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In the Beginning, There Were Hermeneutical Mistakes of Church-State Relations in Modern China*

Cheng-tian, Kuo**

Abstract

The hectic and slow progress of religious freedom in China is a direct result of restrictive religious policies, which have been guided by hermeneutical mistakes about religion-state relations made in the early 1900s. The phrase “separation of state and church” was incorrectly translated and understood as total separation of state and church, instead of its American authentic meaning of “checks and balances between state and church.” Even worse, the phrase has been employed to justify the state’s domination over religion, while forbidding religion from criticizing the state. Chinese nationalism in the early 1900s further permeated the Chinese versions of the Bible by mistranslating different human groups into the state, thus, transforming the Bible into a nationalist textbook for the Chinese. The continued impacts of these hermeneutical mistakes on church-state relations in modern China are evidenced by the Christian Textbook of Patriotism and six major misconceptions of church-state relations commonly held by Chinese officials and intellectuals.

Keywords: Modern China, Church-State Relations, Separation of Church and State, Religious Freedom, Hermeneutics

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** Distinguished Professor, Department of Political Science; Professor, Graduate Institute of Religious Studies, National Chengchi University, TAIWAN

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I. Introduction

Thanks to the enlightened leaderships of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, religious freedom of Chinese Christians made incremental progress from 1982 to 2012. In the past few years, however, the expansion of religious freedom for Chinese Christians reached a plateau, if not a limbo. In April 2014, a new provincial party secretary ordered tearing down those churches or church crosses which violated the building codes of Wenzhou city (Cao Nanlai called it “China’s Jerusalem”). One year later, the city’s party committee conducted an extensive campaign to purge party members who were Christian believers. The short-term factor of leadership transition at both the national and local levels is certainly the dominant cause. But the limited and hectic progress of religious freedom for Chinese Christians is partially rooted in long-term misconceptions of proper relations between the state and religion, starting with two kinds of hermeneutical mistakes in the early 1900s in China: ¹hermeneutical mistakes of the phrase “the separation of state and religion” and hermeneutical mistakes of those words related to the “state” in the Chinese versions of the Bible. ²By revamping these misconceptions and revising current religious

¹ Theologians disagree on the definitions of Biblical interpretation, exegesis and hermeneutics (Bartholomew, Greene, Moller 2000; Corley, Lemke, Lovejoy 2002; Osborne 1991). In this paper, I use the term “hermeneutics” to include both exegesis (analysis of the meaning and morphology of scripture languages) and hermeneutics (application of Biblical verses to contemporary events). Although both exegesis and hermeneutics are subject to theological and ideological influence, hermeneutics is more so than exegesis. Thanks to Reviewers One and Two of this paper for this reminder.

² In the past two decades, the literature on religious politics has expanded from research of church-state relations in Christian/Catholic countries to non-Christian/Catholic countries (Jelen and Wilcox 2002; Cheng and Brown 2006). Therefore, this paper uses “church-state relation”

policies accordingly, Chinese Christians might start to enjoy more religious freedom.

The next section will discuss different hermeneutics of the “separation of state and religion” when the phrase was first introduced to Chinese politicians and intellectuals in the early 1900s. The third section analyzes the hermeneutical mistakes in the Chinese Union Version of the Bible. The fourth section studies the Christian Textbook of Patriotism to illustrate what long-lasting impacts these hermeneutical mistakes on conceptions of church-state relations in contemporary China. The fifth section briefly discusses other major misconceptions of religion-state relations in China as results of these hermeneutical mistakes. The last section concludes this paper.

II. In the Beginning, There Was a Hermeneutical Mistake

Although the phrase “the separation of church and state” was coined by Thomas Jefferson in this letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut in 1802, the principle of church-state separation had been endorsed by the drafters of the U.S. Constitution.³ Its content was made concrete in Article VI and the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Article VI of the U.S. Constitution prescribes “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” But it was the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that has been the most frequently cited exemplar for maintaining proper relations between the state and religion in modern democracies. It stipulates that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Derived from this Amendment are the so-called “non-establishment clause” and the “free exercise” clause.⁴ The first component

to refer to the relation between Christian church and the state, while “religion-state relation” refers to the relation between various religions and the state. Furthermore, the word “state” is used very flexibly in the literature on religious politics. It may refer to administration, government, state apparatus, party state, and politics, or their combinations. So is the word “religion” which may refer to theology, clergy, religious rituals, and faith community, or their combinations. In general, both state and religion are institutions that contain their respective elements. The literature on religious politics studies the relations between these two institutions.

³ Since most of Chinese religious groups are not Catholic or Christian, this paper will use interchangeably the phrases of “church-state relations” and “religion-state relations,” pending on the context.

⁴ On the debate about church-state relations in the U.S., see Edwin S. Gaustad, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land: A History of Church and State in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

forbids the state from establishing any state religion, while the second forbids the state from interfering with religion. Through numerous rulings by the Supreme Court, particularly the *Lemon v. Kurtzman* of 1971, the state's promotion of or interference with religion is allowed only when it meticulously conforms to the criteria of "non-discrimination" and "non-excessive entanglement."

For the purpose of subsequent discussion, it is important to note that the word "separation" in this phrase and its authentic meaning were probably derived from the phrase "separation of powers" which the American founding fathers had in mind when they drafted the Constitution and the First Amendment. They embraced John Locke's political philosophy of separation of powers to construct the first modern democracy in the world.⁵ In a nutshell, the separation of powers means two things: one, the three major branches of a government (administration, legislature and judiciary) are separate entities not subordinate to one another; two, these three branches of the government maintain checks and balances with one another. Therefore, when the founding fathers were drafting the First Amendment, they probably had in mind that the separation of church and state was to mean: one, the state and church were separate entities and were not subordinate to each other; two, the state and church would maintain checks and balances between them. All the U.S. Supreme Court decisions on church-state relations so far have reconfirmed these original interpretations. But so far, very few Chinese officials and intellectuals understand and embrace this authentic meaning of the separation of church and state. It all started with a hermeneutical mistake made in the early 1900s in China.

