The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan and Its Changing Narrative on Human Rights

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Abstract

The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) is the Protestant denomination with the longest tradition in the country. The central theological position of the church began to change in the late 1960s, and over the following decade the church became increasingly politically active and vocal in its support for human rights, minority rights, and democratization. This paper addresses the issue of human rights as narrated within the PCT, which explained its involvement in human rights with reference to its Christian beliefs. One outcome of the church’s endeavors was that the people of Taiwan accepted the struggle initiated by the church and began to ask for free elections. Using the PCT as an example, the paper shows that religious bodies have the potential to be a positive force for change in society and that a Christian perspective on human rights can contribute to secular discourse on the topic.

Keywords

human rights – Christianity – Presbyterian Church in Taiwan – democratization – self-determination – Taiwan
台灣基督長老教會對人權問題的態度變化

摘要

台灣基督長老教會是台灣歷史最為悠久的新教教派。長老教會的神學立場從上世紀60年代晚期開始發生變化，在此後的幾十年中，教會在人權、少數群體權益和民主化方面變得尤為政治活躍。本文探討了基督長老教會內部的人權敘事變化，這解釋了長老教會在基督信仰體系下的人權活動參與。教會努力的結果之一是台灣人民接受了教會發起的抗爭，開始要求自由選舉。以基督長老教會為例，本文表明宗教團體有可能成為社會變革的積極力量，基督教對人權的看法可以促進有關該主題的世俗討論。

關鍵詞

人權，基督教，台灣基督長老教會，民主化，出頭天，台灣

Religious groups should be analyzed within the context of the broader society of which they are a part, not only because they are directly influenced by the social, political, cultural, and economic worlds around them, but also because they themselves can affect all those fields. Religions are often powerful social forces that claim specific moral aspirations on the basis of their perception of good and evil (Zieberts 2021:109). Religious doctrine frequently contributes to the discourse on ethical issues in public life, although sometimes secular and religious concepts of justice collide. Across numerous societies, religions have established a prominent role within the public space. This paper explores how one religious group contributed to the secular world by promoting the notion of universal human rights. Do human rights and religion clash? Or is their relationship complementary? Although religious groups do not always lend vocal support to the implementation of human rights, the selected case is an example of a Christian church that spoke out against the violation of human rights and, building on its religious faith, became engaged in the secular field and opposed an oppressive government. The context for the research is the authoritarian regime of the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan during the period

1 Religious groups, including Christian churches, have of course participated in or enabled human rights violations, often appealing to their religious authority to justify their actions. See, for example, Robinson 2018.
of martial law (1949–1987); the religious group is the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT; Taiwan jidu zhanglao jiaohui 台灣基督長老教會).

The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan has the longest tradition of any Protestant denomination in the island. There has been a Presbyterian mission in Taiwan for over one hundred and fifty years, and the church has long been a promoter of the human rights, minority rights, and political rights of the Taiwanese people. The PCT stands in the line of Reformed churches, which draw their inspiration from the teachings of John Calvin (1509–1564) and his followers, and was formed by the amalgamation of the British and Canadian Presbyterian missions. The two missions shared a theological and historical background: both were built on the heritage of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, founded by John Knox (1513–1572), who wedded Calvin’s theology to a Presbyterian system with elected church leaders (elders) who met at regular national synods (Tomkins 2009:232). The PCT functions as a presbyter-synodical establishment based on the principle of election and delegation. Local religious associations are united into regional presbyteries with elected superiors. These regional bodies are further grouped into higher units called synods (Filipi 2008:112).

Beginning in the late 1960s, the central theological position of the PCT began to change, especially with the emergence of contextual theology and a gradual move away from the Calvinist view of the separation of church and state.² The PCT nonetheless continued to build on those aspects of Calvin’s theology that concerned the image of God and common grace. The people largely responsible for introducing contextual theology into Taiwan were the influential theologians Shoki Coe (Huang Zhanghui 黃彰輝, 1914–1988) and Song Choan Seng 宋泉盛 (b. 1929).³ Shoki Coe maintained that contextual theology could be understood as a methodology that allows for the interpretation of a particular (and invariable) biblical text at a certain time and within a local context. The new theology combined social engagement and Christian teaching and called leaders within the PCT to engage in social and political action. By creating a space for the promotion of human rights, the new dogmatic paradigm helped church leaders to focus on spheres of believers’ lives other than spiritual consolation.

This paper will address the following questions: How has the issue of human rights been narrated within the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan? In what ways has the church’s narrative been innovative? What lies behind the change in the

² Based on John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper’s doctrine on sphere sovereignty (Kuyper 1983).
³ This paper uses the romanized spellings of personal names preferred by Coe and Song. The Chinese characters are added.
church's narrative on human rights? Because religious bodies have the potential to be a positive force for change in a society, it is essential to analyze how a Christian church creates a discourse on human rights while adhering to both religious doctrine and national and international law. A Christian perspective on human rights can, furthermore, contribute to the secular discourse on the topic. The paper does not claim to offer an exhaustive theoretical discussion of the relationship between religious groups and human rights. Its value lies in its in-depth analysis of a particular case.

The Discussion on Human Rights

Human rights are a moral concept; rights are attributed to a person regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, language, or religion. Fundamental human rights encompass four generations of rights that developed over time. The first generation of rights are those “that refer to personal autonomy of the individual and the rights that enable citizen participation in power in a society” (Cornescu 2009:3). These rights are enshrined in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Pact on Civil and Political Rights (1976); first-generation rights include freedom of religion. The second generation of rights are socioeconomic and cultural. The third generation are solidarity rights, such as the right to a healthy environment, to peace, and the right of people to self-determination. The fourth-generation rights are related to future generations and include those pertaining to genetic engineering (Cornescu 2009:4–7; van der Ven 2010:4).

In Western liberal democracies, human rights are considered universal and timeless and are “all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible” (UN General Assembly 1948). Clemens Nathan (2009:25) nonetheless points out that the concept is not truly universal but rather a product of the European Enlightenment. The origins of human rights are generally associated with the rise of modern rational philosophy and a more critical approach toward Christianity. Declarations on human rights such as the Universal Declaration are based on the principle of personal autonomy, although this still resonates quite strongly with the Christian teaching that people are representatives of God on the earth (Horyna 2003:366). The supposed contradiction between human autonomy and Christian theology is not an insurmountable obstacle to a Christian definition of human rights, and the ideas underpinning human rights are becoming an increasing focus of Protestant theology and are drawing Protestant communities into greater political engagement. Human rights can be categorized as social, civil, personal, and religious, and include the rights to
liberty, free movement, use of the mother tongue, and freedom of conscience and religion (Horyna 2003:366). They are usually regarded as pertaining to the individual but are often appropriate to—and appropriated by—whole communities (Black 2009:19).

