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The escalating tensions between church and state in China

The amendment of the Regulations on Religious Affairs and the responses of the Early Rain Covenant Church

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Abstract

The amended Regulations on Religious Affairs in China, implemented in 2018, and the subsequent responses of the Early Rain Covenant Church (ERCC) led to increasing tensions between church and state in China. This article analyses the incompatible worldviews of the Chinese government under the leadership of Xi Jinping and the Reformed church, so as to provide a framework that explains their aggravated relationship. The two worldviews reveal conflicting sources on what should be considered the highest authority and different perspectives on the proper roles of the state and church.

Keywords

China, church and state, law and religion, regulation of religion, religious freedom, Early Rain Covenant Church.

1. Introduction

Having faced hostility from the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) towards religion since 1950, some Protestant churches have accommodated the Chinese authorities and become part of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Meanwhile, others have refused to join the TSPM and formed house churches, which have sometimes been suppressed by the government but have often maintained a certain degree of religious freedom. However, since Xi Jin-

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ping took over political power in 2013, his political reforms have shrunk the space granted to religious freedom, especially for churches that publicly refused to join the TSPM.

The Early Rain Covenant Church (ERCC), a Reformed congregation, was one of these dissenters. It was founded in 2008 by Pastor Wang Yi, a former legal scholar and human rights advocate. The ERCC has been actively involved in social issues and has contributed to society by serving the marginalized. For example, the church organizes an annual prayer meeting to commemorate the Tiananmen Square massacre, it offered financial support to the families of political prisoners in Sichuan in 2011, and it operates a seminary, humanities college and school (China Change 2018).

In 2017, the State Council adopted the amended Regulations on Religious Affairs ("New Regulations"), which came into effect in 2018. All unregistered religious institutions and organizations, including Protestant house churches, faced further crackdowns on their religious autonomy and activities. The ERCC initially responded by discussing the New Regulations and house churches' responses in an interview with another pastor and, subsequently, by posting a joint statement online six months later.

The introduction of the New Regulations and the responses by the ERCC illustrate how the discrepancies between the Party-state's and the Reformed worldviews contribute to the growing tensions between the state and Protestant house churches under Xi Jinping. Drawing on textual sources, this article examines how the contrasting conceptions of the political and ecclesial spheres in China provide a framework for a deeper understanding of the government's intolerance toward autonomous house churches and certain unregistered churches' rejection of state interference. I aim to contribute to research on church-state relations in China by applying these concepts specifically to the New Regulations and the ensuing conflict with the ERCC. This study focuses on specific theological and political views of a particular Reformed church, which do not represent the views of all house churches across the nation.

The following section describes the context of the mounting conflicts between state and church, the relevant content of the New Regulations and the responses of the ERCC. The next section contrastingly elucidates the Party-state's worldview under Xi's leadership and the Reformed worldview, notably their perceptions of the roles of church and state, which explain the reasons behind the exacerbated relationship. The analysis in this section is supported by evidence from state religious regulations, Wang's responses in the interview transcripts, and the ERCC joint statement. The full transcript was published online (Wang 2018) and an excerpt was later recorded in a book chapter (Wang 2022:190-198). The final section

discusses the Party-state's and house churches' actions through the lens of various philosophical and theological perspectives.

2. Context of the growing church-state tensions

2.1. The change in church-state relations under the leadership of Xi Jinping

Since the 1950s, state-sanctioned religious bodies have been delegated by the government to oversee registered religious groups and suppress unregistered groups. After the Reform and Opening period began in 1979, religious organizations enjoyed a certain degree of religious freedom over the subsequent decades. Despite maintaining control over religion, the government regarded religion as positive for development. Hu Jintao emphasized that religious communities could contribute to economic and social development and to building a "harmonious socialist society" (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs n.d.). Since 2013, however, Xi Jinping has sought a deepening reform while asserting his own dominance and the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In his religious reforms, Xi has reverted toward "a more totalitarian program of party control over the *content* of religion" (Rowe et al. 2024:28). He developed the policy of Sinicization and sought to compel religious groups to alter their religious traditions by guiding their adherents to cultivate and practice socialist values that serve the political agenda and by submitting to the Party-state. In other words, the CCP desires to reinforce and solidify its authority (Madsen 2021:1-2). The violation of religious freedom of Christians intensified, from the massive cross demolition in Zhejiang province between 2014 and 2016 to the amendment of the Regulations on Religious Affairs in 2018.