The hermeneutical mistake is that the phrase was translated into "zhengjiao fenli" (政教分離) rather than "zhengjiao fenli" (政教分立) by most Chinese intellectuals and politicians at the time and has been the most popular translation since. The former translation (called "SCX" hereafter for its wrong "X" translation) connotes that the state and religion are separate entities and have no interaction between them, like a divorced couple; while the latter (called "SCO" hereafter for its correct "O" translation) accurately captures the authentic meaning of the American separation of church and state. Even worse, the former was later used to justify the state's arbitrary intervention in the internal affairs of religion while forbidding religion from intervening in the state; SCX becomes a one-way separation. The former rejects the latter's implication for a mutual check-and-balance relationship between the state and religion. The following sections elaborate on these points.

⁵ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, [1683]1993).

In the archive of the Renmin University Library in Beijing, I found 28 newspaper reports and popular journal articles, published from 1904 to 1937, that dealt with the subject of religion-state relations. Among them, only 7 adopted the correct SCO translation, while 21 used the wrong SCX translation. But even among the seven that adopted the SCO translation, most opted for the SCX meaning to prescribe proper religion-state relations.

In the mind of most Chinese intellectuals at the time, the French case of church-state separation seemed to be the exemplar of SCX. Two articles, published in 1906 and 1907, adopted SCO in their titles to report news about France's new law (1905), which terminated all state subsidies to the Catholic Church (Article 2).⁶ Articles 3 to 15 forced the Church to transfer its management authority to the state. Article 16 even forbid clergy from commenting on politics in places where they conducted prayer or read the Bible. The French government literally treated the Catholic Church as a public educational institution that needed to be closely supervised by the state. Among the 21 Chinese articles that adopted the SCX translation, five dealt mainly with the French new law.⁷

In theories of religion-state relations, the French case has been regarded as an extreme and inappropriate model of religion-state separation, forbidding any interaction between these two institutions, such as wearing religious symbols in public schools.⁸ In reality, it provides justification for the state's arbitrary intervention in religion, while forbidding religion from intervening in the state. In this sense, the SCX translation accurately described the idiosyncrasy of the French case. According to the annual Religious Freedom Report by the U.S. State Department, France is constantly criticized for minor violations of religious freedom.⁹ Unfortunately, many important political leaders and intellectuals during

⁶ The Eastern Miscellany (Shanghai), 1906, vol. 3(4): p.26 (Rome: Rome bishop strongly protests against the separation [fenlǐ] of church and state in French); The Eastern Miscellany, 1907, vol. 4(2): pp.4-12 (The new separation [fenlǐ] Law of church and state in French).

⁷ Law and Politics Magazine (Tokyo), 1906, vol. 1(1): 2 (Summaries of current events: The problems of separation [fenlǐ] of church and state); The Diplomacy Review (Shanghai), 1910, vol. 10(10): p.27 (Chronicle of events: French government carried out the separation [fenlǐ] of church and state); The Universal Progressive Journal (Chongqing), 1907, vol. 128: p.10 (Issues: The problems of separation [fenlǐ] of church and state in French); Sein Min Choong Bou (Yokohama), 1906, vol. 4(2): pp.90-91 (The separation [fenlǐ] of church and state case in French); The Diplomacy Review, 1906, vol. 6(24): pp.15-16 (On the bargaining of separation [fenlǐ] of church and state in Europe).

⁸ Lorenzo Zucca, *A Secular Europe: Law and Religion in the European Constitutional Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. xix-xx.

⁹ U.S. Department of the State, "France," *International Religious Freedom Report*, various years.

the early Republican era, including Zou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, had studied in France and enthusiastically embraced the SCX model.¹⁰

Among the 28 Chinese articles, several of them discussed religion-state relations in Tibet. Some used the SCO translation,¹¹ while others used the SCX translation, but all adopted the meaning of SCX. In 1910, the year before the Republican revolution, an editorial suggested the Qing dynasty to adopt the SCX principle in dealing with a new political crisis in Tibet: a senior Dalai just returned home from abroad, with the help of the Great Britain, in an effort to restore traditional theocracy and to abolish the rule of a junior Dalai who was appointed by the Qing dynasty. The editorial recommended SCX to thwart the conspiracy of the senior Dalai, which apparently is interference in Tibet's religious affairs.¹² Another two news reports said that there was already a consensus among the cabinet members of the Qing dynasty to adopt the SCX principle in dealing with the Tibetan question. The Qing government notified all embassies to China that it would not accept any diplomatic agreement made unilaterally by Dalai without the explicit approval from the Qing government.¹³

There was one news report on a British bill introduced to the parliament to remove the Church of England its status as the state religion. This news report used the SCX translation and declared that, following similar SCX policies adopted in France and Spain, religion would no longer be able to resist state domination.¹⁴

Dr. Sun Yatsen, the founding father of the Republic of China, was probably the only intellectual/politician in the early 1900s that adopted the SCO translation with its authentic American meaning in mind. After all, few Chinese politicians had lived in the U.S. as long as he did, or acquired dual citizenship in the U.S.¹⁵ He inserted the principle of SCO in various drafts of the Constitution. Article 5 of the Temporary

¹⁰ This sentence is inspired by Reviewer One.