Attempts to connect human rights and Christianity have always been controversial. Some Christians argue that the concept derives at least partly from the New Testament (Taber 2002); others believe that Christian doctrine is incompatible with liberal values (O’Donovan 1996) and that supporting modernity inevitably leads to the marginalization of Christian religious tradition. However, Anthony Grayling (2017:23) sees the roots of human and civil rights in the Protestant Reformation and the emergence of the idea of freedom of conscience. However, while bringing new ideas and supporting some rights, the leaders of the Protestant Reformation were not supporters of political liberty. Still, the influence of the Reformation, and especially of Calvin’s theology regarding modern civil and human rights, has been a cause of significant dispute. Interestingly, Calvin himself was little interested in the subject: he left no commentary on politics, except for one section of his Institutes (Vorster 1999:209). While his followers would use his theological views on creation, on human beings as the image of God, and on common grace to support the idea that human dignity was inherent, Calvin himself never promoted subjective rights or individual liberties (O’Donovan 2015:121). Rather, he emphasized punishment for heresy (Vorster 1999:210). This point is further highlighted by Steven Lecce, Neil McArthur, and Arthur Schafer (2017:5–6):

[T]he Protestant leaders were not themselves consistent believers in political or even religious liberty. Reacting to a peasant revolt that challenged the foundation of Germany’s social order, Luther wrote that princely

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4 One significant example of Christian institutions failing to promote human rights is the Holocaust (1939–1945). The Catholic Church did not counter German nationalism, and several Protestant churches took a pro-Nazi stance (Shepherd 2003: ix–x). Some Christian leaders also gave their blessing to horrific human rights violations in Rwanda. Catholic and Protestant groups—including the head of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda—supported the genocidal killing (Waller 2009:3–17). During the period of martial law in Taiwan, several Protestant groups supported Chiang Kai-shek—himself a baptized Methodist—and failed to condemn his regime’s human rights violations.

5 The Vatican published several encyclicals condemning liberal human rights. As early as 1791, in Quod aliquantum, Pius VI called all Christians to oppose the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” issued by the French National Constituent Assembly, as he believed it was antithetical to Catholic doctrine. In 1832, Gregory XVI published Mirari vos, which condemned “liberalism, individualism, and democracy as well as freedom of conscience, of speech, and of the press” (Hogan 2015:58).
authority is divinely ordained, and he explicitly denied that common people are qualified to judge what should be the bounds of their rulers’ power. And Calvin suppressed dissenters while in control of Geneva’s government, going so far as to allow one of them, Michael Servetus, to be executed. And, apart from the religious ideals of the Reformation, we might find other, concurrent sources for the emergence of the concept of human rights, such as the revival of classical ideas, the spread of literacy, and the economic changes that undermined feudal structures of authority and gave common people more control over their lives. But it is an open question whether any of these could have had a comparable impact under a society still dominated by the iron hand of the Catholic Church.

There are other voices that support Grayling’s claim. Linda Hogan (2015:58) argues that “the formative role that Christianity played in the articulation of liberal values continues to have relevance for today”. During early modern times it was Calvinist theologians who played a significant role in creating the discourse on human rights. Theodore Beza (1519–1605), Johannes Althusius (1563–1638), John Milton (1608–1674), and John Adams (1735–1826) all promoted “Christian social witness” and addressed social issues from a biblical perspective (Hogan 2015:60). John Witte (2007:35) further explains that

Early modern Calvinists were particularly ardent champions of the rights of life, liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness, rights of democratic election and representation, rights to political dissent and civil resistance, freedoms of religion, speech, press, petition and assembly, freedoms of contract and association, rights to marriage, family, divorce and inheritance, rights to form and dissolve corporations, partnerships and other voluntary associations.

Such thinking shaped the Protestant churches that built their theology on classical Christian texts and on Calvin’s theology and that of his followers and strongly influenced teaching in the Protestant world regarding church and state, duties, and rights (Witte and Alexander 2010:135).

While not all Protestant churches have promoted civil and human rights, many have felt the pressure to draw a connection between their religious traditions and conformity to the newly emerging approaches to human rights. They often reinvented their own tradition as one that promotes human rights because “religious believers might certainly find it easier to believe in human rights ... if they could be assured that God does indeed believe in human rights” (Evans 2007:9).
In Taiwan, one of the most influential theologians was undoubtedly Shoki Coe, a minister of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, principal of Tainan Theological Seminary, and between 1971 and 1975 a director of the Theological Educational Fund of the World Council of Churches. Coe questioned whether it was appropriate for the Taiwanese church to promote theologies that had been developed in the West. He suggested, rather, that Christians should enter a dialogue with the local culture and society into which they were seeking to introduce the gospel and offered the PCT a new and “contextual” way of doing theology (England 2004:674–675). According to Coe, local churches in the Third World must “de-contextualize theology from the West and re-contextualize it in the postcolonial societies” (Shih and Tseng 2020:288). Contextual theology enabled church representatives to include local legends and folk stories in their sermons. Furthermore, the new approach created a new public theology that dealt with the relationship between Christian faith and public life. Contextual theology is “a methodology that enables a specific text to be interpreted within a particular context. While a text is fixed and unchanging, the context in which to interpret the text changes, based on time and place” (Amae 2007:23). Hence, contextual theology represents a radical attempt to connect Christian doctrine with living experience by allowing the text of the Bible to be interpreted within a contemporary cultural context. In fact, all theologies are “contextual,” as they do not exist in a vacuum, but the contextual theology introduced by Coe refers to theologies that are explicitly applied to the political context and the struggle against oppression (Kwan 2005:236).

Coe argued that indigenization of the church was not enough in the new secular and technological society. Rather, Christians should reflect on the struggle for human justice and become political witnesses. Because the Christian God is a God of justice, “participating in the struggles to construct a just society is the only way to witness to faith in God” (Joseph, Huang, and Hsu 2018:6). Contextual theology is closely connected to the Taiwanese people and to Taiwan as a piece of land; therefore, it is often linked to Taiwanese nationalism and to claims for a separate ethnic identity (Seitz 2021:43). The concept of contextual theology legitimized involvement in the political arena and drew the church into a political struggle. The PCT justified its political involvement by drawing links between political issues and Christian doctrine and by suggesting that human rights were a gift from God: the Christian God is the guardian of human rights, and the PCT has the duty to protect them in God’s name.

