray for God’s mercy upon us.

In 2019, the Hong Kong Christian Institute (HKCI) experienced two major events. First, the institute’s property was sold in January to the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China. We have now moved to a new location which is a five-minute walk from our previous place. We share our office with three other organizations, the HK Citizens, HER Fund and the Alabaster Box of Ointment Church. Besides, we welcome different parties from within Hong Kong to use our place for meetings and other activities. However, we have to be honest - we no longer own our office but we rent it, and therefore we are not as free as before to use our place as we wish. For instance, our landlord is not happy with some of our activities because she finds them too political, and this might create trouble for her.

The second event we have been involved in is the protest movement triggered by the Extradition Law Amendment Bill. Because of the limited human resources of HKCI, we could not contribute to all aspects of the protest. Nevertheless, we still connect to and cooperate with various partners in supporting the movement. A consul from a member of the European Union shared with me that he is pessimistic about the development of the movement because there is no identified party to negotiate with, if indeed there will be negotiations. My concern is not how and when the movement will end. Rather, I am concerned with how the experiences of young protestors as crucified people and martyrs can be turned into resources for Hong Kongers to seek justice, truth and reconciliation. Chris Patten, the last governor of Hong Kong, quoted Jack London’s *credo* in his last policy address (1996):

I would rather be ashes than dust,

I would rather my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze,  
Than it should be stifled in dry rot.

I would rather be a superb meteor,  
With every atom of me in magnificent glow,  
Than a sleepy and permanent planet.

Patten continued to say, “Whatever the challenges ahead, nothing should bring this meteor crashing to earth, nothing should snuff out its glow.” “I would rather be ashes than dust” is one of the phrases painted on walls by protestors. This is what Hong Kongers are witnessing, for our sakes. An article on the role of religion in the movement can be found in this issue.

Because of the spread of COVID-19 in late January, the movement has become less active and there are no protests on weekends. However, protests never die out. On the contrary, we have seen how the spirit of the movement is expressed by Hong Kongers facing COVID-19. Let me just highlight a few observations. First, Hong Kongers have learnt from both the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the current movement that the destiny of Hong Kong is in our hands. The Hong Kong government has failed to provide basic necessities such as masks and disinfectants to people for protection. Hong Kongers use different means to purchase them and share them with one another. Second, one feature of the movement is the emergence of organic intellectuals. People from different professions have recognized their social responsibility and are now connected with one another. We are happy to see that medical practitioners have called for a strike in order to request the government to stop people from China entering Hong Kong. This is an important step to stop the spread of the virus.

Lastly, apart from *Reflection* and *Newsletter*, we plan to publish the first issue of *Christian Values and Social Policy* as a support to our pastors. This year, we will publish *The Imprisoned Social Workers – 15 Letters to Social Workers*; *Boundary and Grace:* *Calvinist Theology*; and *The Ecumenicity of Blood: A Theology Struggling with the People*. We are pleased to share with you that we receive sponsorships for these three publications. Please do contact us if you would like to be one of our sponsors.

Lap Yan KUNG (Honorary General Secretary of HKCI)

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**The Role of Religions in Extradition Law Amendment Bill Protest**

**Background**

Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, contends that the proposed amendments to the extradition law (hereafter referred to as the bill) are intended to respond to the murder case in Taiwan (there is no extradition arrangement between Hong Kong and Taiwan), but the scope of the bill includes China. Since the Chinese government has a poor record of human rights, the people of Hong Kong are worried that the bill will give legitimacy to the Chinese government to interfere in the Hong Kong legal system. Furthermore, the government will allow only 20 days for public consultation, an unusually short time for such a controversial bill. Although the government has finally accepted some suggestions and revised the original proposal, (including no extradition arrangements to be made on political, religious, or ethnic grounds) it does not diminish the concerns of the people of Hong Kong. This is because the Chinese government commonly uses false accusations to incriminate people. For instance, a Hong Kong Christian smuggling the Bible into China was accused of illegal economic activity. Pastors in the Chinese mainland protesting against forced removal of crosses from church buildings in 2014 were accused of causing social disorder and illegal money collection from congregants. On June 9, 2019, more than a million people joined the demonstration in Hong Kong demanding that the government withdraw the bill. However, the government has refused this request, and on the evening of the same day, it announced that the second reading of the bill would go ahead on schedule on June 12. This provoked public anger, as the government showed no sign of listening to the voice of the people. In order to stop the meeting of the Legislative Council being held, some protestors (mostly young people) blocked the roads heading to the Legislative Council Building. In response, the government chose to use force against the protesters instead of engaging in dialogue.