¹¹ Kang Zang Qian Feng (Nanjing), 1938, vol. 5(4): pp.10-13 (A proposal to reform minority policies according to the separation [fenlì] of church and state in Xi-kang, Part I); Kang Zang Qian Feng, 1938, vol. 5(5): pp.8-9 (A proposal to reform minority policies according to the separation [fenlì] of church and state in Xi-kang, Part II). Kai Fa Xi Bei, 1934, vol. 2(1): pp.71-72 (Selected Public Opinions: The separation [fenlì] of church and state in Tibet from the historical perspective).

¹² *Yu Ze Sui Bi*, 1910, vol. 1(10): p.6 (The proposal for separating [fenlì] church and state).

¹³ Da Tong Daily (Shanghai), 1910, vol. 13(19): p.29 (Hard News: The foundations of separation [fenlì] of church and state in Tibet). Guo Feng Daily (Shanghai), 1910, vol. 1(14): pp.101-102 (Major Events in China: An opportune moment to separating [fenlì] church and state in Tibet).

¹⁴ The Diplomatic Review, 1907, vol. 13(19): pp.23-24 (On separation of church and state in the United Kingdoms).

¹⁵ Apple Daily (Taipei), June 6, 2011, Sun Yat-sen, the founder of nation, is an American, <http://www.appledaily.com.tw/appledaily/article/headline/20110606/33439605/>, accessed September 2, 2014.

Constitution (linshi yuefa) says that “all people of the Republic of China are equal regardless of race, class and religion.” Article 6 stipulates that “the people have freedom of religion.”

One can argue that these constitutional articles serve only passive protection of religious freedom and do not reflect the component of “checks and balances” of the SCO principle. Indeed, in his reply letter to a Chinese Buddhist organization, which was concerned about the possible abuses of the Temporary Constitution by Chinese warlords in granting religious autonomy, Dr. Sun seemed to adopt the SCX principle by saying that “In modern states, the separation of state and religion is strictly followed. Believers are devoted to the practice of religious life and never interfere with politics, while the state would do its best to protect religion.”¹⁶ In his reply letter to two Methodist leaders, Dr. Sun also used the term of SCO to discourage foreign missionaries from interfering with Chinese politics. He complained about the misbehaviors of some foreign evangelists who occasionally interfered with Chinese local politics. He also warned against those evangelists who intended to use state power for proselytism.¹⁷

But Dr. Sun moved from the SCX principle to the SCO principle in other letters or speeches in 1912. Addressing to a French Catholic church in China, he wished that all religions in China would worship the all-mighty God in order to complement the insufficiency of secular laws. He also wished that national politics make progress so that religions can also make improvement. Politics and religion complement each other.¹⁸ In his speech at a church in Beijing, he proudly mentioned that many Chinese revolutionaries were Christian. Religion and politics are closely connected. The operation of national politics relies on religion to amend its insufficiency. So, he urged Christians to participate in politics.¹⁹ In a speech delivered to a Christian association in the southern city of Guangzhou, he re-iterated his SCO principle: “Brothers and sisters, you are believers in a church, but you are also citizen of a nation... Christians should uphold both Christian ethics and national responsibilities

¹⁶ Sun Yat-sen, “On freedom of religion: reply to the Buddhist Association,” *Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen*, vol. 4, (Taipei: Modern China Press, 1989), pp. 250-251.

¹⁷ Sun Yat-sen, “On Chinese Autonomous Christian Church: reply to the Methodist Episcopal Church’s Gao Yi Sheng and Wei Ya Jie,” *Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen*, vol. 4, (Taipei: Modern China Press, 1989), p. 206.

¹⁸ Sun Yat-sen, “Religion and Politics,” *Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen*, vol. 3, (Taipei: Modern China Press, 1989), pp. 50-51.

¹⁹ Sun Yat-sen, “To amend deficiencies of politics with morality of religions,” *Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen*, vol. 3, (Taipei: Modern China Press, 1989), p. 75.

in order to bring both politics and religion to perfection.”²⁰

A decade later, deeply frustrated by warlord politics during the early Republican era, Dr. urged Christian youths to get actively involved in politics to save the newborn nation. Addressing to the Chinese YMCA in 1924, he urged the Chinese YMCA to follow the exemplar of Joshua to rescue the Chinese people from the encroachment of warlords and to lead the Chinese people to the land of milk and honey.²¹ In a long speech delivered at a YMCA conference in Guangzhou in 1924, he mentioned that American YMCA was active in American politics but Chinese YMCA was, strangely enough, not active in Chinese politics. He exhorted Chinese YMCA members to apply their Christian virtues to national politics, to “save the nation with virtues” (rengē jiuguo). He cited the revolutionary martyrs of Lu Haodong and Shi Jianru who were both YMCA members and KMT members. He even promised the YMCA branches in Guangzhou that he would authorize them to govern a couple counties in Guangdong Province as experiments of “save the nation with virtues.”²²

However, the SCX translation, both in name and in substance, prevailed over the SCO translation in the mind of Chinese politicians and intellectuals in the early 1900s. After all, it was an era when Chinese nationalism just came out the political delivery room.²³ Most politicians and intellectuals fanatically embraced this “new religion” of nationalism with an aim to cleanse the national humiliation caused by Western imperialism and Chinese warlordism. While Catholicism and Christianity were treated as instruments of Western imperialism and needed to be “separated” from the state, traditional Chinese religions were regarded as instruments of feudal forces (warlords and Qing loyal family) that needed to be brought to the knees of a Leviathan state. In terms of religion-state relations, they preferred the French model of *étatisme* (strong state) rather than the more balanced American model of checks and balances.