6 Although Coe and Song are often credited with introducing the concept of contextual theology, the term was not new (Seitz 2021:43).
After the concept of contextual theology had become established in the church, Sc Song Chuan-seng, one of Shoki Coe’s successors at the seminary in Tainan, introduced the “theology of Incarnation,” which identified the Christian God with all human beings. What this meant in the context of Taiwan was that “through identification, Christian communities [were] participating in ... sufferings and in the hope of liberation: and [were] thereby directly involved in the history and cultures of the Taiwanese people” (England 2004:677). Similarly, Chen Nan-jou 陳南州 (b.1944) stressed that theology must be related to the cultural context and political problems of the local church. Christians in Taiwan had no choice, therefore, but to engage in political action that promoted democratization and self-determination in Taiwan:

If the Christian would like to respond to the God of the Exodus and to Jesus’s Incarnation and Cross and participate in the mission of God in Christ’s way in the midst of this identity crisis, he/she has no choice ... but to identify with the suffering and oppressed Taiwanese, and to engage in the Taiwanese struggle for liberation and a new identity. (England 2004:694)

Theologians collectively shifted the focus from personal salvation to social engagement and placed the whole of society at the center of their theology: Christian doctrine should not be Christian-centered but people-centered; Christians should care not only about their religious needs but also about the needs of society, the nation, and the world. Such an outlook represented a significant shift in the PCT’s theology and a departure from the Calvinist view of the separation of church and state.

**The Presbyterian Church and the Turn to Social Activism**

As part of the Protestant reformed church movement based on Calvin’s teaching, Presbyterian churches had previously advocated a separation between church and state:

Based on his doctrine of the two kingdoms, Calvin argued that Church and state are to be kept distinct from each other. But against the Anabaptists, who rejected the participation of Christians in government as civil magistrates, Calvin argued that both Church and state are ordained by God. He was convinced that when Church and state are separate from each other, both can maintain their reciprocal cooperation and mutual responsibility. (Intan 2018:36)
At the beginning of their mission in Taiwan, Presbyterian missionaries also advocated the separation of church and state. During Japanese colonial rule, less than forty years before the first public call for human rights, the missionary Edward Band promoted cooperation with the government rather than support for the rights of local believers. His primary concern was to protect the mission:

Many Formosans⁷ are disappointed that in this affair we missionaries have not stood out as the champions of Formosan independence against the authorities. We have no desire or right to do that. As missionaries, if we can secure an official guarantee that no infringement will be made against perfect freedom for Christian education, we must be prepared to carry out the colonial policy of the Japanese authorities. (Band 1934:473)

Band believed that Christian missionaries had no right to criticize the government. Aside from the fact that there was no theological basis for social engagement at this time, nonintervention was advocated in an effort to maintain good relations with the government and to protect Christian education. After 1928, if missionaries wanted their schools to stay open, they not only had to use the Japanese language but also had to perform Shinto rituals, especially during the time of the Kōminka movement (Amae 2012:59).⁸ The Presbyterians were not prepared to give up their schools and endanger their missionary activity, so they chose to cooperate. The leading figures of the Presbyterian mission were, furthermore, foreigners who did not perhaps identify strongly enough with the needs and issues of the local population and thus allowed the practice of the national cult, considering it merely a harmless manifestation of nationalism. Their focus, rather, was on education and healthcare (Ion 2014:330–334).

After the Second World War, Taiwan once again became part of China and the Taiwanese population acquired Chinese citizenship—at least on paper. China’s nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975) clearly perceived Taiwan as a fresh source of funding for the civil war taking place on the mainland between the nationalists (Guomindang 國民黨, KMT) and the communists (Gongchandang 共産黨, CCP). After losing the war, Chiang Kai-shek

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⁷ Formosa is a name for Taiwan formerly used in the West.
⁸ The Kōminka (Japanese: kōminka undō 皇民化運動; Chinese: huangmin hua 皇民化) movement aimed to transform the Taiwanese into imperial entities fully committed to Japan (Japanese: kōmin 皇民); languages other than Japanese were strictly prohibited (Marchand 2010:365).
withdrew to Taiwan and declared martial law, and so began a period of harsh suppression of any resistance or criticism (Rubinstein 2003:217).

In the early years of the nationalist regime, Presbyterian missionaries and preachers and other representatives of the intellectual elite were considered a potential threat to the government’s hold on the hearts and minds of the people and became victims of the so-called white terror (baise kongbu 白色恐怖). Presbyterian pastors were often monitored, interrogated, or even eliminated, and in 1971 the Presbyterian publication Taiwan Church News (Taiwan jiaohui gongbao 台灣教會公報) was banned.9 Many members of the Presbyterian Church later recalled that the terror was directed particularly toward them and against the PCT (Amae 2007:63; Rubinstein 2003:214–215).

In a deteriorating situation for the Taiwanese population, preachers and pastors were able to offer believers emotional and psychological support. Christianity, as it turned out, was better able to help people cope with sadness and suffering than were some other religions (Rubinstein 1991:38), and the PCT experienced significant growth in new converts during the ten-year period from 1948, partly as an outcome of several evangelistic programs run by the church during this time. Initially run only by the Southern Synod, the Double the Church program (Beijia yundong 倍加運動) sought to attract new converts and, as the name suggests, to gain twice as many members; it came to an end in 1965, the centenary of the Presbyterian mission to Taiwan (Lin 1988:68–69). The church funded numerous research programs to establish how the church had grown, and we now have access to a precise mapping of the success of the Double the Church program. In fact, in the ten years from 1955 to 1965, church membership more than doubled, climbing from 86,064 to 176,255, and the number of churches grew from 410 to 839 (Swanson 1973:97).

The evangelistic program of the New Century Movement (Xinshiji xuanjiao yundong 新世紀宣教運動) aimed to bring improvements and innovations into preaching in the church over a five-year period from 1967 to the end of 1971. The movement also focused on increasing evangelization among indigenous peoples and spreading the gospel to the general population (Lin 1988:70). The program did not repeat the success of its predecessor, however, and after 1971 the PCT launched projects aimed more at Taiwan’s social and political problems.