2.2. The introduction of the New Regulations

In 2004, the State Council first promulgated Regulations on Religious Affairs, which were announced by the State Administration for Religious Affairs. This document was based on Decrees 144 and 155 issued by the State Council in 1994, which aimed to supervise religion, religious activities and places of worship in the PRC. The language of these two legal frameworks is consistent with Document 19 and Article 36 of the Constitution of China. Thus, the 2004 Regulations show continuity from the previous regulations in restricting the right to worship, assemble, and carry out mission work, and in describing unregistered church activities as illegal. On 14 June 2017, the State Council adopted the second version of these regulations, promulgated on 26 August and to take effect on 1 February 2018 (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2017). This latest version concerns all religious institutions and organizations, registered and unregistered, across the nation.

To distinguish different legal statuses of various religions within the PRC, Fenggang Yang (2012:85) has suggested a theory of three religious markets: "red market" represents the government-controlled religions, "black market" refers to the officially forbidden religions, and "gray market" designates the ones with ambiguous legal or illegal status, including unregistered Protestant house churches. Yang concluded that the goal of the Chinese authorities was to eliminate the gray market (ChinaAid 2017). To this end, the New Regulations provided a legal basis for dissolving churches that refused to join and be subject to the TSPM. All unregistered churches and their activities are considered illegal.

The New Regulations consist of 76 articles, or 28 more than the original version. Unlike the previous version, two chapters on "religious schools" and "religious activities" have been added (Tsai 2017:314-315). Jonathan Fox (2018:151-155) categorizes four areas of restriction in religious regulations, and three can be seen in the New Regulations. The first area concerns the autonomy of religious institutions and clergy regarding their status and functions. The New Regulations emphasize that the registration requirements of religious organizations and professionals must follow the state provisions and their professionalization, and they stipulate specific directions concerning these entities' function. The second area of restriction involves the ability of individuals or groups to engage in basic religious practices, rites and ceremonies. The New Regulations instruct religious organizations to apply for government approval if they wish to conduct a large-scale religious activity, and to comply with national provisions on the management of religious publications for public distribution. The third area of restriction refers to other types of regulation, such as state control over religious education and state ownership of religious property. The chapters on religious schools, activity venues, and assets require specific qualifications of teachers, a fixed location for religious activity and government approval for new construction. Religious groups, schools and activity sites must follow state provisions to manage and use assets that are collectively owned by the state.

Additionally, in the chapter on legal responsibilities, new articles (such as Articles 64, 69 and 74) list, in detail, the heavy fines that can be levied on individuals involved in any religious activity that takes place in unauthorized places and with unregistered staff. Most of the fines can be tens or even hundreds of thousands of yuan, making them enormous when compared with the minimum wage of 2,300 yuan per month in Shanghai city (Cervellera 2017).

2.3. Responses by Early Rain Covenant Church

Facing the state's tightening religious control, the ERCC responded in two ways. In February 2018, Pastor Wang of the ERCC and Pastor Gao Zhen of the Beijing

Gospel Church commented on the New Regulations in an interview (Wang 2018). The New Regulations presented a new dilemma because of these congregations' large size. Through this interview, Wang and Gao intended to call house churches to reflection and prayer so that these churches could respond to the regulations in a unified manner. They discussed the motivations of the Chinese authorities behind the regulations, whether house churches should divide into smaller groups for fellowship, in what way their ecclesiology influences house-church responses to the regulations, the testimony that the church presents to the entire Chinese society, and the reasons for large urban churches to stand up for small rural churches.

In September, Wang and the ERCC leadership published a joint statement, "A Declaration for the Sake of the Christian Faith," on their church website and Wang's blog;[2] approximately 446 house church pastors and leaders across China cosigned it to declare their faith. They said their statement was also for the spiritual benefit of the Chinese regime and society, and for the glory of God. In the joint statement, the ERCC starts by affirming God's supremacy and Jesus Christ as the pathway to salvation. Then, it recounts experiences of state persecution and rebukes the state for abusing its power, breaching religious freedom and creating conflicts between political and religious parties in Chinese society. Finally, the joint statement contains a public declaration on the final authority of the Bible; the ERCC's willingness to suffer under state persecution; their commitment to obeying and respecting the Chinese government's authority as long as it does not violate the teachings of the Bible; their support for the separation of church and state; and the sole authority of Christ over the church (Nation and Tseng 2022:211-214).