²⁰ Sun Yat-sen, “Christians in China should also apply Christian teachings to undertaking national duty,” *Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen*, vol. 3, (Taipei: Modern China Press, 1989), pp. 132-133.

²¹ Sun Yat-sen, “Encouraging young Christians in China,” *Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen*, vol. 9, (Taipei: Modern China Press, 1989), pp. 626-627.

²² Sun Yat-sen, “Citizens save their country with their moral quality,” *Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen*, vol. 3, (Taipei: Modern China Press, 1989), pp. 352-360.

²³ Shi-jie Cha, *Minguo Jidujiao Shi Lunwenji* [Essays on the History of Christianity in the Republican Era] (Taipei: Yuzhouguang Press, 1994); Ren-chang Ye, *Wusi Yihou De Fandui Jidujiao Yundong: Zhongguo Zhengjiao Guanxi De Jiexi* [Anti-Christian movement after the May 4th Movement: Analyzing the relationship between politics and religion in China] (Taipei: Jiou Da Press, 1992).

In the mind of Chinese Christians in the Republican era, the misconceptions of religion-state relations were molded by the above nationalist program that could still be adjusted should zealous nationalism fade away. Unfortunately, Chinese nationalism did not stop at the gate of religion, but boldly permeated the very foundation of the Christian belief, the Bible, through hermeneutical mistakes in the Chinese versions of the Bible.

III. In the Beginning, There Was Another Hermeneutical Mistake

The most popular Chinese version of the Bible, which is also the most common reference for Chinese Christian scholarship, is the Union Version (和合本). The translation of the Union Version, which lasted from 1906 to 1919, was led by foreign theologians and missionaries with auxiliary assistance from Chinese Christians.²⁴ It was a time when nationalism reached its zenith in the Western world and blossomed in China. Both the Western translators and Chinese assistants were probably baptized everyday by the nationalist holy water. The critical impact of nationalism on the Union Version is mistranslation of words that are not entities of a state into states. The author of a previous Chinese version of the Old Testament, Jewish Bishop Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, had warned his successors, who were not of Jewish background, about possible mistranslations of those Hebrew words that are not entities of a state into states. Somehow, the translation committee of the Union Version failed to heed his critical warning when they started their new translation based on his draft.²⁵ Without exception, all other less-popular Chinese versions of the Bible, such as the Lu Zhenzhong Version (呂振中譯本), the New Translation Version (新譯本), the Contemporary Version (當代聖經譯本), and the Contemporary Chinese Translation Version (現代中文譯本) made similar hermeneutical mistakes. Even if these translators had in mind the difference between nation and state, they and their readers did not make such a clear distinction under

²⁴ Holy Study Bible (Hong Kong: The Rock House Publishers, Ltd., 2005), p.1967; Wei-ben Zhao, *Yijing Suyuan* [Origins of Biblical translation: The history of Translation of Five Modern Chinese Bibles] (Hong Kong: China Theology Graduate School, 1993).

²⁵ Ai-lian Yi [Irene Eber], *Shi Yuese Chuan: Youtai Yi Zhujiao Yu Zhongwen Shengjing* [Biography of Samuel I. J. Schereschewsky: The Jewish Bishop and The Chinese Bible] (New Taipei City: Chinese Christian Literary Mission Publishing Group Ltd., 2013), pp.245-252. So far, I have not found other documents describing the worldview and background of these translators.

the influence of imported modern nationalism.²⁶

Using both Chinese and English Bible study software programs,²⁷ Kuo conducts an intensive hermeneutical study of these translational errors.²⁸ It suffices to summarize his major conclusions here. Due to their lack of hermeneutical materials, both the Western translators and Chinese assistants of the Union Version extensively mistranslated various kinds of human groups that are not states into states. Even if occasionally they made the correct mistranslation, they did not apply the correct translation consistently throughout the Bible. The number of mistranslations in the Union Version is more than 3,000. These include eleven Hebrew words and four Greek words that are mistakenly translated into Chinese state: *guo*, *bang*, *bangguo*, and other similar terms (see Appendix 1).

In the Old Testament, the only Hebrew word whose meaning comes close to a modern state is מַלְכוּת (kingdom or dynasty; 王國, 王朝). The other eleven Hebrew words that are mistranslated into a state actually refer to other people (עַמ), tribes (שֵׁבט), people living in certain areas (אֶרֶץ), other ethnic groups (גּוֹיִם), visitors ($\text{בָּרִי$), outsiders (גֵּרִים), ethnic groups (עַמִּים), language (לְשׂוֹן), clans (מִשְׁפָּחָה), strangers (זָרִים), and God's people (עַמִּי). It is likely that the Israelis had a precarious history of thousands of years during which they encountered different "groups" of people with different degrees of friendship or hostility. Therefore, they probably developed different words to describe these groups of people for easy identification of threat. To lump these groups of people into a "state" is a reflection of the lack of hermeneutical knowledge on the part of both the Western translators and Chinese assistants of the Union Version.

In the New Testament, the only Greek word whose meaning is similar to a modern state is *basileia*, a (kingdom or dynasty; 王國, 王朝). In fact, in the

²⁶ Reviewer One suggests that in ancient Chinese classics, the concept of *bangguo* (邦國) might include both state and people/ethnic group; such as "ming wei bang ben" (民為邦本)。However, as this paper argues, the Chinese terms "bangguo" probably denote the government/dynasty, rather than the people, and even more unlikely the modern state.

²⁷ For Chinese versions, Almega Bible Tools 4 contains Lu Zhenzhong Version, the New Translation Version, the Contemporary Version, and the Contemporary Chinese Translation Version. For English versions, BibleWorks 9.