The fundamental theological position of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan began to change from the late 1960s, especially with the emergence

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9 The magazine was banned and confiscated on several occasions until the 1980s. Initially it was banned because it published articles in Taiwanese languages, later because it occasionally published articles on “forbidden” issues (Taiwan Church News Network 2020).
of contextual theology, which gradually began to shape the theology of the 
PCT, enabling it to interpret the Bible in the social and political context of 
Taiwan (Amae 2007:22). As tensions between the church and the government 
rose, church leaders realized they could not sit quietly and wait for change 
and began to issue public proclamations calling for a progressive democracy 
in Taiwan and respect for human rights. In 1971, the PCT issued the first of its 
“Important Documents” (zhongyang wenxian 重要文献), by which it sought to 
draw attention to the problems the country was facing and to call for help. 
The documents were produced under the auspices of the General Assembly 
of the PCT in a cooperation between Taiwanese pastors and foreign mission-
aries. More credit is perhaps due to the Taiwanese leaders of the PCT as they, 
like the rest of the Taiwanese population, were those who had to face adverse 
conditions daily.

Materials and Methods

This study is based on historical textual analysis and interpretation. The pri-
mary sources for the study are the “Important Documents,” that is, the public 
statements published by the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan between 1971 and 
1979, and correspondence between Chinese church leaders and foreign mis-
sionaries. All of the Important Documents were analyzed, but only those that 
focus on the issue of human rights are discussed here. The study explores how 
the concept of human rights has been narrated and negotiated by this religious 
group for its specific purposes, a discourse that will not necessarily match the 
oficial international definitions of human rights at every point. The study also 
oberves how the PCT has shifted its theology to promote human rights, which 
in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had been considered a topic distinct 
from Christian doctrine.

The first public statement was the Statement on Our National Fate by the 
Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT 1971a). The document was originally to be 
an ecumenical work. It was drafted by the Baptist minister Rev. Chow Lien-hwa 周聰華 (1920–2016) in cooperation with other Protestant ministers (Yang and 
White 2021:11) and was presented at a meeting of the Ecumenical Cooperative 
Committee consisting of the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, and Catholic 
churches. However, the proposal was not supported by other Protestant lead-
ers, who worried about possible persecution by the state. It was Rev. Kao Chun-Ming 高俊明 (1929–2019) who introduced the document to the PCT 
assembly. Later, the PCT leaders signed a revised version and distributed 
it to the presbyteries (Amae 2008:82; Kao, Kao, and Hu 2001:230). The final
version was signed by the PCT’s president, Liu Hwa-Yi 劉華義 (1914–2005), and Secretary-General Kao on December 29, 1971, and was published in response to the visit of President Nixon to China and the announcement of the normalization of relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The United States, a traditional ally of the Republic of China, was now turning to the People’s Republic of China. As people in Taiwan began to fear a forceful reunification with communist China, the PCT’s first public statement declared the right of Taiwan to exist as a national entity without external interference (Rubinstein 1991:99) and called for free elections as a basic human right. The PCT declared that the Important Documents, like the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934) and the Belhar Confession (1982), were purely theological. The documents are all addressed to the church rather than to the regime (Seitz 2021:44), but their political connotations are undeniable—as this paper aims to prove.

The PCT insisted that On Our National Fate was a religious statement, but its political context is clear. Proclaiming the independence of Taiwan and stating the case for democratic elections, the document became a symbol of the church’s controversial abandonment of its previous insistence on the separation of church and state:

Recently the government has stressed the use of new people in official positions. Therefore, we earnestly request that, within the Taiwan area, it hold elections of all representatives to the highest government bodies to succeed the present representatives who were elected 25 years ago on the mainland. (PCT 1971b)

The document is clearly not only theological and doctrinal; it also expresses the church’s concern regarding the prevailing situation and its hope for change. The church initially attempted to publish the statement in a local newspaper as a paid advertisement, but the plan was aborted after it was uncovered by government security agencies (Amae 2008:182–184). During martial law (1949–1987), freedom of expression was impossible, even though the

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10 The year 1971 was a turning point as Taiwan faced a series of diplomatic setbacks, one of which was the withdrawal from the United Nations of the Republic of China and its replacement by the PRC. This was followed by Henry Kissinger’s visit to Beijing (July 9–11, 1971) to arrange a possible visit to the PRC by President Nixon. Nixon’s visit and the issuing of the Shanghai Communiqué took place soon afterwards, in 1972 (Rubinstein 2006:120). This official visit was the first step toward the normalization of relations between the United States and the PRC and signaled the end of official relations with the Republic of China (Neary 2002:101).
constitution “guaranteed” it. The media was strictly controlled by the government and was little more than a tool for government propaganda (Rawnsley and Rawnsley 2011:401); any criticism of the KMT government was pounced upon. Nevertheless, the PCT made its statement, and some scholars consider it the first public declaration on self-determination to be published in Taiwan (Rubinstein 1991:100; Amae 2008:182).

The statement was eventually issued in March 1972 in Taiwan Church News, although many copies of the paper were never delivered. This and several other statements were translated and published in the English-language magazine Self-Determination (Chutou tian 出頭天),11 which targeted an international audience. The statements were also secretly distributed to foreign missions, the World Council of Churches, the Vatican, and the US Department of State. Today, all the statements are available on the church’s website and some correspondence is held in the archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London as part of the Presbyterian Church of English Foreign Missions Committee collection. No organization or individual in Taiwan could criticize the government without fear of reprisals. It is no surprise, therefore, that the publication of On Our National Fate was followed by a period of severe restrictions. Many of the foreign missionaries who helped to compile and disseminate the church’s statements were expelled, among them Donald Wilson, Daniel Beeby, and Milo Thornberry (Amae 2008:184–188).

Also in March 1972, the church published the statement On Our National Fate: Motivation Based on Faith and Theology (PCT 1972), which introduced the church’s new theological position on human rights and democratization and offered a religious interpretation of contemporary social issues.

In the years that followed, the PCT continued to publish statements that drew links between Christian doctrine and political activism. In 1975, the church responded to a government order for Bibles to be confiscated by publishing another important document, Our Appeal (PCT 1975), which criticized the banning of non-Chinese Bibles,12 that is, most of the Bibles issued by the Presbyterian Church. The regulation led to protests in Taiwan and elsewhere, and the church argued that the confiscation was a denial of the human right to religious freedom. Further statements published by the PCT called for

11 The magazine was published by exiled church leaders in New York; the first issue was released in 1973. Other international movements that supported the self-determination of Taiwan included the Taiwanese Christian Self-Determination Movement in Germany (Chao 2008:163). Information regarding Taiwan’s situation under martial law was distributed by the PCT to other Christian churches around the world. See Arrigo and Miles 2008 for examples of foreign assistance to the PCT.