3. The Party-state and Reformed worldviews

To understand Xi's motivations for imposing the New Regulations and the ERCC's reactions, this section explains the Party-state's hybrid worldview, followed by the Reformed worldview. I consider how each perceives the church, the state, and their roles, as well as how their worldviews shape both the state religious regulations and the ERCC's responses to them.

3.1. The hybrid worldview of the Party-state

Since the establishment of the PRC in 1950, the Party-state worldview has been deeply influenced by Marxism-Leninism. Xi developed and reinforced the concept of "socialist spiritual civilization" used in the post-Mao period (Brown and

2 The original version of the joint statement is in Chinese on the ERCC website and Wang's blog, it is translated into English in Nation and Tseng (2022).

Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:335-336), stressing that "the people have faith, the nation has hope, the country has power" (Xinhua 2015). This concept emphasizes the cultivation and practice of the socialist core values and the "excellent Chinese traditional culture," a term that refers mainly to Confucianism. The CCP selectively implements certain Confucian elements that align with Marxism-Leninism. Thus, it has a hybrid worldview with two significant components.

3.1.1. Confucianism

Confucianism is a value system with a long history in Chinese culture. It was suppressed like other religions during the Cultural Revolution; however, the tradition of self-cultivation and *neisheng* (inner sagehood) has been preserved on a deeper mental level within Chinese Communism throughout the Maoist period (Billioud 2020:82). Since the beginning of the 2000s, Confucianism has been revived in Chinese society to respond to its social context of individualization, and to reflect on the collective dimension of society (Billioud 2020:84-85).

The Confucian philosophy emphasizes moral ideals and *jiaohua* (to educate and transform), meaning that the morality of a human being can be transformed through education and ritual. The "spiritual civilization" can be achieved through a principle drawn from an idiom in one of the Four Classics of Confucianism, "cultivate your body, rectify your mind, harmonize your home, rule the country, and all under heaven will be in peace," which accentuates the cultivation of moral conduct to attain order, peace and cohesion between oneself, family, society and the cosmos (Iskra et al. 2020:57). This cohesion reflects the interrelation and intimate connection between levels in the hierarchical structure, from individual to cosmos. The ruler or emperor is placed at the central position, and he connects the spiritual realm or heaven and the secular realm. In mirroring "his moral behavior in heaven" and *dao* (its way), he becomes the model for the nation through his moral superiority. Thus, he possesses the moral authority to operate his administration in a proper manner. His rule aims to preserve harmony by upholding the social order in the secular realm. This concept is applied by the Chinese Communist leaders to the contemporary nation (Dessein 2017:202-203).

Another principle is related to the connection between family, government and society. The Confucian understanding of government is based on its understanding of the family in the principle of filial piety. Just like the head of a household, the ruler is represented as the parent of all people in the nation, and society is represented as a gigantic "family." The Party-state has absolute power to control social affairs, including religious affairs, because state control is necessary for the good of the entire nation (Xie 2023:ch. 9), just as a father is for the good of his child. The religious groups are therefore also expected to be "patriotic."

3.1.2. Marxist-Leninism

Marxism-Leninism posits a totalitarian state that is hostile toward religion and focuses on collectivism. Marx criticizes rulers who use religion as a false consciousness to prevent people from seeking their true interests (Fox 2018:151). Following the paradigm of Leninist monolithic organizations, the CCP has established a hierarchically ordered and patriotic organization for the five official religions, and it claims exclusive authority over their religious followers (Kindopp 2004:2-3).

Xi extended his political power by centralizing his authority on himself as the general secretary of the CCP, chairman of the Central Military Commission and president of the PRC. In his interpretation of the "spiritual civilization" concept, core socialist values are placed at the center (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:336). Among the 12 socialist values, Marxism-Leninism notions and Confucian principles are interwoven in the following ways: *pingdeng* (equality) denotes the Confucian and CCP's ideological commitment to creating a society "characterized by common ownership and collective achievement of development goals"; *gongzheng* (justice) means that the Party controls the sources and definitions of justice; *fazhi* (rule of law) refers to stronger regulations (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:333-334); *hexie* (harmony) connects Confucian order and hierarchy from *tianxia* (all under heaven) to the notion of upholding social stability and avoiding conflict in society, which implies that only one voice supporting the Party-state with a collective goal can achieve unity and harmony, and that any dissenting voice must be "harmonized" or silenced (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:333; Pils 2019:44); *jingye* (dedication) relates to people's more profound commitment to a shared mission with the CCP, including the state's stability; *aiguo* (patriotism) asserts nationalism and simultaneously strengthens the Party (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:333-334). In sum, the Chinese government requires religious adherents to cultivate socialist core values so as to align with the socialist society and contribute to social harmony.

