

Sing hallelujah to the Lord: secular Christianities on Hong Kong's Civic Square

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Sing hallelujah to the Lord.

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Sing hallelujah, sing hallelujah,

Sing hallelujah to the Lord.

—Linda Stassen-Benjamin (1974)

I was in Chicago on June 12, 2019 when my friend, a Christian theologian from Hong Kong, sent me a Facebook Live video of Civic Square, the site outside the government offices that got its name from a 2012 protest against a bill to revise Hong Kong's education curriculum to feature nationalistic Chinese themes. Civic Square was also where the 2014 Umbrella Movement began. The crowd that gathered there in June of last year was singing the evangelical chorus "Sing Hallelujah to the Lord." The word on the street, my friend said, was that Christians were trying to calm the police attired in riot gear. A day of protests was expected against the second reading of a bill to amend the extradition law to allow for any requesting foreign jurisdiction, including the Chinese mainland, to request the return of "fugitive offenders" to face legal repercussions for their crimes. The fear was that it would be used to repress critics of Beijing.

The popular interpretation of what was happening at that moment was that the singers had to be Christian. And, of course, they probably were. They would, after all, be the only ones who would think of singing an evangelical chorus from the Jesus Movement of the 1960s and 1970s that has become globally popular in contemporary evangelicalism; in fact, I have even heard it sung by Roman Catholics at mass. Indeed, the activist pastor Timothy Lam told Reuters reporters at the time that the singing, which lasted eighteen hours into the day, was an attempt to relieve the tensions between the police and the protesters who would try—and succeed—in blocking the Legislative Council chambers that day so that the reading would not be able to happen. Hong Kong Free Press goes as far as to speak of a 72-hour prayer meeting that had been planned around the demonstrations. During a press conference held by Protestant and Catholic clergy planning on confronting the Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor with the police violence that ensued over the day, one pastor reported hearing a police officer shout at a protester, "Ask your Jesus to come down and see us!" Following such reports, the New York Times interviewed Christian participants in the singing and protesting that day who thought Lam should repent of her sin and return to a path of just governance.

I was not in Hong Kong for the protests. But it did not take long for the news media I was reading and the live feeds and online forums I actively followed to show that “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” began taking on a life of its own. Within a week, Shanghaiist ran a headline declaring the anthem had become the “unofficial anthem of the anti-extradition protest movement,” though the piece’s attempt to figure out who the Christians were rendered unclear the question of whether the Christians it described were making statements or leading the singing. As far as the song itself went, some explained that they joined because religious gatherings are, by legal definition, not a riot. With its catchy lyrics able to call back in popular memory the events of June 12, it became increasingly difficult as the protests dragged on for the entire year and then some to determine whether all singing hallelujah to the Lord in Hong Kong were actually worshippers of that Lord. In time, a perverse, non-Christian Cantonese imprecatory adaptation of the Christian chorus also gained in popularity: Send Lam Cheng Yuet Ngor to the Lord.

Situated at what is arguably the founding moment of these 2019 protests, the popularity of “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” unveils, I claim, the possibility that the relation between “populism” and the “political” in Hong Kong is that the protests could over time be framed as the work of a praying public, instead of, say, a religious community going public. There is a temptation, I think, when an evangelical chorus like “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” is deployed to try to find out who is singing the song, to isolate analytically the Christian communities as units who in this analytical imagination must be engaging publics outside of their congregations whenever they act in secular arenas, instead of simply having their actions recognized as being part of these public spheres. The chorus may well have been sung on June 12 by Christians (though except for Hong Kong Free Press uncovering the plans for a prayer meeting on that day, no media coverage seems to have discerned which communities they were from). Indeed, I am saying that trying to figure out who the Christians are because “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” is so obviously something that should be associated with Christianity misses the point of how the song became the informal anthem of the subsequent protests writ large. What happened on June 12, 2019 was arguably more than a protest against the extradition bill and obstructing its second reading at Legislative Council. Arguably, the “people” were framed in that moment as a praying populace, and as such, like in the anti-national education curriculum protests and the beginning of the Umbrella Movement, the political action of this politicized public was to reclaim Civic Square with the song.