²⁸ Cheng-tian Kuo, *Guozu Shenxue De Minzhuhua: Taiwan Yu Zhongguo Dalu* [Democratization of Nationalist Theologies: Taiwan and Mainland China] (Taipei: Chengchi University Press, 2014), Chapter 3.

Septuagint, all βασιλειῶν, βασιλεῶν, βασιλείων, βασιλείων were correctly translated as basileia.²⁹ There are only four other Greek words in the New Testament that come close to a state, probably because the Jews, as a community, under the Roman Empire had stopped traveling extensively outside the Empire like their ancestors. The Roman Empire also annexed nearby kingdoms to make the world system simpler in the eyes of the Jews. Furthermore, the Greek language, koinh., is also a more precise language than Hebrew. All these factors probably contributed to the fact that the Union Version did a better job in translating these Greek words than Hebrew words. The other three Greek words that refer to tribes (λαοί), other places (ἄλλοι) and clans (φυλῆς) are mostly translated into words other than a state in the Union Version. But still, the most used word in the New Testament referring to a large community of people, ἄλλοι, is frequently mistranslated into “other states” (waibang) or “people from other states” (waibangren) in the Union Version.

These translational mistakes immediately generate new theological interpretations different from the original intent of Biblical verses. Kuo composes a list of 151 verses where the Union Version makes important translational mistakes.³⁰ For instance, one of the most often cited verses in Chinese political theology is “Righteousness exalts a nation (δικαιοσύνη), but sin is a reproach to any people” (Proverbs 14:34). The Septuagint correctly translates nation (ἐθνος) as ἄλλοι (nation or ethnic group), not a state. But the Union Version translates it as a state (bangguo). So the origin intent of the whole verse is to promote righteousness among the common people. But because of this mistranslation, the Union Version breaks the verse into two parts: to encourage public officials to uphold justice, and to discourage the common people from doing evil. Most Chinese Christians (in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong) today continue to cite this translation of the verse when they pray for or comment on national politics.

Another example of the translational mistake that generates new theological interpretations is related to the controversy whether secular states continue to exist in the new heaven and new earth. Revelation 21:24 says that “By its light shall the nations (ἔθνη) walk.” The original meaning of the verse is that believers of different “ethnic groups” will walk by its light. However, the Union Version translates “the nations” as “the states” (lieguo) and the verse becomes: “By its light shall the states walk in the city.” But how can the states, which are governmental institutions, walk in the city? People can walk, but not governmental institutions.

²⁹ BibleWorks 9.

³⁰ *Supra* note 24, at pp. 285-297.

The impacts of these hermeneutical mistakes on Chinese Christian theology are significant. First, most Chinese Christians would think that the history of Israel is a history of modern states fighting with one another, which is similar to the modern history of China defending itself against imperialist states. The primary responsibility of Chinese Christians would be patriotic to the Chinese state against imperialist states. Secondly, the misery of the Israelis was caused by a lack of centralized state, while the belief in God played only a secondary role. Again, the primary responsibility of Christians would be patriotic to the state; loyalty to the religion, second. Love your state first, then, love your religion (aiguo, aijiao). Thirdly, the new heaven and new earth will be composed of modern states, probably including the Chinese state, although probably not under the atheist leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, Chinese Christians should embrace Chinese nationalism in this world in preparation for the coming of new Jerusalem, which would preferably descend upon somewhere in China.

IV. An Exemplar of Hermeneutical Mistakes: the *Christian Textbook of Patriotism*

The omnipotent and omnipresent combined influence of these hermeneutical mistakes in the translation of religion-state relations and in the Chinese versions of the Bible is best exemplified by the Christian Textbook of Patriotism (jidujiao aiguo zhuyi jiaocheng; hereafter, CTP), which is the textbook of a required course for all freshmen in Chinese theological seminaries and is used in compulsory political study courses of large Three-Self churches in most major cities.³¹ It was one of the religious textbooks of patriotism sponsored by the State Administration for Religious Affairs in the early 2000s with the aim to solidify the religious legitimacy of the CCP leadership after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre of students. The Catholic Textbook of Patriotism contains similar hermeneutical and hermeneutic mistakes as the Christian Textbook, but due to the limit of this paper, it will not be dealt with here.³²

In addition to its introduction and conclusion, the Christian Textbook of Patriotism contains nine chapters. Chapter One proposes that patriotism is consistent

³¹ The following is adapted from Cheng-tian Kuo, "Chinese Religious Reform: The Christian Patriotic Education Campaign," *Asian Survey*, 51(6)(2011): pp.1048-1053.

³² Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association and Bishops Conference of Catholic Church in China, *Zhongguo Tianzhujiao Duli Zizhu Ziban Jiaohui Jiaoyu Jiaocai* [Catholic Textbook of Patriotism] (Beijing: China religious culture Publisher, 2002).

with the Bible and Christian traditions. It extensively cites verses from the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as works of church fathers, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, to substantiate this proposition. Chapter Two traces the advent of Christianity in China, exposing the evil behaviors of missionaries in the late Qing dynasty and the early Republican era, but says that not all Chinese Christians were bad. Chapter Three recognizes contributions of Chinese Christians (including Sun Yatsen) to the 1911 Revolution, the patriotic movement of the early Republican era, the anti-Japanese war, and establishment of the People's Republic of China. Chapters Four and Five elaborate the development of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the past fifty years, presenting new religious/political dogmas and doctrines adapted to the emerging new political environment. Chapter Six provides justifications of the existence of the all-encompassing hierarchy of the National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches and the China Christian Council. Chapters Seven and Eight pay tributes to eighteen founders and exemplars of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Chapter Nine discusses the more recent developments in church reforms led by Bishop Ding Guangshun. The ultimate goal of these reforms is to realize the "Construction of the Socialist Harmonious Society," which Party Chairman Hu Jintao championed at his inauguration in 2002.