3.2. The Party-state's hybrid worldview as reflected in the New Regulations

Fox (2018:151) suggests that explicit anti-religious national ideologies such as communism can provide a motivation for engaging in religious policies. Since religious institutions and organizations participate in politics to build a civil society, autocratic regimes put religious groups, especially those independent of the state, under their control through restrictions. The government fears that religious institutions might compete with the state for political power by organizing and mobilizing people for political actions, such as opposing government policies or supporting an opposition movement (Fox 2019:5). Indeed, the Chinese government is inherently intolerant of any opposition because of its autocratic nature. Having

suffered from Western countries' humiliation in history, it suspects that foreign religions such as Christianity might oppose and threaten the state if they can gain sufficient power. The Party-state considers that influence of foreign forces, such as Protestant churches, can undermine national harmony and unity.

The CCP's perennial enmity toward religion is another reason to enforce state religious regulations. Fox (2018:150) indicates that the application of regulations to all religions, including the majority religion, implies a country's hostility to religion in general. Ani Sarkissian (2015, cited in Fox 2019:6) further identifies varieties of religious repression. Some regimes, Sarkissian notes, engage in variable repression, with stronger control of those religious organizations perceived as greater threats to the government. As mentioned in the previous section, the New Regulations restrict all religious groups, but they impose tighter restrictions on the gray market than on the red market.

The regime's worldview is readily apparent in the New Regulations, which prioritize government interests to preserve national unity and security through religious adherents' obedience and loyalty to the Party-state. The "general provisions" chapter guarantees citizens' constitutional right to freedom of religious belief. However, it emphasizes that each religious citizen must preserve the unity of the nation, ethnic, religious harmony, and social stability and must not endanger national security or disrupt public order. Moreover, several articles, such as Articles 6, 26 and 27, reinforce the supervision and inspection functions of religious affairs officials on one hand, and the required compliance by religious groups with their work on the other hand. Furthermore, Article 63 states that "using religion to harm national security or public safety, undermine ethnic unity, divide the nation, … infringing upon citizens' rights in their persons and democratic rights, [and] impeding the administration of public order" will be punished criminally or administratively in accordance with the law (China Law Translate 2017).

Additionally, the New Regulations promote socialism and prohibit the proselytization of children. Article 4 states that religion should implement core socialist values. Article 44 bans proselytization in educational institutions. Article 70 specifies the sanctions for proselytization, organization of religious activities, and establishment of religious organizations or religious activity sites in any educational institution (China Law Translate 2017).

Finally, the regulations particularly forbid the influence of foreign powers. Article 5 stresses that based on the principle of self-governance, religious groups, schools and their activity should not be dominated by foreign forces. Other articles, such as Articles 17 and 57, require foreign professional staff to obtain state approval and prohibit foreign financial support.

3.3. The Reformed worldview

Martin Luther and John Calvin acknowledged divine authority and argued for a clear separation of the earthly and spiritual realms. Following his principle of *sola scriptura*, Luther based his beliefs on Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13-14 concerning the divinely ordained nature of government authority and its responsibility to maintain worldly justice, peace and order (George 2013:100). Although the principles of the state are not identical to those of the gospel, government authority is ultimately from God. Calvin shared a similar view of God as a Legislator and King. God's rule was extended from the congregation beyond the church. The sovereignty of Christ covers the entire created realm (George 2013:252–253). Calvinists hold that a political community is under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and that both state and church are accountable to God (Starr 2016:9).