Under pressure from the Hong Kongers, on June 15, the government finally decided to suspend the bill with no timeline, but people refused to accept this as a resolution. On June 23, two million people took to the streets in another demonstration. They demanded the withdrawal of the bill, the withdrawal of the term “riot” in regard to the protesters, amnesty for the arrested and the setting up an independent investigation committee to examine police brutality as well as the resignation of Carrie Lam (the last demand was changed to universal suffrage at a later stage). Lam and a few senior officials have made public apologies, but Lam has not responded to the five demands from the people. Finally, Lam formally announced the withdrawal of the bill on September 4, 2019, but it was too late. Hong Kongers insist on “Five demands, no one less.”

**Institutional Religions**

The Colloquium of Six Religious Leaders of Hong Kong (Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Daoism, Islam and Protestantism) did not make any comment on the issue of the bill until there was a serious clash between police and protestors on June 12, 2019. Its first statement on the bill was made on June 12, 2019 after the chairperson of the Legislative Council adjourned the second reading of the bill due to the blocking of the roads heading to the Legislative Council Building. . The statement had three proposals. First, it urged the government to respect the right of freedom of assembly and speech, second, it requested both the government and the people to be rational in order to find a peaceful solution in dealing with the bill and third, it emphasized that all should learn to live in diversity so that the social spilt could be healed. The second statement was made on June 18, 2019, a day after the six religious leaders were invited to meet Carrie Lam. It made four requests. First, it requested the Chief Executive to apologize over the handling of the extradition bill, and appealed to the people to accept her apology. Second, it supported peaceful rally and denounced any form of violence. It asked the government to be more tolerant in dealing with the people who had been arrested. Third, it asked the protestors to return to their work and families, and to terminate the conflict. Finally, it urged the government to be more attentive and amenable to people’s opinions. Coincidentally, on June 18, 2018, Carrie Lam said in a press conference,

I have heard you loud and clear, and have reflected deeply on all that has transpired ... I personally have to shoulder much of the responsibility ... This has led to controversies, disputes and anxieties in society. For this I offer my most sincere apology to all people of Hong Kong.

Does Lam’s apology imply that the religious leaders successfully brought Lam to make amends? Did Lam politically use the religious leaders to persuade the people to accept her apology? If it is a yes to the second question, why are the religious leaders willing to play the assigned role designated by the government? No matter what the reasons are, the reality is that Hong Kong is not a religious society, and religious leaders do not automatically hold a prestigious status in society. Hong Kongers do not submit to authority but to truth. Cardinal Joseph Zen is respected by Hong Kongers not simply because he is a cardinal, but mainly because he has been described as “the new conscience of Hong Kong” for his defense of human rights. Hong Kongers do not accept Lam’s apology, because her apology does not include her acceptance of the five demands of the people.

On July 2, 2019, the Colloquium made a third statement. It was a day after that the protestors occupied and selectively damaged the Legislative Council Building. The statement had four requests. First, it appealed to the people not to use violence and violate law and order. Second, it urged all parties to be more attentive to others. Third, it asked that no requests should contravene the welfare of Hong Kong. Fourth, it appealed to people to have open minds. On July 19, 2019, both the Catholic and Protestant representatives (the Hong Kong Christian Council of Churches) issued a joint statement. First, it requested the government to withdraw the bill. Second, it urged the government to set up an independent investigation committee. Third, it appealed to all parties to be calm. Fourth, it advised the government to take the initiative and talk to different constituencies of society. The first two requests seem to be on the side of the protestors, and therefore the joint Catholic and Protestant statement does not have support from the other four religions because the other four religions are used to complying with government policy and tare pro-establishment. Probably the Catholic and Protestant representatives are unable to persuade the other four religions to accept their joint declaration. Although the Colloquium made appeals on August 30, Oct 30 and Nov 13, these appeals condemned violence without highlighting the excessive force used by the police, a level of brutality which is alien to the people of Hong Kong.

**Lived Religions**

The term lived religions here refers to the practice of local religious communities, religious organizations and individual believers. What are the religious faiths of protestors? To what extent and how are they inspired and motivated by their faith? These concerns are beyond the scope of this short article. Nevertheless, we have been able to observe religious communities involved in the protest. Let me share some of my observations.