12 Bibles written in romanized Minnan and in aboriginal languages.
democratic elections, secession from mainland China, the creation of a distinct Taiwanese national identity, and the protection of human rights.

The PCT Perspective on Human Rights

The early Calvinists saw no problem in using secular language to explain Christian doctrine. The PCT returned to this discourse and took Calvin's theology of the image of God and common grace as a basis for its narrative on human rights. Calvin's support for freedom and liberty was based on his interpretation of the Bible, mainly the letters of Saint Paul, but his language was strikingly "modern." He spoke of

the subjective “rights” (iura, droits) of individuals, in addition to their “liberties” or “freedoms” (libertates, libertés). Sometimes, he used such general phrases as “the common rights of mankind” (iura commune hominum), the “natural rights” (iura naturali) of persons, the “rights of a common nature” (communis naturae iura), or the “equal rights and liberties” (pari iura et libertates) of all. (Witte and Alexander 2010:138)

For Calvin, human beings were created by God and in God’s image. Because of the fall, Calvin wrote, humankind lost the grace of God, but not entirely, and God’s image is still present in every person: “[W]e are not to reflect on the wickedness of men, but look to the image of God in [people], an image which, covering and obliterating their faults, should by its beauty and dignity allure us to love and embrace them.” Vorster (1999:212) provides a neat summary of Calvin’s position:

The image of God and the gifts of God’s grace to humankind constitute the basis of Calvin’s view of the responsibilities of individuals to one another. It is our duty to see our fellow human beings as creatures of God with certain gifts bestowed on them by God. It is also the responsibility of the believer to act on behalf of others in order to promote justice.

Similarly, the PCT, which had been concerned with political issues in Taiwan for many decades, explained its active involvement in human rights in terms

13 For more on how the PCT built and supported a multicultural Taiwanese national identity distinct from Chinese identity, see the discussion in Masláková 2016.
of its Christian beliefs. One outcome of the church’s endeavors was that the people of Taiwan accepted the struggle initiated by the PCT and began to demand free elections. The PCT was one of the instigators of democratization and human rights in Taiwan and gained status and recognition for this.

The PCT statements devote a significant amount of space to human rights, such as the rights to personal liberty, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech. Although the Constitution of the Republic of China guarantees several of these rights, article 26 adds that human rights may be restricted “in order to avert an imminent crisis, maintain social order, or promote the public interest” (Neary 2002:103). The nationalist government was thus all but absolved from the necessity to respect human rights. Criticism of this approach and of the vague wording in the constitution was one of the points made in the PCT’s first official statement:

We oppose any powerful nation disregarding the rights and wishes of fifteen million people and making unilateral decisions to their own advantage, because God ordained, and the United Nations Charter has affirmed, that every people has the right to determine its own destiny. (PCT 1971b)

The statement suggests that the concept of human rights is not simply a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, because it is the Christian God who grants people their human rights, the Christian church has the right to demand them, and in this case request that the government fulfill them. In a later statement, we read that according to the PCT, the Christian church (represented by the PCT) is to be the guarantor and protector of human rights:

The purpose of the Church of Christ, to which also we belong, is to spread the love of God. Its mission is to uphold human rights and human dignity. Its service is to seek a peaceful and civil society by promoting justice, freedom, peace, and reconciliation. (PCT 1981)

The mission of the Presbyterian Church is therefore not only to spread the Christian gospel but also to promote human rights and dignity, and thus to participate actively in civil society and engage directly in national politics. This hints at a significant shift in the church’s perspective on the role it should play in civil society.

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14 In the Chinese version of the text, there is no mention of the United Nations.
15 Translation by the author.
From the late 1960s, the fundamental theological position of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan began to change, especially with the emergence of contextual theology, which supplanted many of the tenets of Calvinism. Human rights were an important issue for the PCT, whose public statements were issued precisely because of perceived violations. Importantly, the PCT believed that basic human rights included those to self-determination and free elections. Although we might now categorize these as third-generation rights, for the church’s leaders they were foundational. The PCT’s second official statement, *On Our National Fate: Motivated by Faith and Theology*, contained a further reference to human rights, concerning their origin and the fact that the church must become the protector of those rights:

But should the corporate Church, which acts in the name of Christ, keep absolute silence on social and political issues? Not necessarily, as in the following two situations, (i) When political power from without violates the nature of the Church and the carrying out of her mission on earth, and when, (ii) similarly, political power from without violates human rights, that is, the dignity of human existence.

Therefore, looking at it from the point of view of Christian faith and ethics, if the two situations cited above should occur (or even have the possibility of occurring), that is, if the Church’s life and human rights are violated, then (i) the Church cannot but contend vigorously for the truth of the Gospel and its own life, and (ii) also fight to protect God-given human rights, for the origin of human rights lies in man’s having been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27). When the Church of Christ in either of these two cases produces a statement, this kind of statement is not basically political, but is a confession of faith. (PCT 1972)

Human rights are described as a gift from God. Here, the argument goes further than the previous statement and is supported by a reference to the Bible—the First Book of Moses. The PCT took the story from the Bible and linked it directly to its own context: if people are created in the image of God, they have human rights, and human rights are universal because all human beings are God’s creation; the PCT is to become the protector of these rights since it is the bearer of the Christian faith.

*Language as a Basic Human Right*

Before the nationalists came to Taiwan from the mainland, the island was a veritable babel of languages: Chinese, Japanese, local languages such as Taiwanese *Taiwan hua* 台灣話, and the Austronesian languages of the indigenous
Several ways of writing Chinese and Taiwanese were used, such as romanized Chinese and Taiwanese written in Chinese characters. The KMT government, like most Chinese mainlanders, did not understand Taiwanese (especially its various dialects) and banned its use as a language of instruction and a language for written texts. In fact, to cement its hold on power in the country, the government banned all languages except for Mandarin Chinese, which it declared to be the national language (guoyu 國語). The PCT flouted this rule, but most other denominations in Taiwan used Chinese, not only because they wanted to avoid conflict with the government but also because their mission was directed toward migrants from mainland China. The national Chinese language was incomprehensible to most Taiwanese, however, and quickly became known as the language of the oppressor (Amae 2012:174). The PCT took issue with the KMT’s language policy and continued to publish books, Bibles, and sermons in whichever local language was spoken by its target audience. Presbyterians had promoted local languages since the beginning of their missionary work in Taiwan, and therefore considered the government’s requirements impossible to apply.

