

# RECONSIDERING PUBLIC THEOLOGY

## Involvement of Hong Kong Protestant Christianity in the Occupy Central Movement

Wai-Luen Kwok♦

**Abstract:** In the Occupy Central Movement in Hong Kong, from its very beginning, the influence of Protestant Christianity was obvious. The initiators launched the Movement in a church, and claimed that it is not only a political but also a spiritual quest. The initiators attempted to theologize their actions, and quickly engendered hot debates within the Church and society. More interestingly, even non-Christians have entered these discussions to articulate their versions of public theology. The paper introduces these discourses and analyzes their theological implications. I argue that the case of the Occupy Central Movement shows that public theology in Hong Kong needs to move away from focusing on political mobilisation and counter mobilisation. Rather, pursuing theological reflection on the concepts of justice, peace and welfare of the society can help Hong Kong Protestant Christians regain a sense of public shared values to meet the challenge of coming political crisis.

**Keywords:** Christian Political Participation, Christianity in Hong Kong, Mass Media, Occupy Central Movement, Public Theology

### 1. Introduction

Since the hand-over of sovereignty of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997, Hong Kong churches (both Catholic and Protestant) have been considered as increasingly politicized.<sup>1</sup> During the Occupy Central Movement (which is

---

♦**Dr Wai-Luen Kwok** is Assistant Professor of Theology in the Department of Religion and Philosophy, and Associate Director of Centre for Sino-Christian Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University.

<sup>1</sup>Beatrice Leung and Shun Hing Chan, *Changing Church and State Relations in Hong Kong, 1950-2000*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003, 146.

now labelled Umbrella Movement or Occupy Movement), Beijing-controlled press made the accusation that many Christians are “the backbone” of the Movement.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the campaign was launched in a church and the three leaders of the Movement are closely related to Protestant Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Benny Tai Yiu-Ting is a Christian lay leader of the Evangelical Free Church, Chu Yiu-ming a Baptist pastor, and Chan Kin-Man a pro-Christian non-believer. The three leaders claimed that it is not only a political but also a spiritual quest. They described their campaign as “Occupy Central with Love and Peace”<sup>4</sup> and attempted to theologize their actions. However, as a public political movement which advocates civil disobedience action, it has quickly engendered hot debates within the Church and society. In this circumstance, Hong Kong pastors and theologians have become heavily involved in a public theology discourse with an unprecedented intensity.

## 2. The Lens of Public Theology and the Scope of Investigation

The lens of public theology will be used for my analysis because the Movement is a large-scale social movement. The civil society is at the centre of the stage, though the goal of the Movement is to ask for a fair direct electoral system for the 2017 Chief Executive Election. As Max Stackhouse pointed out, political theology focuses on the exercise of power by the state, and the public theology on the civil society.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, public theology emphasizes that the social, ethical and spiritual traditions within a society have more primary powers than political order:

---

<sup>2</sup>“Zhan Zhong Nei Wai Gou Lian, Niang Ku Jiu Quan Gang Mai Dan (Occupy Central Colludes with Foreign Powers. Hong Kong People Bears the Bad Consequences),” *Wen Wei Po*, 29 October 2104, <<http://news.wenweipo.com/2014/10/29/IN1410290023.htm>>.

<sup>3</sup>Joshua But, “Plans for Occupy Central Outlined,” *South China Morning Post*, 28 March 2013, EDT3.

<sup>4</sup>Tony Tsoi, “Wo Bu Wan Mei (I Am Not Perfect),” *Apple Daily*, 9 April, 2013, B14.

<sup>5</sup>Max L. Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology: What’s the Difference?” *Political Theology* 5, 3 (2004), 288.

In this view, political parties, regimes and policies come and go; they are always necessary, but they are also the by-product of those religious, cultural, familial, economic and social traditions that are prior to government, and every government is, sooner or later, accountable to them.<sup>6</sup>

Public theology explores how the civil society shapes public policies and interacts with political institutions. It also emphasizes that the civil society is moulded by religion and culture. As Stackhouse stated, the order of pre-political organizations of life is the “incarnation” of certain “religious or ethical presumptions.” More importantly, he believed that public theology, which begins with God’s ethical teaching to Christians, is able to offer “normative models of how to order complex civil societies that reach beyond any single nation-state.”<sup>7</sup> This means that public theology is predicated on a trust that universal values will be enshrined through Christian communities in their public theological discourses. Even though this process will meet plural and contentious claims, it should finally arrive at “a limited constitutional political order.”<sup>8</sup>

However, as a theologian in a non-Christian majority society, I suspect that Stackhouse’s assertion is a good wish rather than the reality in this part of the world. In this paper, I would like to point out that Hong Kong Christians generated diverse and even conflicting public theologies throughout the Movement. Also, theo-political discourses have been channelled and fermented through the media and internet. Church leaders in Hong Kong found that Hong Kong Protestant Christians are deeply divided and thus become hostile to political opponents. Also, theology has been taken away from the control of institutional churches and made genuinely public.