In linking “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” to the space of Civic Square, this praying public instantiates what I am tentatively calling “secular Christianities.” Following the social movement analyses in the vein of what Michael Warner has provocatively called the “evangelical public sphere,” the chorus establishes a rhetorical moral high ground for the protesters, who protest in secular space against a law with no ostensible theological significance. Secularity here does not refer to the absence of Christians, their communities, or their contributions. I use it instead to reference the juridical and deliberative political zone thought in modernity to have become autonomous from ecclesial jurisdiction. This secular usage of Christian semiotics, I am saying, should not be surprising in a colonial city like Hong Kong. As Jean and John Comaroff observed, Christian symbols in colonial consciousness in South Africa operated for both the purposes of oppression and liberation. Likewise, Hong Kong has had a long history of Christian theological discourse in both the establishment of moral authority by the British colonial regime in schools, hospitals, and charities, as well as in contesting it in democratic movements dating back at least to the 1970s.

In both cases, “Christianity” does not refer solely to the identification of communities that have appropriated Christian symbols and then put them to work in organizing movements. Instead, secular publics, both ones that reinforce establishmentarian rule and oppositional liberation movements, can be underwritten by Christian discourses. As anthropologists of Christianity taking inspiration from the Comaroffs have shown, there is something all too facile about the charge that Christian collaboration with colonialism has only

created governing establishments in formerly colonized sites where theologically-influenced concepts of sovereignty and morality have a lingering outsized influence. The populations of those places, like the secular regimes that are still shot through with Christian symbols of power, can seize those theological tropes, too. Of course, that seizure may be occasioned by Christians contributing their symbols for public usage—nobody would want to rob Desmond Tutu of credit for his leadership in the South African liberation struggle, just like I am not trying to underplay the participation of Christians in the Hong Kong protests. But those contributions, I am suggesting, may also take on lives of their own.

In this way, what happened in Hong Kong’s Civic Square arguably unveiled a rift in secular Christianities, pitting a protesting public that came over time to appropriate these practices of prayer against establishments imbued by the political theological trappings of sovereignty. Indeed, one of the difficulties that an auxiliary bishop of the Roman Catholic Church, Joseph Ha OFM, has noted with his own sympathies with the protesters, is that the Chief Executive they oppose, Carrie Lam, is herself a “parishioner.” But still, the space of the church is not where this bishop is standing alongside the opposition to a member of one of his parishes. The arena of contested prayer remains secular, a civic square, so autonomous from ecclesial governance that Christian symbols can gain a certain autonomy from churches there, too. And so, it also may be the case that pastors continue to act as chaplains on the street, Christians might still be found praying in public, and clergy coalitions are writing statements to the government calling for peace. But their theological contributions can take on lives of their own, opening another vista for analysis that moves from parsing how Christian communities are contributing to the protests to what the public is doing with those contributions.

By manifesting “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” on Civic Square, Hong Kong’s praying public assimilated the Christian practices of praying and singing evangelical choruses of their ecclesial context to mediate a popular movement. As work will no doubt burgeon on theological reflections on these newest protests in relation to the contested history of this city—and with it, figurative publics in other ex-colonial, contemporary global cities—the scholarly gaze should be directed to those publics. Otherwise, blind spots will go unchecked, with anything that appears Christian, or even vaguely theological, attributed solely to communities that purportedly identify with these theologies. Even if they are the contributions of such ecclesial communities, these offerings also circulate in often decontextualized ways through public spheres whose secularity might be mistaken as nonreligious. No doubt, as my colleague Ting Guo has already suggested in her ongoing ethnographic work on popular Daoist and Buddhist presences and appropriations of Maoist discourse in the Hong Kong protests, this work must move beyond “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” to account for other possible theologies and traditions that also might take on autonomous secular circulation as they are introduced as a kind of cultural currency. In so doing, the praying public may be found to be continually drawing from the wealth of symbols throughout Hong Kong’s contested colonial history to figure itself over and over again.

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