As well as their historical use for missionary purposes, under martial law local languages became a means of expressing disagreement with the ruling KMT. Use of the Taiwanese language was considered a sign of protest, and the romanized vernacular became identified with Christianity (Lin 1999:56–58). Because the church protested against the language policy, the rest of the society began to consider the PCT a defender of the nation. Using local languages during religious services and in church newspapers had a powerful impact on the Taiwanese population and emphasized the fact that PCT pastors identified with the oppression and problems experienced by the whole of Taiwanese society. The importance of local languages is stressed in the memoirs of Shoki Coe (1993:244): “One’s mother tongue is part and parcel of one’s very existence. To try to forbid it, to take it away forcibly, this is nothing less than an attempt to

16 The ethnic composition of Taiwan is diverse and distinctive. Four groups can be distinguished: the Hoklo (Heluo ren 河洛人); the Hakka (Kejia ren 客家人); mainland Chinese; and indigenous people (yuanzhumin 原住民). Of these, only three (the Hoklo [70 percent], the Hakka [18 percent] and mainlanders [10 percent]) are found in mainland China, where they are perceived only as language groups, not ethnic groups, as they are part of the most prominent ethnic group, the Han. The Hoklo came to Taiwan from Fujian Province in China in ancient times; the Hakka emigrated from inland China; and mainlanders migrated to Taiwan after 1949 with the arrival of the Guomindang. Indigenous Taiwanese have different ethnic roots from these three groups. They are of Austronesian origin and currently represent only around 2 percent of the population.
obliterate one’s identity as a person.” Suppressing the use of a person’s mother tongue is seen as depriving them of a basic human right.

In 1975, the government confiscated all Bibles not written in Mandarin Chinese. Most of these were published by the PCT and used for missionary purposes. Christians responded with protests in Taiwan and abroad, and the PCT published *Our Appeal*:

> In view of the danger in which our country stands at this time, the Church must take responsibility with regard to the nation’s survival, and once again honestly express to the government our Church’s position on the national fate….

> The people in every nation in the free world enjoy full religious liberty. Thus, every person should be able to enjoy the freedom to use his own language to worship God and to express his own religious faith….

> On the basis of its mission to protect human rights and preserve human dignity, the Church appeals to the government to strengthen the development of society, to focus its attention on the atmosphere of corruption in society, of unequal distribution of wealth, of avarice, public peace and order and pollution, and to adopt effective measures to safeguard human rights and the welfare of the people. (PCT 1975)

Elsewhere, the statement emphasizes the need to authorize publication of the Bible in different languages and argues that implementation of the new language policy violates religious freedom (*xīnyáng zìyóu* 信仰自由). The statement does not make an explicit link between religious freedom and human rights, but freedom of religion is a first-generation human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration. The language policy of the KMT government was threatening the mission of the church, which had appointed itself as the protector of human rights and of the whole of Taiwanese society.

Several other PCT statements supported the use of local languages. In 1985, the church openly declared that the new language policy deprived people of their fundamental human rights and could lead to the destruction of Taiwanese society:

> Because of the implementation of the Language Law, the basic human rights and religious freedom will be seriously harmed…. It will cause the nation and the state to be brought to endless disaster. (PCT 1985a)

> Prohibition of dialects will bring to the Church and national society many disturbances, conflicts, and numerous disorders; moreover, it will
destroy the government, the country’s image in international space.\textsuperscript{17} (PCT 1985b)

The argument presented here is different from the argument made in 1975 in Our Appeal. The church is worried about Taiwan’s future and is urging the government to withdraw the language policy. Its rhetoric is urgent: language concerns the whole society, culture, and nation.

\textit{Free Elections and Self-Determination as Human Rights}

The PCT narrative sees free elections and self-determination as basic human rights. A demand for free elections may be a surprising inclusion in what was purported to be an “ecumenical” document, but the church had formulated its stance on self-determination as a human right at least as early as 1970, that is, before it had publicly declared it in the statements:

Basic human rights demand that the welfare and wishes of the ten million people who live in Formosa should be the major factor in determining Formosa’s future. (Correspondence in the Presbyterian Church of English Foreign Missions Committee Collection)

A year later, the church called for self-determination in an official statement that it claims was a result of ecumenical cooperation. The motivation was political, however, and the religious argumentation was added later to support the claims, as we see by comparing the church’s first two statements. The statement from 1971 couches the request for elections in the following terms:

Recently the government has stressed the use of new people in official positions. Therefore, we earnestly request that, within the Taiwan area, it hold elections of all representatives to the highest government bodies to succeed the present representatives who were elected 25 years ago on the mainland. (PCT 1971b)

The elections are not linked to the issue of human rights in the 1971 statement, and there is no link with Christian doctrine—the appeal is based solely on social and political concerns. By the following year, however, the argument had acquired a theological dimension:

\textsuperscript{17} Translation by the author.
Even this proposal that the government “hold elections of all representatives to the highest government bodies” is motivated by the belief that human rights are given by God. For we believe that only in this way can there be any internal reforms. (PCT 1972)

The statement was a response to Christians from other communities who had criticized the 1971 document for being too political. The document was controversial not only in Christian circles (Neary 2002:106), and some criticism even came from within the PCT itself. The Seven Sisters Presbytery published a critical response to On Our National Fate and even threatened to withdraw from the PCT (correspondence in the Presbyterian Church of English Foreign Missions Committee collection). Little wonder, then, that the church soon sought to consider its political demands more theologically.

The argument was constructed as follows: fresh elections are necessary; elections are a human right; human rights are a gift from God; and human beings were created in the image of God, as the Genesis narrative indicates. According to these connections, the PCT argued that the demand for fresh elections was based directly on its faith, as the church had created a link between political rights and the biblical text. Efforts toward social transformation along the lines of democratic Western countries nonetheless began to come to the fore: here, the Christian doctrine works more as a legitimizing tool. Interestingly, a similar reference to Genesis appears in only one other statement:

We believe that we are created in God’s image, that people should have dignity and a free will to determine their own destiny. We also believe that God gave us land for each to live on in peace. But in human history, people have abused power to seize land and life from others by force, so that the world is filled with injustice and evil. We believe in Jesus Christ who became human and proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, changing the old world order for a new creation. This is the basis for the hope of humankind. (PCT 1991)

There is no explicit mention of human rights (renquan 人权) in the document, but we do find a reference to the right to dignity (zunyan 尊嚴). Since human rights and the right to dignity are often directly connected in the PCT’s

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18 This is the interpretation of human rights according to the church. While the right of people to self-determination is defined as the third generation of human rights (Cornescu 2009; van der Ven 2010), it is not included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Often, the right to self-determination is defined as a civil right, restricted by civil law.
statements, such wording can be considered an indirect reference to human rights. Furthermore, the church once again put the Christian doctrine of creation at the foundation of its theology. Such a foundation is necessary if human rights are to be considered universally applicable. However, “[what] human rights advocates very rarely say is that the notion of human rights rests on a developed account of human nature” (Brown 2013:24). Indeed, many advocates of human rights are unable to define what makes human rights both truly human and truly universal. At this point, a Christian interpretation fills the gap: people were created by God. This is of course a religious interpretation, but it shows how religion can enter the secular discourse with its religious language and understanding. Nonetheless, rather than trying to find a fixed definition, we should look at the issue of human rights within a pluralist discourse, which “although embedded in the politics of power, has nonetheless been productive of enduring values” (Hogan 2015:3). In this way, the PCT’s interpretation based on its Christian doctrine also has a role to play.