In this situation, one may ask if Hong Kong Christians could develop an inclusive framework to support understanding this political conflict, as well as retaining a power to influence public values.

---

<sup>6</sup>Stackhouse, “Civil Religion,” 289.

<sup>7</sup>Stackhouse, “Civil Religion,” 289.

<sup>8</sup>Stackhouse, “Civil Religion,” 291.

In order to articulate the subtleties of the public theology discourse in the Occupy Movement, I will employ E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr.'s definition of public theology for analysis:

[P]ublic theology is theologically informed descriptive and normative public discourse about public issues, institutions, and interactions, addressed to the church or other religious body as well as larger public or publics, and argued in ways that can be evaluated and judged by publicly warrants and criteria.<sup>9</sup>

Under this definition, public theology discourse can be understood in three categories: the content, the audience, and the criteria of evaluation of the discourse. In the paper, I will articulate the content and the characteristics of the discourse, analyze the audience of the discourse, and reflect on the warrants and criteria that are used in the discourse. Then, I will point out the features of public theology discourse in the Movement with reference to Stackhouse's ideal.

Because the Movement has had a long time span of nearly two years (that is, it was advocated in January 2013; the actual occupation occurred on 28 September 2014, and ended on 15 December 2014), my analysis of discourse will end by December 2013, which divides the development of the Movement into two roughly equal halves in terms of time. Also, because the volume of discourses is huge, I can only select the most representative examples that had been disseminated through newspapers and Internet for discussion in this article.

### **3. Benny Tai Yiu Ting: A Christian Law Professor Turned a Public Theologian**

Benny Tai is the initiator of the Occupy Central Movement. He is associate professor of Law at Hong Kong University and was chairman of the deacon-pastor meeting of the Evangelical Free

---

<sup>9</sup>E. Harold Breitenberg Jr., "What Is Public Theology?" in *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, ed., Deirdre King Hainsworth and Scott Paeth, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010, 5.

Church of China Yan Fok Church.<sup>10</sup> He wrote a newspaper article on 6 January 2013, which received public attention, suggesting that civil disobedience is a “mass destructive weapon” in the struggle for a true direct election.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, in a newspaper interview, he stated that the Movement is inspired by Christian faith and religious spirituality.<sup>12</sup> Shortly thereafter, he wrote an article, “Christians and Civil Disobedience,” for an important local Christian newspaper, *Christian Times*, on 13 February 2013.<sup>13</sup> In that article, Tai stated that God is a God who loves justice. God also demands Christians to “right the wrongs.” On this basis, he pointed out that, although the Bible does not directly teach specific actions for the Christian practice of justice, actions of civil disobedience should be considered as acts of justice if the aim is changing an unjust law. He suggested that only disobedient actions explicitly conflicting with the Bible are prohibited.

He explained that, while *Romans* chapter 13 taught Christians to be obedient to rulers, Christians should not interpret biblical teaching with only one single passage. Biblical teaching is to be understood holistically and according to the passage’s context. He asserted that God, but not government rule, is the final authority that Christians should obey. Also, the New Testament

---

<sup>10</sup>“Tong Shu Bo Dao Hui Tai Shang Hu Su Ku (Both Are from Evangelical Free Church and Told Their Sufferings to Each Other on the Stage),” *Ming Pao*, 30 October 2013, A06.

<sup>11</sup>Benny Yiu Ting Tai, “Gong Min Kang Ming de Zui Da Sha Shang Li Wu Qi (The Mass Destructive Weapon of Civil Disobedience),” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 6 January 2013, A16.

<sup>12</sup>Wai Wan Tam, “Zhun Shi Hui Jia Zhong Yao Hai Shi Pu Xuan Zhong Yao? Dai Yao Ting Tan Du Lu Zheng Min Zhu (Return Home on Time or Universal Suffrage, Which Is More Important? Benny Tai Talked on Struggling for Democracy by Blocking Roads),” *Ming Pao*, 3 February 2013, P03.

<sup>13</sup>Benny Yiu Ting Tai, “Ji Du Tu Yu Gong Min Kang Ming (Christians and Civil Disobedience),” *Christian Times*, 13 February 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.js?Nid=76726&Pid=2&Version=1329&Cid=959&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.js?Nid=76726&Pid=2&Version=1329&Cid=959&Charset=big5_hkscs)>.

Church should be considered as a prime example of Christian civil disobedience. Thus, one cannot say that Christians' obedience to rulers is an absolute teaching of the Bible.