Both Catholics and Protestants have had a more obvious role in the protest. First, many churches were open for people during the time of protest. This was not the case during the Umbrella Movement, five years ago. One pastor said, “On August 5, two protestors suffering from tear gas came to my church for refuge and cleaning. They said ‘thank you’. I am pleased to know that my church is serving people who are in need.” There are no temples and mosques open for this purpose because there are no temples in the urban areas where the protests used to take place. Second, many Christians using the name of their denominations, individual churches and Christian associations have made public statements saying no to the bill, condemning the excessive force employed by the police and the violence of the thugs, and urging the government to listen to the five demands of the people. Third, the Pastors’ Care Fellowship was formed in solidarity with protestors. For instance, it organized a 72-hour prayer meeting starting on June 10 outside the Government Main Office. One amazing scene was on the night of June 11, when tension between protestors and police escalated. The protestors (both Christians and non-Christians) joined together with Christians singing the hymn, “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord,” for nearly nine hours straight, and this helped to release the tension. The police did not know how to respond to them. Since then, “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” has become one of the songs for protestors to use in the resistance. A young protestor wrote in his Facebook, “I am not a Christian, but I am ‘indoctrinated’ by this hymn after singing it for a few hours. The Christian hymn is really powerful. It helps to reduce the tension between police and protestors.” In order to prevent violence, the fellowship organized a team of pastors to stand between police and protestors. The role of the pastors caught the media attention, but its effect should not be over-estimated. The role of Pastors’ Care Fellowship is declining as the clash escalates. Fourth, as one of the slogans of the protest is “Be Water”, more individual Christians and pastors are organizing assemblies to pray for Hong Kong. Some key Christian figures such as Most Rev. Joseph Ha, Auxiliary Bishop of the Catholic Church, said in a public gathering, “Where our sheep are, there the pastors are.” Fifth, Christians have their own newspapers, the Christian Times for Protestants and the Kung Kao Pao for Catholics. They not only report Christian participation in protests, but also provide a deep theological reflection on the issue. This helps to generate a good discussion of the issue among Christians.

An article published in Global Web entitled to “The Damage Done by These Pastors on Hong Kong Society is Beyond your Imagination” severely criticizes the churches engaging in the protest. It condemns the pastors who mobilize people to protest, prevent police from arresting protestors, use religious reasons for organizing assembly, support students to have class strikes, provide material support to protestors and construct discourse for protest. My concern is not whether these accusations are true or not, but whether the rationale of protest is justified. Christian involvement does not reflect the politicization of the churches, because the churches have to learn what a missional and incarnational church is. Unlike the time of the Umbrella Movement when protestors were critical of pastors and Christians, protestors in the current protest appreciate the work done by pastors and churches. However, it has to admit that there are churches and Christians reluctant to support the movement. One of their major concerns is the issue of violence. On August 8, 2019, a Christian appeal was initiated by 31 pastors and theologians and carried the title, “Say No to All Forms of Violence”. It condemned the violence employed by the police as well as the protestors. It urged that Christians should be the peace-makers, and reminded them to love their enemies and treat others as themselves. It received about 3500 signatories. This was an appeal representing quite a number of conservative Christians and churches. There are two weaknesses in this appeal. First, it talks about the importance of peace-making, but it remains a slogan, because it does not address the issue of structural violence. There is no peace if there is no political transformation and justice. Second, it considers all violence as the same, and fails to distinguish between violence from police and from protestors. The protestors would have paid for their use of violence by being caught, but none of the police were prosecuted for their extreme and excessive force. As a result, its condemnation of violence is hypocrisy, because it is already on the side of the government and police.

In this short article, I have not identified the role non-Christian religions, because individual non-Christian religious believers seldom emphasize their religious affiliations in protest. There is no doubt that there are Buddhists, Muslims and others joining protests.

**Learning to be a Religion With/For the People**

Being involved in different protest groups, I find that protest groups identifying themselves as non-violent expect that Christian leaders and churches can play a more explicit role in protest. Christian leaders are seen as some of the very few people with integrity in the eyes of the public. They believe that Christian leaders and churches have the potential to calm down the possible clash between police and protestors. No matter whether the expectation from protests groups is realistic or not, Christian leaders should prepare themselves and their churches to take up their social responsibility. Theologically, this is the time of *kairos*. The churches should be creative and courageous to gather their spiritual resources for enhancing and encouraging our commitment to justice and love.

Lap Yan KUNG (Honorary General Secretary of HKCI)