The same understanding of human rights as a gift from the Christian God is mentioned in other statements from the church:

Our Church confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord of all mankind and believes that human rights and a land in which each one of us has a stake are gifts bestowed by God. Therefore, we make the declaration, set in the context of the present crisis threatening the 17 million people of Taiwan. (PCT 1977)

We firmly believe that land and human rights are given by God. Therefore, the aim of the Church is to love one’s own homeland and actively care for the future of Taiwan. (PCT 1990)

There has been little change in the PCT’s narrative of human rights since 1975. In addition to the argument that human rights are granted by God, we can see here how the church linked the concept of basic human rights to the right to a homeland and therefore to Taiwan’s right to self-determination. While promoting human rights, the church also called for the creation of an independent country, often using the term “homeland” (xiangtu 鄉土) to support its appeal. “Homeland” is an emotive, pathos-filled term that readers easily relate to. The argument is clear: the right to a homeland is a fundamental human right granted by God and protected by the PCT as the self-appointed prophet of the Taiwanese nation. The PCT repeatedly appealed for recognition of the right to a homeland: the PCT theologian Wang Xianzhi 王憲治 (1941–1996)
introduced the concept of a homeland theology (xiangtu shenxue 鄉土神學) during the Christian Conference in Asia (September 3–5, 1979, Taipei).

Wang developed a theology of homeland based on the role of the promised land in Israelite history and on the six major covenants of the First and New Testaments. Taking the exodus, nation-building, and the exile of Israel as a paradigm, homeland theology affirms that the issues of ethnicity (people), land, power, and God are the main theological themes for the Israelites, the Israelis, and the Taiwanese (England 2004:692).

Wang’s theology was based on the church’s position on human rights, including the right to a homeland, and aimed to consolidate a new national Taiwanese identity. Huang Po-ho 黃伯和, Chen Nan-Jou, and Song Choan Seng were among the Presbyterian theologians who helped to develop homeland theology. Following on from contextual theology and the public statements of the PCT, Rev. Song, Rev. Coe, Rev. Ng Bu-tong, and Dr. Lim Chong-gi Quansheng founded the movement Formosan Christians for Self-Determination, which aimed to “assert [Taiwanese] human rights of self-determination ... and to promote the cause of self-determination in the international community of nations” (England 2004:688). The first goal of the movement was “to attain a stronger manifestation of Christian conviction of human rights for Taiwan” (Tiu and Siau 2012:127).

Together with Shoki Coe, this group of theologians sought to create a new Asian theology of liberation based on the view that Christian theology was too dependent on Western ideas and that theology should be local. Their demand for a new theology ran counter to the traditional theologies taught in Taiwan by missionaries. In the case of Coe and his supporters, theology was to fit the unique cultural and political context of the Taiwanese people. The combination of contextual theology and homeland theology led the PCT to promote Taiwan’s independence and self-determination as a basic human right.

In 1977, the PCT issued a statement that dealt solely with the issue of human rights violations in Taiwan. The brief statement was addressed to all Christians and nations of the world, and in particular to President Jimmy Carter:

Our Church confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord of all mankind and believes that human rights and a land in which each one of us has a stake are gifts bestowed by God. Therefore, we make the declaration, set in the context of the present crisis threatening the 17 million people of Taiwan.

Ever since President Carter’s inauguration as President of the United States he has consistently adopted “Human Rights” as a principle of his diplomacy. This is an epoch-making event in the history of foreign policy....
In order to achieve our goal of independence and freedom for the people of Taiwan in this critical international situation, we urge our government to face reality and to take effective measures whereby Taiwan may become a new and independent country. (PCT 1977)

The church again repeats its position that human rights are a gift from God, and that land and self-determination form a part of these rights. In the statement, the church openly asked for help from President Carter, who had been a strong advocate for human rights in the early part of his presidency but also continued to normalize relations with the PRC, a course that the PCT saw as endangering Taiwan’s position on the international stage. In December 1978, President Carter announced that the United States would recognize Beijing rather than Taipei as the capital of China, and in 1979 the United States ended its official relationship with Taiwan. On December 10, 1979, a celebration of Human Rights Day was organized in Kaohsiung, during which the KMT’s opposition (dangwai 黨外) demonstrated against human rights violations in Taiwan. The KMT sent in the police to forcibly break up the demonstration and make arrests. Persecution of many of those involved in the “Kaohsiung incident” followed. One of those arrested was Rev. Kao Chun-ming, the general secretary of the PCT. Kao had been one of the signatories of the PCT’s Declaration on Human Rights and was a supporter of Shih Ming-teh 施明德 (b. 1941), one of the directors of Formosa Magazine, a platform that opposed the government. The government “determined that the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan was an organization which was more political than religious…. So the authorities used the Formosa Incident of 10 December 1979 as an excuse to arrest many church people” (Tiu and Siao 2012:133). However, after the incident, local people started to collect and circulate information and materials on human rights (Arrigo and Miles 2008:ix).

The church made no further official calls for an independent Taiwan until fear of persecution all but ended with the lifting of martial law in 1987. The political situation then eased slightly, and a period of free speech began: the government was openly criticized, reforms were proposed (Rawnsley and Rawnsley 2011:403), and the PCT once again began to support the concept

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19 A year earlier, the PCT had organized a service to commemorate the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Originally, it was supposed to be a joint service with the Catholic Church. The latter, however, withdrew from the event as its representatives were afraid of persecution by the state (Amae 2008:192).