Besides this biblical consideration, Tai pointed out that some Christians considered that social reform is not the major consideration; rather, charitable works are a more tangible input to those in need. Also, Christians should be evangelical in their actions as part of their responsibility. If the rulers became Christians, God's justice would be naturally fulfilled. Tai asserted that civil disobedience is not the only way to practice Christian justice. However, if Christians felt that they are called to do justice in this way, which is in concord with biblical teaching, they may choose it to achieve Christian justice. Also, he asserted that Christian civil disobedience is a form of evangelism. When Christians step in to help the oppressed with civil disobedience, people can witness Jesus Christ in these Christian actions. In this sense, it is an indirect evangelism.

On 19 April 2013, Tai spoke to 350 participants at the first Christian seminar on the Occupy Central Movement. The church that housed the seminar has a capacity of only 250 seats. This full-house event indicated that the Movement had generated a great deal of concern among Christians.<sup>14</sup> In this seminar, Tai aligned himself with Martin Luther King, Jr. and read King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* to explain his position. He later expanded this speech to become a newspaper article in August 2013. Tai noted that his Occupy Movement had raised a big controversy within the Church. However, he pointed out that the only guiding principle for Christian actions in the midst of controversy is faith. He admitted that the Bible has no direct guidance on political systems, though he asserted that Jesus'

---

<sup>14</sup>Ying Yan Chan, "Xin Tu Qun Ti Tan Tao Zhan Ling Zhong Huan. Dai Yao Ting: Wo Xin Gang Ren Ke Chao Yue Zhong Huan Jia Zhi (Christians Discussed Occupy Central. Benny Tai: I Believe that Hong Kong People can Transcend 'Central Value')," *Christian Times*, 24 April 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=77816&Pid=2&Version=1339&Cid=589&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=77816&Pid=2&Version=1339&Cid=589&Charset=big5_hkscs)>.

teaching of “love your neighbour” should also include bringing justice to neighbours. He claimed that the Occupy Movement is aimed at a fair and just direct electoral system, which could change the social inequalities of Hong Kong society. It is an action for justice and love that accords with Christian faith.<sup>15</sup>

To respond to the criticisms that the Occupy Movement will damage the social order and is considered to be a coercive action by the Central People’s Government, Tai pointed out that the Movement advocates non-violent and self-sacrificing actions. It is coercive to the central government, but it comes from a moral force rather than violence. Therefore, it is an action to promote peace, love, and justice. This civil disobedience movement is something like Jesus Christ’s crucifixion.

In this way, Tai theologized the civil disobedience movement. Although he did not construct his discourse within Christian institutions or as a theology, he launched his movement with spirituality and theology. The content of his discourse is biblical and provides a theological basis for civil disobedience. He suggested that Christian values support civil disobedience action. In his first article, he wrote to the general public in a newspaper suggesting civil disobedience action, and later stated that it is an action guided by Christian faith. In this sense, he was truly developing a public theology.

It is not surprising that Tai’s proposal quickly ignited debates within the Church. Stackhouse asserted that public theology will promote normative proposals of universal values. In this case, it started a confrontation of values with theological claims.

#### **4. Civil Disobedience, Public Theology and Christian Value(s): Sharp Division and Blurred Theological Camps**

Tai’s proposal for civil disobedience prompted criticism. If public theology is generated from Christian religious and ethical values, and if these values can contribute to normative universal proposals for our public life, one might expect that similar public

---

<sup>15</sup>Benny Yiu Ting Tai, “*You Ma Ding Lu De Jin Dao Zhan Zhong* (From Martin Luther King to Occupy Central),” *Christian Times*, 7 August 2013.

theology discourses would share similar theological positions. But, in the Occupy Movement, even persons belonging to the same theological and denominational camp can hold extreme opposite viewpoints. A content analysis will show the unclear theological direction of these public theology discourses.

#### 4.1. Evangelical against Evangelical

Daniel Ng Chung Man was the first important Hong Kong pastor to publicly condemn the Movement. He is the senior pastor of the Evangelical Free Church of China Kong Fok Church, which has a congregation of 2,000 members. The Church is also well known as many high government officials are members. It should be noted that Ng and Tai are in the same denomination. Also, the Evangelical Free Church of China considers itself evangelical in theological position.<sup>16</sup>

In the Church's "Sunday Service Bulletin" of 7 April 2013, Ng wrote the article "How should Christians Understand Civil Disobedience?" Ng started his article with an analysis of the current political ethos in Hong Kong. He stated that the mass media and academics should not spread radical thought and advocate anti-social behaviours. He also noted that many political practitioners adopt a double standard in their judgements of the colonial government and the post-colonial Special Administrative Region Government.<sup>17</sup>

He then asserted that the civil disobedience action of the Occupy Central Movement is anti-social. Even though it is led by a pastor and university professors, Ng stressed that Christians should use the Bible to assess the Movement. He claimed that,

---

<sup>16</sup>Kam Hoi Chan, "Shen De Zuo Wei: San Zong Jiao Tong De You Lai (God's Work: The Origin of the Communication between Three Denominations)," *Evangelical Free Church of China*, 2014, <<http://www.efcc.org.hk/Articles/view/2621#.VOB3AcZRfdk>> (18 December 2014).