Regarding church-state relations and their respective roles, Luther and Calvin highlighted distinctions between spiritual and secular authorities and duties. Luther distinguished two governments and affirmed their coexistence: spiritual government produces righteousness, whereas temporal government brings external peace and prevents evil deeds. "No one can become righteous in the sight of God by means of the temporal government, without Christ's spiritual government" (Luther 2009:73-74). Chloe Starr (2016:3, 9) indicates that Luther opposed the confusion of the earthly and spiritual kingdoms. Rulers can enjoy power and authority only as God wills. Calvin described the distinctive duties of a bishop and a magistrate (George 2013:252–253). For the Calvinists, the government in its limited role is responsible for the legal protection of religious freedom, whereas the church has autonomy (Starr 2016:9, 12). Nevertheless, Luther (2009:76, 88) emphasized that Christians must be willing to submit to the secular government's limited authority in civic responsibilities and assist the government authority. He called Christians to suffer evil and injustice willingly without avenging themselves, but to seek justice and protection on behalf of others (Luther 2009:81). The state should allow itself to be criticized when it fails to protect the nation and infringes on the authority of the spiritual realm (Starr 2016:9).

Calvin urged Christians not to withdraw from the world but to engage in it. He advised them to respect and obey rulers, notwithstanding their opposition. In cases of persecution, Calvin called on Christians to engage in perseverance and prayer, entrusting their welfare to God, because the institution of the magistracy was ordained by God despite its abusive behavior (George 2013:253-254).

3.4. The Reformed worldview in response to the New Regulations

The Reformed worldview acknowledges the ultimate sovereignty of God and Jesus as the head of the church. Christians recognize the divine appointment of

earthly government by respecting the state, yet they declare their ultimate obedience to God and their willingness to suffer state persecution. Wang and the church leaders affirm God's sovereignty. In their 2022 joint statement, they affirmed the final authority of the Bible in "all righteousness, ethics, and salvation" and Jesus Christ as the only head of the church (Early Rain Covenant Church 2022:211, 213). They acknowledge the divine appointment of the government and declare their eagerness to obey and respect the government. Nevertheless, they also clarify that when the government violates the teachings of the Bible and interferes in anything related to faith, they will obey God rather than men and suffer persecution peaceably, due to the "demands of the gospel and from a love for Chinese society" (Early Rain Covenant Church 2022:213).

Reformed Christians perceive that the earthly and spiritual kingdoms should be clearly divided and that each fulfills a unique role. The former is responsible for civic matters, while the latter seeks both inner justice in the eyes of God and justice on behalf of others should the state fail to fulfill its role. According to its ecclesiology, the ERCC firmly supports separation between church and state. It rejects the government's control over belief of Christians and its intervention in the religious affairs of churches and religious groups in China (Wang 2022:194-196). In their joint statement, the ERCC signatories accepted lawful oversight by civil administration but refused to join any government-controlled religious organizations or to accept any kind of affiliation from the state (Early Rain Covenant Church 2022:213-214).

In an interview, Wang argued that the New Regulations reflect the desire of the CCP and its unwillingness to acknowledge the two separate kingdoms. He stated that politics and religion are united in China's governing philosophy. Instead of accepting the separate sphere of spiritual authority, the CCP pursues the sole "sphere of authority under the government" (Wang 2022:190, 194). The Chinese regime perceives the church-state relationship as a competition. It considers the church a civil governing problem that can influence the state's ideological security and even its existence. Wang desires that the government would treat the church legally and as equal to other civil organizations, with certain distinctions. Additionally, Wang objects that religious affairs are elevated to the level of ideological or national security and Sinicization of religions. He argues that the New Regulations aim for "new reforms, patriotism, and Sinicization of religion … religions should adapt to socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Wang 2018).

4. Discussion of the actions of the Party-state and house churches

The divergence of state and church worldviews explains the state's action and the church's reaction. This section will discuss the Party-state's repression under Xi's

leadership and the ERCC's resistance. Can their worldviews appropriately justify their actions and reactions? Is there room for dialogue?

The introduction of the New Regulations represents Xi's coercive implementation of state worldview that leaves no room for other worldviews. This aligns with Sander Griffioen's concept of an "embedded world view," which simultaneously fosters one specific course of action and blocks other possibilities. As the embedded worldview conceals the existence of alternative worldviews, it is harmful because "social processes follow their own irreversible tracks irrespective of human assent" (Griffioen 2012:23-24). The state cannot pressure religious groups to change their worldview or conform to the government's worldview without consent. Assent to a cause implies personal commitment, including subjectivity. A change of worldview involves a transforming state of mind, modifying all our perceptions, emotions and beliefs (Griffioen 2012:31-32).

