

**Our Views on Evil Cults as well as the
Protection of Religious Freedom in Hong Kong
Hong Kong Christian Institute
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*Hong Kong Legco Panel on Home Affairs Committee Meeting***

(1) The Principle of Religious Freedom

(1.1) According to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

(1.2) Since Article 39 of the Basic Law stipulates that the provisions of the ICCPR will continue to apply to Hong Kong, therefore, the SAR government has the obligation to guarantee that everyone in Hong Kong is able to enjoy freedom of speech, association, assembly, religious belief and freedom to conduct and participate in religious activities in public.

(1.3) In view of this, the activities undertaken by the followers of Falun Gong in Hong Kong are permissible under the ICCPR and the Basic Law and in no way can be considered a threat to national security by any standard.

(2) The Definition of Evil Cult

(2.1) In mainland China, there are only five official religions that the Chinese government recognizes: the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, Buddhism, Islam and Taoism.

(2.2) The Chinese government has presently used two kinds of interpretation to accuse any religious group or cult of being illegal. One is based on "illegal religious activities," and the other is on being an "evil cult." However, the reasons they have used to ban religious bodies in the past are only for political reasons instead of religious reasons. For example, thousands of Christians, Protestants as well as Catholics, have been arrested over the years because of their refusal to register with the State.

(2.3) In late 1999, the People's Republic of China (PRC) enacted the Against Cults law with the intention of retroactively prosecuting adherents of Falun Gong. The law was enacted to deflect worldwide condemnation of the Chinese government for its

arbitrary mass arrest and sentencing of these spiritual practitioners. The definition of "evil cult" that the PRC formulated was the use of "religion, *qi qong* or other titles to divinize the leader of the cult, to spread superstitious ideas to deceive people, to develop and manipulate their members and to cause harm to society." Under this definition, Falun Gong was accused of being an "evil cult." However, the Against Cults law violates Article 36 of China's Constitution, which states that its citizens "enjoy freedom of religious belief." Furthermore, although a member of the United Nations – indeed, even a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council – the PRC has violated the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights by enacting such a law.

(2.4) What Falun Gong seeks from the Chinese government is legal recognition of their right to exist on the mainland. As long as the government continues to persecute and violate the rights of Falun Gong followers, the tension between the government and Falun Gong will not be resolved.

(2.5) Today Western societies do not generally discriminate against cults because of the respect for religious freedom and tolerance toward all religions that is ingrained in their legal systems and within their societies. Everyone is free to practice their religious beliefs as long as they abide by the law of the society. In fact, in human history, there have been thousands of sects and cults, even up to the present time, which have attracted millions of followers. Take, for example, Christianity which was once treated as a sect or cult and was persecuted. Christians too during different periods of history have persecuted others who they have described as followers of a sect or cult. These dangerous memories thus remind us that when a group of people is labeled as an evil cult there is the possibility that persecution and violence will follow.

(2.6) However, there is no legal definition of "evil cult" in Hong Kong. Moreover, the government and the people have always respected the diversity of the community's many faiths and people's freedom of thought, conscience and religion as long as their activities abide by the law of Hong Kong.

(2.7) On Feb. 8, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa said that "Falun Gong is more or less bearing some characteristics of an evil cult" and that "the HKSAR government will observe closely the activities of the Falun Gong in Hong Kong and will not allow anyone to abuse Hong Kong's freedoms and tolerance to affect public peace and order in the HKSAR or public peace and order on the mainland." Based on the explanation above, Tung's statement has already violated the principle of "one country, two systems" and has threatened freedom of religion in Hong Kong.

(2.8) Yesterday, the head of the State Council and Religious Affairs Office Mr. Ye Xiaowen openly attacked Hong Kong Falun Gong as being evil and that they had betrayed its original purpose and become political and international. We worry that his speech indicates a signal from Beijing to put pressure on the HKSAR government to take further action to ban Falun Gong.

(3) The Relationship of Religion and Politics

(3.1) From the perspective of the sociology of religion, all religions are a part of civil society and function as a third sector of society that provides social services, education, etc.

(3.2) From the perspective of the Christian faith, all Christians are called to be active participants and agents for the social transformation of society by working for justice and the common good of the community as a whole. Therefore, in addition to preaching and teaching our faith among our Christian followers, we also strive for social justice and love and kindness toward the outcasts of our society as our social witness. Therefore, it is unavoidable to criticize the government as we speak out from our conscience that is grounded and molded by our faith. Our goal is to transform the society for the common good. It is not necessary for the government to take our criticism as a threat or form of confrontation. Instead, this is a positive way to build a better society.

(3.3) We urge that all religious bodies as well as all Legislative Council members should speak up and defend Falun Gong's freedom of religion and conscience for this is a way to defend the rights of everyone in Hong Kong.