<sup>17</sup>Daniel Chung Man Ng, "Ji Du Tu Gai Ru He Kan Gong Min Kang Ming (How Should Christians Understand Civil Disobedience)," *Evangelical Free Church of China Kong Fok Church Sunday Service Bulletin*, 7 April 2013, 1.



from the point of view of biblical history and human history, God expects humans to be lawful and uphold social order. Disobedience is only acceptable in exceptional circumstances. He listed ten examples of disobedience in the Bible: *Exodus* 1:20-21, *Joshua* 2, *1 Samuel* 14:45, *1 Kings* 18, *2 Kings* 11, *Daniel* 6, *Esther* 4:9-17, *Matthew* 2:1-12, *Acts* 4:19-20, and *Revelation* 13:15. From these examples, he concluded that the Bible only permits Christians to be disobedient when the government threatens their religious right and/or right to life. Conversely, Christians should obey a government that is relatively just and should understand that no government throughout history can be considered as fully just. He clearly stated that:

Civil disobedience is not a general principle of the biblical teaching. Therefore, please do not put the cart before the horse and view that it is a Christian obligation. If someone is under the influence of heretics (especially the highly individualistic Western humanistic liberal political idea), and makes the relative political opinion absolute, the temporary political agenda eternal; this is the real reason that Daniel and his friends stood up to resist.

Therefore, Ng suggested that Christians should not launch a civil disobedience movement against the Government. Rather, they should stand up to resist Tai's proposal even at the risk of their lives. One may wonder what Ng would suggest Christians should do if they find a government's policy or political structure to be wrong? Ng's answer is that Christians can, within the boundaries of law and establishment, use non-violent actions to stop the evils of government and improve the society. In other words, he rejected all civil disobedience actions on solely political grounds.

On 7 May 2013, Ng was interviewed by *Ming Pao*. He further stated that Christians should focus on evangelism rather than on civil disobedience. Christians who engage in civil disobedience do not attend to their proper duties and are deceived by Liberal Theology. He asserted that if pastors and Christians violated

laws, their church membership should be deprived.<sup>18</sup> On 28 May 2013, Ng did another interview with *Sing Tao Daily*. He stated that Occupy Central campaigners improperly used the biblical verse “to do justly, and to love mercy” to support their movement. He argued that *The Epistle to Romans*, *The Epistle to Titus*, and *The Epistles of Peter* teach Christians to respect social order. He asked on what ground the campaigners can ignore these teachings and use “to do justly, and to love mercy” as their excuse.<sup>19</sup> Ng positioned himself in the evangelical camp, and placed Tai, though he is in the same denomination as Ng, as a “heretic” of Liberal Theology.

Leung Wing Sin, the senior pastor of the Remembrance of Grace Church, which is one of the evangelical mega-churches in Hong Kong, disagreed with Ng’s suggestion of excommunicating church members who participate in civil disobedience. Leung pointed out that the apostles had violated Roman laws, Sun Yat Sen Imperial China laws, and Moses Egyptian laws. One cannot agree that it is reasonable to excommunicate these persons. He also pointed out that because the Government has lied for years about direct election and universal suffrage, it is understandable that some people are going to struggle for a true universal suffrage through civil disobedience.<sup>20</sup>

Other evangelical writers and workers also expressed similar views. For examples, Yu jie, a mainland Christian political dissent, criticized Ng for not attending to Jesus’ teaching that the

---

<sup>18</sup>“Zhan Zhong Ji Bian: Mu Shi Yi Cheng Yi Fan (Hot Debate on Occupy Central: One Pastor Supports and Another Objects),” *Ming Pao*, 7 May 2013, A07.

<sup>19</sup>“Wu Zong Wen: Wu Xu Yu Dan Ju Fen ZhengPuXuan, Xhi Yi Zhan Zhong Li Ju Bo Ruo (Daniel Ng: No Need to Ruin Everything in Seeking Universal Suffrage. Question the Reasons for Occupy Central Are Thin and Weak),” *Sing Tao Daily*, 28 May 2013, A08.

