

Christians and secularists under the same umbrella

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [September 28, 2016](#) issue



Pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution rally in November 2014. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Studio Incendo](#).

Hong Kong is a tiny but extremely rich territory that occupies a delicate position within the People's Republic of China. Over the coming year, Hong Kong's internal affairs are going to feature prominently in international news, with far-reaching implications for the city's small but influential Christian minority.

Britain acquired Hong Kong, the "Fragrant Harbor," after the 19th-century Opium Wars, and in modern times it grew to become a global financial center where today some 7 million people live in one of the world's most densely packed cities.

China, naturally, resented this continuing insult to its authority and maintained pressure to resume control. In 1984, Britain and China concluded an agreement by which Hong Kong acknowledged Chinese sovereignty, but under remarkably generous and statesmanlike terms. For 50 years after the merger, Hong Kong would retain substantial autonomy, respecting such traditions as a free press, an independent judiciary, and the territory's freewheeling capitalist economy. In 1997, China finally celebrated the return of its long-lost territory. Many Hong Kong

residents were delighted to acknowledge a reassertion of Chinese cultural pride, even if they had concerns about the future.

Relations since then have been rocky, with PRC officials constantly pressing to assert control over the territory's institutions and media. Partly they are simply following a natural ideological imperative. But they are also deeply concerned about Hong Kong's democratic traditions spreading and arousing discontent on the mainland. Repeated surveys have shown Hong Kong residents so unhappy with the situation that many reject any Chinese national identity and define themselves instead as Hong Kongers. They have fiercely resisted official attempts to bring communist-tinted "patriotic education" into the school system.

One enduring point of contention has been the election of a chief executive, which is undertaken by a 1,200-strong election committee. The Chinese want to retain and dominate the cumbersome process, while Hong Kong activists campaign for a genuinely democratic election.

In fall 2014 mass democracy protests took the form of a movement to "Occupy Central with Love and Peace," popularly known as the Umbrella Revolution. (Protesters used umbrellas to fend off police pepper spray.) Somewhat nervously, the territory now awaits the next choice of an executive, scheduled for March 2017.

Often unremarked in global coverage of these conflicts has been the critical role of Christian activists. Generally, Hong Kong is quite a secular place, with only half its people affiliated with any organized religion. There are some 870,000 Christians, composing about 12 percent of the population; this includes 370,000 Catholics and a half million Protestants and others. That proportion rises significantly among educated younger people, and Christians account for about a quarter of the university population. Significantly, Hong Kong's special status means that local churches do not have to obey the same controls over leadership and policy that constrain mainland congregations.

Ever since 1997, Christians have been among the most visible faces of the human rights protests. The most persistent thorn in the government's flesh has been the now-retired Catholic cardinal Joseph Zen, who has called repeatedly for democracy and religious freedom and for respect for human rights and the rule of law. From the government's point of view, he has also crossed some extremely sensitive lines, notably by offering help to underground churches on the mainland. No less daring,

he challenged the Communist Party's official narrative when he praised Catholics who had been martyred during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. In communist hagiography, the Boxers were nationalist heroes, while their Christian victims were agents of imperialism. Although he lives under Chinese rule, Hong Kong's anomalous status has repeatedly allowed Zen to say the unsayable.

Other Christians have been much in evidence in recent protests, and especially in the Umbrella upsurge. That includes Benny Tai, a law professor who was a prime mover in the formation of Occupy Central, working alongside Baptist minister Chu Yiu-ming. The movement's most visible media face was Joshua Wong, who had barely turned 18 at that time, but who has formed a number of prodemocracy pressure groups. Wong is also a Christian, of evangelical bent. One of the democracy candidates in the 2017 elections will be the Catholic lawyer Audrey Eu, who chairs the Civic Party.

It would be quite wrong to see the Hong Kong democracy movement as either Christian or crypto-Christian, and most of its adherents are secular idealists. But Christians have provided crucial leadership, or to use a biblical term, they have been the leaven in the loaf.

The consequences of their work are hard to judge. Perhaps the Chinese government will crush protests, as it did in Beijing in 1989. Alternatively, we might imagine Hong Kong-inspired human rights spreading across China. Umbrellas can be powerful things.

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