The CTP is significantly different from the older propaganda works in terms of theological sophistication.³³ In one pioneering book, the CTP constructs an indigenous nationalist theology that is both comprehensive and consistent. It starts with the sacred religious scriptures and traditions. Then, it reconstructs the origin and development of Christianity in China in order to transform the hitherto imperialist, exploitative Christianity into a native, patriotic Christianity. It justifies the existing Christian hierarchy and provides eighteen recent exemplars of Chinese patriotic Christians for common Christians to emulate. Older propaganda works might have dealt with these subjects separately but have not matched the breadth and consistency of the CTP.

Furthermore, old propaganda works did not extensively cite from the Bible to substantiate their arguments, thus, lacking religious legitimacy in the eyes of lay

³³ These propaganda books include *Weile Zhengyi Yu Heping* [For Justice and Peace]; *Qianshi Buwang Houshi Zhishi* [Lessons learned from the past can guide one in the future]; *Zhongguo Jidujiao Sanzi Aiguo Yundong Wenxuan, 1950-1992* [Selections of three-self patriotic movement of protestant churches in China, 1950-1992]; *Wu Yaozong Xiaochuan* [Biography of Wu Yao-zong], *Huiyi Wu Yaozong Xiansheng* [Wu Yao-zong in retrospect]; *Zhao Zichen Wenji* [Selected Works of Zhao Zi-chen]; *Ding Guangxun Wenji* [Selected Works of Ding Guang-xun].

believers. Neither did they refer to important Western theological works based on liberal or conservative theology. Most of them consisted of proclamations and reiterations of state religious policies, official stories of modern Chinese Christian history, news of international religious exchanges, and personal witnesses related to the “insightful” and “correct” state religious policies. To avoid the political risk of innovative ideas, many propaganda works simply plagiarized sentences from existing publications and state proclamations.

Different from these propaganda works, the CTP cites extensively from the Bible and Western theological works to justify patriotism. For instance, Chapter One proposes that patriotism is consistent with the Bible and Christian traditions. It argues that the concept of a sacred nation originated in Genesis 12:1-2 in which Jehovah promised Abraham establishment of a great nation(☒📖👉 ; not a “state”). Since then, “national sovereignty and territorial integrity became sacred.” Moses, “taking the burden of national independence and freedom, ‘liberated’ Israelis and consolidated state-building through the Law of Moses.” David established a strong state to protect religious freedom. Later, political fragmentation and decline of the state led to religious fragmentation and decline. The Books of Daniel and Esther re-iterate the truth that “without state protection, there is no religious independence and freedom.” Psalmists (e.g., Psalm 126) reveal a strong sense of patriotism. “Having a burning heart for patriotism is a requirement of all Jehovah prophets,” as witnessed by Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah. Does patriotism lose its importance in the New Testament? No, the authors of the CTP say. Jesus himself was a great patriot, presumably to the lost Jewish state. The Great Commission is interpreted as Jesus’ love for his nation-state. And the New Heaven and Earth is a reconstruction of his “mother nation.” Jesus’ disciples were also patriots. They wanted to establish the Messiah kingdom based on Jewish idealism and patriotism.

Authors of the CTP further cite from works of church fathers, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin to substantiate the patriotic proposition. Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian, St Justin Martyr, and St Polycarp of Smryna of the first to third centuries exhorted Christians to pray for the Roman emperor and the polytheist state even when they were mistreated. These church fathers “sacrificed their lives in order to demonstrate to the world that Christianity was the most patriotic force in the state.” St Augustine promoted citizen virtues and encouraged Christians to become the foundation of national harmony and stability and to defend the state. Thomas Aquinas urged Christians to obey the law and the

officials. Martin Luther's religious reform expelled the exploitative Holy Sea from his fatherland and contributed to Prussian national self-determination. John Calvin established national churches in Geneva free of Papal control. In order to strengthen the credibility of these patriotic interpretations, CPT authors cite works written by liberal and neo-conservative Western theologians/ philosophers such as Jürgen Moltmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Leonard Trelawney Hobhouse. Most of these cited (translated) works were published after 1991, reflecting the increasing exposure of Chinese theologians of younger generation to sophisticated theological thoughts that provide an alternative perspective to government propaganda works.

There is little doubt that CTP authors have deliberately interpreted or misinterpreted these Biblical verses and Christian traditions in order to justify Chinese patriotism. Borrowing from Luke 5:37, one senior Christian theologian I interviewed commented: "it is new wine in the old propaganda bottle." However, an in-depth discussion of Biblical verses and Western Christian traditions to justify Chinese patriotism had been rare before the CTP was published. Most of older Chinese theologians did not have access to these translated works or did not have foreign language skills to read the original texts. Younger seminary students and Christians, particularly in urban family churches, think "foreign priests deliver better sermons." The CTP authors must have felt it necessary to place this discussion right in Chapter One in order to strengthen their appeal to younger Christians. The side-effect of this discussion is that it may open up a Pandora's box of other "pernicious, politically incorrect" discussions of religion-state relations. And it does.