<sup>20</sup>Wing Sin Leung, “Can Yu Zhan Zhong Zhe Hui Bei Kai Chu Hui Ji? (Excommunicate Church Members that Participate Occupy Central?),” *Christian Times*, 14 May 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78115&Pid=19&Version=0&Cid=269&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78115&Pid=19&Version=0&Cid=269&Charset=big5_hkscs)>.

gospel will bring conflicts and war to the world. He called Ng and his church “a church of bigwigs and a pastor of maintaining status quo.”<sup>21</sup> Ip Hon Ho, the Executive General of the Hong Kong Industrial Evangelistic Fellowship (an evangelical parachurch organization), criticized that Ng’s biblical interpretation is illogical as his ten examples of civil disobedience can only support a conclusion that Christians are allowed to carry out disobedience, rather than a requirement to obey a relatively just government. Concerning the exposition of *Romans* 13, Ip asserted that this chapter should be read together with chapter 12. Paul’s rhetoric showed that he indirectly denounced the Roman emperors’ claim to be God and, thus, rejected their claim of absolute authority. Paul’s teaching of obedience was specific to the issue of tax-paying rather than an unconditional obedience.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4.2. Is Liberal Not Liberal?

More interestingly, while Ng suggested that Christians who support civil disobedience are theologically Liberal, the Anglican Church in Hong Kong, which is considered as Liberal in its theology, does not support the Movement. On 1 September 2013, *Echo*, the newspaper of the Anglican Church, published an interview with Paul Kwong, the Archbishop of Hong Kong’s Anglican Church. In the interview Kwong admitted that civil disobedience is a measure that could be used in an extreme situation. He disagreed, however, with using this measure for

---

<sup>21</sup>Jie Yu, “*QuanGui Jiao Hui Yu Wei Wen Mu Shi* (The Church of Bigwigs and the Pastor of Maintaining Status Quo),” *Christian Times*, 10 May 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78077&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78077&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5_hkscs)>.

<sup>22</sup>Hon Ho Ip, “*Hui Ying Wu Zong Wen Mu Shi: Chang Li, Liang Zhi, Luo Ji Ji Xin Nian* (Respond to Rev. Daniel Ng: Common Sense, Conscience, Logic, and Belief),” *Christian Times*, 19 May 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78175&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78175&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5_hkscs)>.

seeking universal suffrage, which he claimed is not a panacea.<sup>23</sup> Through these debates, it is evident that public theology discourses are in disarray and not providing a constructive direction toward a “limited constitutional” government. When an archbishop claims that “universal suffrage is not a panacea,” one might be worried about whether this church would cherish the value of limited constitutional political order.

## 5. Public Theology and Media

### 5.1. Public Media as a Medium for Christian Debate

Tai received public attention because of his advocacy of civil disobedience in newspapers. Indeed, most of the theological discourses on the Movement have been channelled and fermented through the media. For example, Ng’s criticisms of Tai received prompt press attention. Likewise, Ng’s speech quickly received hot criticism in the Christian media. In *Christian Times*, six writers and two talk-show hosts wrote or spoke to criticize Ng’s speech within a month. Besides responses in the press, various popular Christian bloggers also opened fire on Ng. All these blogs condemned Ng for misinterpreting the Bible.

Internet media, such as Facebook, blogs, Internet radio, and Internet newspapers also enabled lay Christians to respond quickly to the leaders’ theological discourse and generated their own political theologies. On 8 December 2014, I used the blog search function of Google with the keywords “Occupy Central” (*Zhan Zhong*) and “Christ” (*Ji Du*), limiting the search period from 1 December 2013 to 31 December 2013. A search result of 151 was returned. When the search parameters were expanded to all web pages and no time limit, about 595,000 results were returned. I have also used the discussion-board search engine of Yahoo with the same keywords. It showed 207 results. From the blogs and discussion boards, one can see that opinions on the Movement are deeply divided. One may easily find debates in

---

<sup>23</sup>“*Pu Xuan Bu Shi Wan Ling Dan* (Universal Suffrage Is Not a Panacea),” *Echo*, 1 September 2013, <<http://echo.hkskh.org/issue.aspx?lang=2&id=131>>

these discussion boards where the participants offer their own theological reflections and biblical expositions on the Movement.

Public theology is “public” because it places emphasis on the dialogue within the civil society, and the importance of conveying theological ideas to the public. In the above analysis, one may find that different Christian ideas on civil disobedience are shown to the public through the media. However, the media has become an arena for political rebuttals. The theological discourses have gone public, but it is questionable whether a theology shared by the public could be constructed on this stage.

## 5.2. Media or Political Propaganda

Public media has not only become a battlefield, but is also an actor in this fighting. The media selectively interviewed and reported clergy who shared a similar political stance in order to support a particular media viewpoint. For example, Beijing-controlled newspapers reported only the discourses that were against Occupy Central. The *Christian Times*, which has a chairman and editor-in-chief who openly supported the Movement, had more articles and interviews supporting than opposing the Movement.<sup>24</sup> From the article search engine of the *Christian Times*, there are 286 articles with the keywords “Occupy Central” (*Zhan Zhong*) and “civil disobedience” (*Gong Min Kan Ming*) from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2013. Only eight articles are clearly against the Movement.