Griffioen's concept corresponds to the case of China. Xi compels adherence to a hybrid worldview regardless of the consent of religious organizations. The New Regulations allow the Party-state to hold supreme authority and control all religious organizations. Under Xi's leadership, the Party has endorsed the accommodation of religion to the socialist society and requires religious adherents to cultivate core socialist values for a harmonious society. Not only does the state thereby violate the religious freedom of all religious groups, but it also ignores genuine public interests, namely national well-being and the common good (Griffioen 2012:46). Such negligence of the public good is indicated by Alasdair Mclntyre (1998, cited in Chaplin 2008:59), who argues that modern governments focus on their own dominance and subject the public good to ideological fantasies. His argument is reflected in the management of religious affairs in China, which implies that the Party-state prioritizes its interests and political agenda over guaranteeing religious freedom. Religious groups are not allowed to practice their faith according to their conviction. All religious worldviews are "harmonized," and dissenting worldviews are considered disloyal to the CCP and a threat to national stability.

The Party's perspective is that social harmony is the paramount norm, and it attempts to conceal any possible conflict. However, discord is unavoidable amid diverse worldviews. It is mistaken to think that conflicts between distinctive viewpoints must destabilize the public order. I agree with Griffioen (2012:45) that since social conflicts will be common throughout history, Christians must engage in public debates. The prophetic role of religion exposes social realities and seeks true harmony for a better future. Just as Cornel West (2011, cited in Calhoun 2011:120) argues, prophetic religion helps people see realities, renders

disharmony visible, and challenges people to reflect and make possible improvements. Lesslie Newbigin goes further. Criticism of religious groups in the public realm is essential. The church must question and expose the beliefs and actions of the state in light of the gospel (Newbigin 1986: 132).

The ERCC, playing its prophetic role, has indicated where it believes the government has made mistakes in its treatment of religious groups in China, as well as upholding and publicly presenting its theological position. In its declaration, the ERCC urges other churches to seek justice on behalf of other churches across the nation. It desires to pressure the government and bring about changes in society for the common good. Moreover, as Griffioen says, one can take deep conflicts seriously yet remain civil. He argues that Abraham Kuyper's idea of the religious antithesis applies not to a person or entity but refers to opposition between fundamental principles (Griffioen 2012:28, 48).

Jonathan Chaplin (2008:35) extends Kuyper's argument that critical public engagement shows the opposing party respect. For me, engaging with multiple worldviews is an enriching experience, calling for openness and humility. This perspective is supported by the views of various scholars. Griffioen (2012:29) argues that the presence of communities holding different worldviews brings different organizations into each other's "range of vision" and "play[s] an integrative role" because each worldview community reflects the presence of the others. Newbigin (1986, cited in Mouw and Griffioen 1993:66) further suggests listening genuinely in dialogue with non-Christians and learning humbly and openly from those who hold opposing views. Likewise, Chaplin (2008:48-51) calls for acknowledgement of disagreement and a spirit of mutual respect and understanding. Zhibin Xie (2023:ch. 3) adds that a willingness to accept criticism and engage in self-amendment are also essential.

These characteristics are reflected in the ERCC's attitude. In its "Ninety-Five Theses" document published in 2015, the ERCC declared its willingness and openness to meet and dialogue with state representatives. It clarified that the theses and the church's theological perspective can serve as the basis for dialogue with the state (Starr 2016:5). In its responses to the New Regulations, the ERCC proclaimed its obedience to and respect for the Chinese government concerning civic matters, consistent with Romans 13.

In contrast to the Party-state's system of "unified state and religion,"[3] in which religious affairs are regarded as internal government affairs, the ERCC supported the separation of the two kingdoms, rejecting the government's interference in

3 The CCP's idea of "separation of church and state" means that religious organizations cannot interfere in government affairs, yet it does not mean that the Party-state guarantees religious freedom of religious organizations, as mentioned above.

religious affairs (see 3.4). This ecclesiological view can be misinterpreted because of the term "separation," which may refer to a strict division with mutual non-interference, implying that the government must not have any authority over the church in any case, or that a church must not be involved in any political and social issue, which includes injustice caused by the state. Nevertheless, the ERCC acknowledges both the government's and the church's idiosyncratic authority and their coexistence. The ERCC did not consider that church and state should be strictly separated because it supported the church's engagement in the world, seeking justice when the state fails to do so, and claimed its obedience to the government in civil matters (see 3.4). Hence, instead of using the term "separation," I suggest another term, "distinction," drawn from the "sphere sovereignty" concept developed by Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd, for better precision. Kuyper and Dooyeweerd first confess God's chief sovereignty over all spheres. Kuyper characterizes the specific sovereignty of human institutions as to be exercised within their own sphere. James Skillen and Rockne McCarthy (1991:404) further explain that each sphere is identified uniquely by its "leading function." It has its own responsibility or sovereignty and a distinguishable character. For example, a government is qualified by a guiding juridical function and brings public justice to all spheres. This point is further explained by Xie (2023:ch. 9), who argues that the state exercises its authority only to protect and maintain a balance between diverse social spheres. Likewise, in an interview with Xie, Skillen elucidates the concept of "principled pluralism," according to which the government must establish laws that uphold pluralism and do justice to diverse institutions by treating them justly and giving them their due (Xie 2023:App. 2).