The most interesting part of the CTP is its impressive emphasis on political prophetic roles of Chinese Christians, hitherto a taboo in Chinese theological seminaries and in Three-Self churches. Instead of patriotism alone, "patriotic but politically critical" seems to be the quintessential theme of the textbook. The CTP authors do this in a very subtle way and place these critical messages in between patriotic statements. For instance, Moses Law was patriotic but "its core was liturgy ... A nation cannot be strong without a worship center." Do the CTP authors want to convey a message of religious freedom to the readers? The Books of Psalms, Daniel and Esther, as well as the prophets praised patriotism. But the CTP authors spent almost ten pages to explain that the decline of Israel was due to government corruption and distributional injustice. Isaiah urged people not only to relinquish evil behaviors but also to uphold social and political justice, i.e. to vindicate the disadvantaged people. Micah was a patriot but shared with Isaiah the abhorrence for official corruption. Jeremiah was a patriot but risked his life to criticize the Jewish

rulers. Jesus was a patriot but he “showed true love by respecting human dignity.” By these comments, are the CTP authors talking about basic human rights? St Augustine promoted patriotism as well as the “interdependent and re-enforcing relationships between state and church.” He urged Christians to “reform the state in order to reinvigorate national unification and strength.” Thomas Aquinas asked Christians to obey the government but also to promote justice and social equality. Martin Luther pursued both national self-determination as well as freedom and equality.

These prophetic messages are not limited to Chapter One alone, which focuses on the Bible and Western Christian traditions; they are spread sporadically in other chapters of the textbook. For instance, Chapter Three eulogizes those patriotic Christians who participated in liberation of the Chinese people from feudal forces and imperialist powers. This serves to justify Christian participation in political reforms. Chapter Four criticizes some anti-revolutionary Christians during the anti-Japanese war because they “promoted unconditional obedience to the (Japanese) government in the name of Christ.” Chapter Five provides justifications for the TSPM, but CTP authors periodically remind the readers of the importance of religious freedom and democratic legal institutions. Chapter Seven is devoted to introducing Wu Yaozong, the champion of the TSPM and a sincere follower of liberal Social Gospel. Among his patriotic behaviors, Wu touted Christians to promote a more “equal and reasonable” socialism. At the end of each chapter, the authors encourage the readers to apply the gist of the chapter to current social and political issues in China.

In addition to what is theologically and politically innovative in the CTP, what is missing also deserves discussion. The minimal role of the Chinese Communist Party in modern Chinese Christianity is one such missing point. A typical patriotic theology usually would have some theological justification of the contemporary ruler and some elaboration of the contribution of the political guardian to the religion. The CTP does not contain much information on these topics. When I pointed out this puzzle at a meeting with about thirty SARA researchers, they seemed stunned and could not explain it. They promised to add materials related to the CCP in the next edition of CTP. Later, a senior SARA researcher, in private, offered an explanation for the CCP’s minimal role. The textbook was written by a believer/theologian who knew that he should not theologically over-eulogize the CCP in the text because of political considerations. Otherwise, the book would lose its legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary believers. The author intended to write a

textbook that was acceptable to believers in both Three-Self churches and family churches.

V. More Hermeneutical Mistakes of Religion-State Relations in China

The hermeneutical mistake of the phrase “the separation of religion and state” along with the hermeneutical mistake in the Chinese versions of the Bible in the early 1900s were responsible for the development of additional six major misconceptions of proper relations between the state and religion in China for the whole century and till now. These are: (1) In traditional China, the state tightly controlled religions, while religions were submissive to the state. (2) Religious freedom would cause political instability. (3) Traditional Chinese religions are obstacles to China’s modernization. (4) Catholicism and Christianity are instruments of Western (neo-) imperialism. (5) Religious sovereignty infringes upon national sovereignty. And, (6) Western religious freedom is not applicable to the Chinese context. Based on the previous discussion, these misconceptions are rebutted in the following.

1. In traditional China, the state tightly controlled religions, while religions were submissive to the state. This is an “imagined” utopia, using Benedict Anderson’s reference to nationalism as “imagined community,” with which Chinese nationalists imposed their political program on historical facts. The majority view of recent scholarly findings is that the Chinese state was a religious state, while the Chinese society was a religious society.³⁴ Neither one dominated the other, but rather, they lived in harmony with each other. Religious tolerance and freedom was the norm rather than the exception, due to the long tradition of religious pluralism and religious syncretism. By comparison, Chinese people in traditional China probably enjoyed more religious freedom than their counterparts in the West before World War II.

2. Religious freedom would cause political instability. Historically, most of religious rebellions were instigated by corrupt officials who caused local political

³⁴ Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); John Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Kenneth Dean, “Further Partings of the Way: The Chinese State and Daoist Ritual Traditions in Contemporary China,” in Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, eds. *Making Religion Making the State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

instability, not the other way around; for examples, the Yellow Turban Rebellion (184 AD), the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1851), and the White Lotus Rebellion (1900). Most Chinese religions are, by nature, conservative and pro-government.

3. Traditional Chinese religions are obstacles to China's modernization. Chinese religions underwent modernization in the Republican era and continue to do so in the Communist China.³⁵ In fact, major religions successfully adapt to new environments all the time.³⁶ Christianity was a modernized religion derived from Catholicism. Catholicism underwent modernization in the early 1960s. Even "fundamentalist Islam" is a selective adaptation to the pressure of modernization. Currently, all the five major religions in China have been modernized and significantly contributed to the socialist construction programs.³⁷ In Taiwan, Chinese religions, such as Ziji, Foguangshan and Yiguandao, have adopted modern management and established branches in more than 100 countries.

4. Catholicism and Christianity are instruments of Western (neo-) imperialism. Some of them were, but most of them were devoted to evangelism and modern education.³⁸ We need to differentiate pure religious organizations from politically motivated religious organizations. The majority of Chinese Christians and Catholics, both the Three-Self and family churches, are loyal supporters of the CCP regime, although they disagree with the extent of religious autonomy.³⁹ Besides, Chinese Christians are so divided to have a coherent political influence. Western Christianity also learns from past experience to respect local autonomy and politics in China.