I have searched another important Christian newspaper in Hong Kong, *Christian Weekly*, which is politically conservative, using the Google search engine with keywords “Occupy

---

<sup>24</sup>Man Wai Law, “Gong Min Kang Ming – Ren Min De Dao De Gan Shao (Civil Disobedience: The Moral Calling of the People),” *Christian Times*, 5 April 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=76839&Pid=19&Version=0&Cid=906&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=76839&Pid=19&Version=0&Cid=906&Charset=big5_hkscs)>; Kam Hung Lee, “Kong Jian De Zhan Ling Yu Chuang Zao (The Occupation and Creation of Space),” in *Gong Min Kang Ming Yu Zhan Ling Zhong Huan: Xiang Gang Ji Du Tu De Xin Yang Sheng Si (Civil Disobedience and Occupy Central: The Religious Reflection of Hong Kong Christians)*, ed. Haiying Peng, Taipei: Ya Ge, 2013, 41–49.

Central” (*Zhan Zhong*) and “civil disobedience” (*Gong Min Kan Ming*). There were only 15 articles on the Movement; three short announcements of coming events, five reports of events, and seven column articles. None of these articles openly supported the Movement.

More interestingly, non-Christian journalists turned their news reports and comments into theological discussion and debate. *Apple Daily*, a pro-democratic newspaper, published an article titled, “Demand congregation obey the ruler. Pastor of Kong Fok Church misinterpreted the Bible and threw mud on Occupy Central” on 18 April 2013. The article positioned Occupy Central as apposite to the core values of the Bible. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s inspiration from “the Sermon on the Mount” were cited as evidence that Christian faith supports civil disobedience actions.<sup>25</sup>

Another example is Joseph Lian Yizheng – a famous non-Christian columnist and economist in Hong Kong who wrote five articles on Christianity and civil disobedience, taking the point of view of a theologian. He gave an exposition on *Matthew* 22:15-21, *Romans* 13:1-17, *John* 2:13-16, *Matthew* 17:24-27, and *Luke* 22:35-35 in order to assert that civil disobedience is permissible in Christian faith. In some cases, Jesus even used mild violence to attain his goal of justice. Thus, Christians should have the courage to stop the evil even though they might break civil laws.<sup>26</sup> In total, Lian wrote over 15,000 words on the topic.

---

<sup>25</sup>“Yao Qiu Xin Zhong Shun Cong Zhi Zheng Zhe. Gang Fu Tang Mu Shi Qu Jie Sheng Jing Mo Hei Zhan Zhong (Demand Congregation Obey the Ruler: Pastor of Kong Fok Church Misinterpreted the Bible and Threw Mud on Occupy Central,” *Apple Daily*, 18 April 2013, A12.

<sup>26</sup>Yizheng Joseph Lian, “Ji Du Jiao Yi Bing Bu Pai Chi Gong Min Kang Ming (Christian Doctrine Does Not Reject Civil Disobedience),” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 19 September 2013, A19; Yizheng Joseph Lian, “Kan Ye Su Zhan Zhong Wen Zhong Huan SheiShu (On Jesus’ Occupation of Central and Whose Central Is),” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 26 September 2013, A17; Yizheng Joseph Lian, “Zhan Jiao. Nai Zhi Ya. Bo Ding Li (Religion of Occupy: The Pressure of Milk Powder. The Case of Bo),” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 30 September 2013, A18;

From the above examples, one can see that in the Occupy Movement, public theology is not unidirectional from the Church to the public. Non-Christian writers also theologized their support or opposition to the Movement. More importantly, their discussion can be considered as a kind of mobilization or counter-mobilization. This phenomenon showed the media press as a promoter of a certain theological discourse, rather than as a platform for debate and dialogue. In this sense, one may doubt that these discourses could contribute to a healthy development of civil society, and might lead to division and conflict, and indeed this finally surfaced in 2014.<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Theologians’ Public Theology

The attractiveness of public theology for theologians is that it promotes the public influence of Christian faith in understanding public issues and formulating policies. However, in the Occupy Movement, I find that Hong Kong theologians were not well prepared for engaging in a highly contested public realm. If we analyze their discourses in terms of content, we find that most of the theologians formulated normative accounts. Though they have descriptive discourses on biblical teaching and historical church practices, their intention descended into providing arguments for or against the Movement. Thus, they were working out a theological ground for or against Occupy Central, but not providing a normative account for a just political order. I will introduce these accounts first, and then, analyze the limitations of such discourses.

---

Yizheng Joseph Lian, “Lun Ji Du Xin Tu Zheng Zhi Shang bao Chi Jian Mo De Yi Ju (On the Evidence for Christian Political Silent),” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 3 October 2013, A25; Yizheng Joseph Lian, “Ji Du Xin Yang Yu Zhan Zhong He Gan? Jianjie Pan Huo Hua (What Does Christian Faith to Do With Occupy Central? Introducing Bonhoeffer),” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 10 October 2013, A19.