20 During the period of martial law, the KMT government considered Taiwan to be part of mainland China and not, therefore, an independent country. The Taiwanese population was not perceived as a “nation”; people were not considered Taiwanese but Chinese citizens.
of a sovereign and independent Taiwan. The term “sovereignty” (zhuquan 主權) was first used in 1989, two years after the lifting of martial law, and in 1991 the PCT published its Declaration of Sovereignty and Independence (台灣主權獨立宣言), a document in which the church officially and openly appealed for the sovereignty of Taiwan:

We believe that we are created in God’s image, that people should have dignity and a free will to determine their own destiny. We also believe that God gave us land for each to live on in peace. But in human history, people have abused power to seize land and life from others by force, so that the world is filled with injustice and evil....

The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan firmly proclaims that:

(1) Taiwan is a sovereign country. Taiwan’s sovereignty and land belong to the people in Taiwan.

(2) Taiwan and China are two different sovereign countries.

Therefore, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan categorically affirms that:

1. A new Taiwan constitution be written....
2. Officially use “Taiwan” to join the United Nations....
3. Establish a new relationship between Taiwan and China. Before a new government is formed based on a new constitution, and before authority is given by the people as a whole, no person or political party, or group should have the right to consult with the China government about any important policy which influences Taiwan’s security, and matters relating to citizens’ benefits. According to the principle of mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence, Taiwan and China should mutually recognize and respect each other and promote harmony and development in Asia and in the Pacific. We sincerely seek God’s help to give us the strength of the Holy Spirit to renew all creation, so that we can establish a new and sovereign Taiwan. (PCT 1991)

Almost twenty years later, in January 2019, the PCT published a further statement in support of an independent Taiwanese national identity and the independence of Taiwan as a country:

We firmly believe that human rights and homeland are given by God. Christians seek justice and safeguard human dignity in order to participate in the continuing creation of God, manifesting God’s image.
We firmly believe that Taiwan is a beautiful homeland given by God to the Taiwanese people, comprised of Austronesian Indigenous Peoples, descendants of immigrants across the Taiwan Strait who married with Plain Indigenous Peoples, and the new immigrants after WWII. Taiwan is a multi-ethnic and multicultural oceanic nation. Taiwan has never been part of the People’s Republic of China. (PCT 2019)

The church’s basic position has therefore changed little since the 1990s: Taiwan as an independent country is an outcome of human rights given by God; Taiwan is a gift from God to the Taiwanese people. The PCT promotes Christian involvement in social issues and legitimizes the church’s role in society. Christian faith, the independence of Taiwan, and human rights are all connected. The Christian God is the guarantor of human rights and of self-determination for the Taiwanese people in the territory of Taiwan (Frettingham and Hwang 2017). Such a belief creates for the PCT the justification for its self-appointed role as the nation’s prophet (xianzhi 先知), a role it exercises on behalf of otherwise overlooked sections of Taiwanese society, and on the basis of which it ascribes to itself the status of a key authority in society with a high level of prestige and legitimacy.21

Conclusion

Why is it important to understand how one Christian group has narrated the concept of human rights? Any religious group is a part of society and has the potential to influence that society. An individual’s attitude toward various social issues—including human rights—is also shaped by religious belonging. The Presbyterian Church has been a significant actor in Taiwanese politics, mobilizing its foreign contacts and organizing various events to support human rights in Taiwan and abroad. It established the Worldwide United Association of Taiwanese, which united Taiwanese people in Taiwan and abroad with a view to defending the human rights of its Taiwanese compatriots (Tiu and Siau 2012:130). The church realized its potential as a member of a wider Christian fellowship and asked for help from abroad. The statements and letters explaining the PCT’s position were distributed among other foreign Christian churches, and the church repeatedly appealed to the United Nations and foreign governments for assistance; leaders of Formosan Christians for Self-Determination used their connections to raise funds to help political

21 This is not unique to Christians in Taiwan. In other Asian countries, Christian missionaries also appointed themselves as prophets who represented the local people.
prisoners (Tiu and Siau 2012:133). Combining political and theological criticism of the human rights violations committed by the nationalist government became a powerful tool, and the church and other political opponents of the KMT finally helped Taiwanese society transform itself into a democratic system. Li Teng-hui 李登輝 (1923–2020), the first democratically elected president of the Republic of China in Taiwan, was a member of the PCT. Frettingham and Hwang sum up the PCT’s involvement in political developments in Taiwan:

It was during the 1970s that the PCT came into open confrontation with the KMT regime, publishing a series of outspoken statements criticizing restrictions on religious freedom and human rights and calling for democratization and self-determination for the people of Taiwan. These statements were some of the earliest public attempts to reorient the KMT’s project of national consolidation towards Taiwanese autonomy.... The PCT may not have regarded their challenge to the KMT as political, but the government took a different view. The PCT’s advocacy of self-determination and democracy, and support for the activist movement that later became the DPP, came at a considerable cost during the martial law period. Its challenge to the KMT’s project of state-building accepted its basically secular civic nationalism and its distinctiveness from religion, while making arguments on religious grounds for reorienting it towards a project of Taiwanese nationalism. (Frettingham and Hwang 2017:365–366)

The church’s statements have indeed been outspoken and controversial. Other Christian communities criticized the church for being involved in political affairs, and several Protestant leaders in Taiwan opposed the PCT on these issues (Neary 2002:106). Some of them were worried about possible persecution by the state; some were openly supporting the ruling regime. The PCT, nevertheless, further promoted human rights.

While several articles on the involvement of the PCT in human rights have been published, they have tended to focus either on historical events or on the theological perspective. The distinct contribution of this essay is to connect the two. It is important to understand how Christian thinking evolves and adapts to current conditions. The paper has therefore followed changes in the theological perspective and shown how a religious group can become involved in secular affairs. Recent scholarship has, after all, shown that despite theories of growing secularization, the role of religion in the political and social fields has increased rather than declined. Christian theologians are facing the challenge of how the Christian faith can contribute to the public debate surrounding issues such as human rights, and religious institutions have been
strengthening transnational connections and their potential for influencing public life. It is essential, therefore, to further explore the channels of interaction between religions and secular society. We should not forget, however, that Christian doctrine is not static but constantly developing and adjusting to the evolving context. Churches develop a theological understanding of human rights that best fits their needs and supports their position, and this has certainly been true of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan.

References


PCT. 1985b. Youguan neizheng bu laihai jinzhi shiyong fangyan chuanjiao ben jiaohui zhi juciyi wen 有關《內政部來函禁止使用方言傳教》本教會之決議文 [Resolution about “Letter from the Ministry of the Interior Prohibiting the Use of Dialects for