5. Religious sovereignty (宗教主權) infringes upon national sovereignty (國家主權). Religious freedom aims to promote religious autonomy(宗教自主權), not religious sovereignty. There is no such concept of religious sovereignty as religious freedom is concerned. Nor the concept of religious sovereignty can be found in theories of religion-state relations. The Holy See (the Vatican State) is an exception

³⁵ C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961); Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁶ John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, *World Religions Today*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁷ P.R.C. Center for Religious Research of China, State Administration for Religious Affairs, ed., *Zhongguo Wuda Zongjiao Lun Hexie* [Chinese Five Great Religions Commenting on Harmony] (Beijing: Beijing: China religious culture Publisher, 2010).

³⁸ *Supra* note 28; National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China and China Christian Council, *Jidujiao Aiguo Zhuyi Jiaocheng* [Christian Textbook on Patriotism] (Beijing: China religious culture Publisher, 2006).

³⁹ *Declaration of Family Churches in China*, 1998(unpublished).

that proves the rule. It functions mainly as the religious coordination center of Catholic religious organizations worldwide. By religious freedom, it means only the freedom to choose religion, to practice religion in private and in public, to make own decision on religious management and doctrine, and to disseminate their religious doctrine without discrimination and harassment from the government. On the one hand, religious freedom is practiced under the constraints of social norms and the rule of law. On the other hand, state sovereignty, as defined in its first appearance in the Westphalia treaty of 1648, explicitly excluded religious autonomy from its jurisdiction. The practice of religious autonomy can hardly infringe upon national sovereignty, unless the controversial religious organization promotes non-religious goal of national independence. In return, the state should refrain from interfering with religious autonomy.

6. Western religious freedom is not applicable to the Chinese context. Taiwanese compatriots experimented with a similar Leviathan rule by the Leninist party-state from 1949 to 1987.⁴⁰ Most religions practiced medium level of religious freedom and supported the KMT government. The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan supported the KMT government from 1949 to 1972. It was the incompetent secret police, who constantly violated the PCT's religious freedom, drove the PCT to the opposition movement. It also thanked to the major religious organizations, which developed democratic culture within their organizations, to promote peaceful transition to democracy. According to the US Religious Freedom Reports, Taiwan is a model of religious freedom among all democratic countries.⁴¹ Western religious freedom is proven applicable to the Chinese context.

VI. Conclusion

The hectic and slow progress of religious freedom in China is a direct result of restrictive religious policies, which have been guided by hermeneutical mistakes about religion-state relations made in the early 1900s. The phrase "separation of state and church" was incorrectly translated and understood as total separation of state and church, instead of its American authentic meaning of "checks and balances between state and church." Even worse, the phrase has been employed to justify the

⁴⁰ Cheng-tian Kuo, *Religion and Democracy in Taiwan* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

⁴¹ U.S. Department of the State, "Taiwan," *International Religious Freedom Report*, various years.

state's domination over religion, while forbidding religion from criticizing the state. Chinese nationalism in the early 1900s further permeated the Chinese versions of the Bible by mistranslating different human groups into the state, thus, transforming the Bible into a nationalist textbook for the Chinese.

The combined and long-lasting influence of these hermeneutical mistakes can be found in the Christian Textbook of Patriotism (CTP), which serves as a standard textbook in a required course for all freshmen in theological seminaries. Clergy and leaders of lay believers of churches in major urban areas are also required to study this textbook. The CTP extensively mistranslated and misinterpreted Biblical verses in order to provide religious justification for Chinese patriotism. However, the CTP also contains hidden messages of religious freedom that reflect the growing dissatisfaction of Chinese theologians toward the lack of religious freedom.

Additional six hermeneutical mistakes of religion-state relations in China are briefly rebutted. Based on recent scholarly findings and contemporary theories of religion-state relations, these hermeneutical mistakes are amended as the following: (1) In traditional China, the state did not tightly control religion. They largely lived in symbiosis with high levels of religious freedom and tolerance. (2) Religious freedom did not cause political instability. It was political corruption and incompetence that instigated religious rebellions. (3) Traditional Chinese religions have been modernized and contributed to China's modernization. (4) Catholicism and Christianity are no longer instruments of Western (neo-) imperialism. (5) Religious sovereignty, which is an hermeneutical mistake of "religious autonomy," does not infringe upon national sovereignty. And, (6) Western religious freedom is applicable to the Chinese context, as evidenced by the high degree of religious freedom and democracy in Taiwan.

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現代中國政教關係詮釋錯誤的起源

郭承天*

摘要

現代中國宗教政策導致宗教自由的緩慢與崎嶇發展，而這些政策的理念源自二十世紀初期政教關係概念傳入中國時，所發生的翻譯與詮釋錯誤。「政教分立」一詞被誤解為「政教分離」，而非美國原意、具有「政教相互制衡」意涵的「政教分立」。更糟的是，「政教分離」被國家用來合理化它對於宗教的控制，同時禁止宗教批判國家。二十世紀初期的中國國族主義更進一步滲入聖經的各種中文譯本，把各種人群團體都翻譯成國家或邦國，而使得聖經成為當代中國的愛國主義教材。這些詮釋的錯誤對於現代中國政教關係的持續影響，仍可見於《基督教愛國主義教材》以及中國官員與知識份子常抱持的六個錯誤的政教關係觀點。

關鍵詞：現代中國，政教關係，政教分立，宗教自由，詮釋學

* 國立政治大學政治系特聘教授、宗教所教授。