<sup>27</sup>June Cheng, “Decisive Moment: As Protesters Demand Democracy in Hong Kong, Churches There Are Divided over Whether to Support the Marchers,” *WORLD*, 17 October 2014, <[http://www.worldmag.com/2014/10/decisive\\_moment](http://www.worldmag.com/2014/10/decisive_moment)> (20 February 2015).

I was the first academic theologian in Hong Kong who spoke on the Occupy Central Movement. In the seminar of 19 April 2013, in which Benny Tai also participated, I offered a theological analysis on civil disobedience. Later, the lecture was published in two issues of the *Christian Times*.<sup>28</sup> I started with a definition of civil disobedience by Hugo Adam Bedau, as a conscientious and public violation of law for a change of government's political decision or law for a high moral cause. I suggested that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 12:1-14 is similar to Bedau's position and pointed out that Protestantism, from its historical origin, is a kind of disobedience. Calvin and Luther preferred to have reforms without government influence, while John Knox promoted revolution and the Anabaptists espoused a kind of pacifist disobedience.

All these options of disobedience in Protestant history have a theological basis. It is important to note that disobedience in the Bible and Church history is not the same as contemporary civil disobedience. Therefore, one cannot say that Christians should or should not opt for civil disobedience. This is a matter of political discernment rather than a pure Christian obligation. Also, from the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., one should realize that a society experiencing civil disobedience is a deeply divided society. For Hong Kong Christians, I suggested that they should drop the option for revolution, as modern Chinese history is already full of violence and the sad experience of revolutions. An internal reform could avoid the danger of division and conflict. However, when the Government has no reform agenda

---

<sup>28</sup>Wai Luen Kwok, "*Geng Gao De Ming Ling: Gong Min Kang Ming De Xin Yang Fan Si Shang* (The Higher Command: A Christian Reflection on Civil Disobedience, Part 1)," *Christian Times*, 29 April 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=77873&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=77873&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5_hkscs)>; Wai Luen Kwok, "*Geng Gao De Ming Ling: Gong Min Kang Ming De Xin Yang Fan Si Xia* (The Higher Command: A Christian Reflection on Civil Disobedience, Part 2)," *Christian Times*, 5 May 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=77873&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=77873&Pid=6&Version=0&Cid=150&Charset=big5_hkscs)>.



and the society is at boiling point, I preferred civil disobedience to revolution.

In short, I was trying to analyze the legitimacy of Christian participation in civil disobedience and other academic theologians joined in the discussion on this very narrow topic.<sup>29</sup> From a biblical perspective, Lo Ping Cheung used *Exodus* to support civil disobedience. Cheung Wan Hoi asserted that the Bible does not forbid disobedience in principle. Philip Chia Phin Yin pointed out that Israelites did not stop their resistance to the prevailing power. Lo Lung Kwong argued that *Romans* 13 does not teach Christians to obey the rulers unconditionally; he highlighted that, in the New Testament period, rulers claimed that they are gods. In this sense, Paul’s teaching that, God is the final authority of rulers, is rebellious. Common Chan Lung Pun asserted that the *Book of Revelation* is full of violent metaphors. It leads Christians to think about even the possibility for violence to fight against injustice.

From a theological perspective, Kung Lap Yan believed that a peaceful and non-calculated civil disobedience is virtuous and Christian. Daniel Pang Shun Keung used examples of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as support for Christian civil disobedience. Andres Tang Siu Kwong and Freeman Huen Chi Wai borrowed John H. Yoder’s teaching to assert that Jesus is thoroughly non-violent and non-coercive; they questioned whether Tai’s Occupy Movement could be considered Christian.

One exception is Kang Phee Sang. Kang noted that public theology should be oriented by theological elements rather than public issues.<sup>30</sup> His themes are listening and dialogue.<sup>31</sup> One may

---

<sup>29</sup>For the limitation of space, I do not list the bibliographical details here. But, one may find these articles on the website of *Christian Times*.

<sup>30</sup>Phee Seng Kang, “*Xin Zai Zhan Zhong (Yi): Gong Gong Shen Xue (Faith in Occupy Central 1: Public Theology)*,” *Christian Times*, 8 May 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78056&Pid=2&Version=1341&Cid=721&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78056&Pid=2&Version=1341&Cid=721&Charset=big5_hkscs)>.

<sup>31</sup>Phee Seng Kang, “*Xin Zai Zhan Zhong (Liu): Chi Xu De Dui Hua He Ling Ting (Faith in Occupy Central 6: On-Going Dialogue and*

consider that Kang suggested Christians should neither support nor oppose the Occupy Central Movement. They should listen to and talk with each other, which is the thrust of public theology, but he does not discuss how different groups of people in the society can listen to each other and have dialogue on the topic of election and political justice. He only suggested changing the discussion from civil disobedience to dialogue and listening.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, he is still entangled in the question of Christian civil disobedience.