Finally, in view of the Party-state's totalitarian nature and the house churches' disagreement with the government's interference in ecclesial affairs due to irreconcilable differences between their worldviews, is dialogue or even cooperation between the Chinese government and house churches still possible? It seems difficult after the arrest of Wang, ERCC leaders, and congregation members in December 2018, followed by a series of harassment actions toward the ERCC in subsequent months and Wang's sentencing to nine years of imprisonment a year later (Nation and Tseng 2022:207-208). The Chinese government seems to be leaving no room for discussion and concession.

5. Conclusion

Since the establishment of the PRC, perennial tensions have existed between church and state. The deteriorating relationship caused by the state's imposition of religious regulations and the ERCC's resistance reflects the deep discrepancies between their worldviews, which primarily lie in different definitions of the highest

authority and conflicting demands for loyalty. The Reformed perspective affirms that sovereignty belongs to God alone and that Christians are ultimately responsible to God. In the separation of church and state, the church has autonomy while the government rules civic matters with limited power. On the contrary, Xi and the CCP uphold the government's supreme authority over all spheres of life and people. Confucianism was restored in Xi's political reform because he desires to "Sinicize" Marxism through it. For Xi, "socialist spiritual civilization" can be possible only under the CCP's rule in partnership with the Chinese cultural tradition. However, his reform selectively applies certain Confucian elements – only those that do not infringe the Party-state's interests – notably Xi being the moral leader or father of the nation. Under the profound influence of Marxism-Leninism, the CCP cannot tolerate the existence of any well-organized group, such as religious institutions, because it could potentially oppose the Party's authority.

The New Regulations, as one of Xi's most significant reform strategies, undermine the autonomy of religious organizations, especially house churches, and reinforce the Party-state's authority. By complying with the state's religious regulations, religious institutions are expected to contribute to individual morality by cultivating Xi's core socialist values, which implies their loyalty to the Party. The goal is to reconstruct national identity and advance civilization so as to enhance the social order and build a harmonious society, and thus a stronger nation. Confucianism serves as an ethical source for the constitution of the Chinese government and a means of governance over society.

Not only do the New Regulations infringe on the religious freedom of all religious organizations, but they also have an extensive impact on society. In her analysis of the political, economic and social implications caused by religious controls and persecution, Sarah Cook (2019:339) argues that government policies can harm the CCP's legitimacy. When religious suppression extends to state-sanctioned religious groups and increases in intensity, popular resentment grows and people's distrust in the government could be aggravated. Resources invested in controlling religions could be used to ease urgent social issues such as poverty and benefit society. Mass religious persecution worsens the legal-security apparatus, and the effort to establish a genuine rule of law is undermined.

Facing the Party-state's intensification of religious control and the unlikely possibility of dialogue between church and state, the ERCC has demonstrated how to live out its faith, respecting the government as God-given earthly authority and obeying it in legal matters. It also shows how churches may engage publicly and peacefully with political and social issues, clarify their theological standpoint notwithstanding disagreement, and strive for justice on behalf of others so that churches can be a good witness to society.

This research has focused on the ERCC, which represents a particular theological position. However, unregistered churches in China present theological diversity. Further research on church-state tensions could scrutinize different theological positions of other unregistered churches and compare them with the government's worldview. On the other hand, some unregistered churches choose to focus on church ministry and remain silent with regard to their political views. How are these churches coping with the New Regulations? What are their reactions to churches such as the ERCC, which publicly resist the government? How are they affected by these churches' activism? Finally, as mentioned in 2.2, the New Regulations also affect the registered churches; how is compliance with expanding regulations affecting the registered churches' theological legitimacy? These questions deserve close attention as they have significant implications for the future of Christianity in China.

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