If democracy and the social injustice are the two main reasons for the exploding civil disobedience movement, should public theology address these problems and analyze them through a theological lens rather than being narrowly focused on the manifestation of the problem – civil disobedience? In 2013, these discourses have been mainly responsive and reactive.

## 7. Conclusion

The above analysis has shown that the theological discourses on Occupy Central during 2013 were divided with the content focused on whether Christian participation in civil disobedience is biblically and theologically grounded. There was little discussion of other related topics, such as whether the electoral system and political order that various writers supported should be considered as just and fair. Moreover, the divisions within theological camps indicated that political positioning has assumed a more fundamental concern than theological standards in the debate. Under this light, it appears that the public theological discourses are not genuinely informed by theology. In the worst case, they may become propaganda for mobilization or counter-mobilization.

---

Listening)," *Christian Times*, 12 June 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78583&Pid=2&Version=1346&Cid=721&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78583&Pid=2&Version=1346&Cid=721&Charset=big5_hkscs)>.

<sup>32</sup>Phee Seng Kang, "Xin Zai Zhan Zhong (San): Wo De Min (Faith In Occupy Central 3: My People)," *Christian Times*, 22 May 2013, <[http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78266&Pid=2&Version=1343&Cid=721&Charset=big5\\_hkscs](http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=78266&Pid=2&Version=1343&Cid=721&Charset=big5_hkscs)>.

In terms of the audience of the discourses, the primary audiences are Christians, even for the discourses of non-Christian writers. As the discourses aimed at arguing for or against a rightful Christian participation in civil disobedience, it is very interesting that, from these discourses, the civil disobedience of the Occupy Movement looks like a Christian disobedience. Perhaps public theology becomes a theology suggested by the public to Christians in the discussion of the Occupy Movement in 2013.

For the criteria of evaluation, because a rightful Christian participation is the utmost concern of most of the discourses, writers and speakers concentrated on whether they could provide a fair exposition of biblical passages and historical evidences of church practice for their positions. Other kinds of criteria, such as in-depth discussion on political and social justice in the circumstances of Hong Kong, are rarely identified in the discourses. The discourses had already assumed some kind of social and political judgment in their arguments.

Stackhouse suggested that public theology is articulated by civil society and constructed through dialogue and exchange; it can provide normative values for developing a limited constitutional political order. In the present case, the public has actively engaged in theological discourses on civil disobedience, though the discussion cannot be considered as an adequate attempt for building up normative political values for the public. In Hong Kong, a positive relationship between public theology and political, religious, and social culture is still underdeveloped and needs to be further explored.

Finally, I would argue that we can still find three common concerns among these divided discourses: justice, peace, and the welfare of Hong Kong. The discourses supporting the Movement found that Hong Kong is experiencing political and economic injustice and thus peaceful civil disobedience for the welfare of Hong Kong is acceptable. Conversely, the opposing discourses emphasized that the present Hong Kong society is still relatively just and has no need for civil disobedience. Disobedience will

endanger the peaceful society and bring large-scale social instability, thus damaging the welfare of Hong Kong people.

In the midst of political division, these three themes can help Hong Kong Protestant Christians regain a sense of public shared values to meet the challenge of political crisis and pave the ground for future reconciliation when the political division ends. We may expect that there will be disagreement between the opposite parties, which public theology suggests is unavoidable. However, as Miroslav Volf pointed out, when religious believers are engaged in public issues, we do not need to pretend to be value-free; rather, we should speak in our own voice. This Christian voice is not our political agenda; it is a conviction that God loves all people, including the transgressors, and all boundaries are permeable.<sup>33</sup> With this ethos, Christians will learn to “exchange gifts.” They give what others need and delight in, and through this exchange to search of truth and mutual understanding. Volf called these are two forms of exchange gifts: beneficence and hermeneutical hospitality.<sup>34</sup> If Hong Kong Christians of opposite positions could learn to understand the concerns of their opponents empathetically, we may breakthrough our deadlock in supporting or opposing the Movement and thus move towards a deeper understanding of what we mean by justice, peace, and welfare for each other.

On 1 May 2015, I and other theologians in Hong Kong, under the auspices of Hong Kong Christian Council, organized a public seminar on Christian public life after the Occupy Movement. We emphasized that though the discussion on election is bogged down, Christians should learn to live faithfully and constructively in different areas of public life (for examples, economic equality, environmental protection, Hong Kong-China relation, media, and culture) in the midst of political struggle for democracy. For me, this is the first step of materializing a public theology of beneficence.

---

<sup>33</sup>Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011, 132-133.

<sup>34</sup>Volf, *A Public Faith*, 136.