Ontological (In-)Security and the Dark Night of the Soul: Political Prisoners’ Sense-Breaking

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Abstract
This study reflects on how Christian political prisoners in Hong Kong utilize their Christian resources to articulate and live with the ontological insecurity caused by incarceration. Hong Kongers consider political prisoners to be sufferers for Hong Kong rather than criminals, an interpretation that corresponds to the Christian notion of redemptive suffering. The Christian political prisoners interviewed in this study see their days in prison as the dark night of the soul in which a generative sense-making has emerged. The days in the dark night are painful, but ironically, their spirituality in the dark night exposes the injustice of rule by law, disempowers the threat of demoralization, changes the game theory from prisoner’s dilemma to warden’s dilemma, and illustrates that imprisonment can be turned to an unexpected platform for personal growth. This sense-breaking, despite as yet being weak, gives birth to a social narrative characterized by suffering in solidarity in contrast to the official narrative, “from chaos to order, from order to prosperity.”

Keywords
Political prisoners, ontological security, spirituality, Hong Kong, political theology

Despite the fact that the term “political prisoner” is debatable,¹ there are prisoners prosecuted for political reasons, such as defending human rights (the Weiquan movement in China), struggling for democracy (the


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Bersih movement in Malaysia), and confronting a military junta (Myanmar in 2021). This article reflects on the ontological insecurity of prisoners charged with crimes related to the 2019 protest in Hong Kong and the National Security Law introduced in Hong Kong on June 30, 2020. In April 2023, police said they had arrested 10,279 people in connection with the social unrest of 2019. Of those, 2,899 were charged with offenses such as rioting, wounding, illegal assembly, and arson. By October 2022, 250 people had been arrested under the law or for offenses related to endangering national security, according to the figures released by the Secretary of Justice in April 2023. This is the first time that such a significant number of people have been arrested and prosecuted since 1997, when China resumed the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong. The emphasis on political prisoners in this study does not aim to exclude general prisoners. Neither does it intend to present political prisoners as elites among prisoners. Rather, these prisoners bring us to reexamine procedural justice, compliance with the law, and imprisonment. A political prisoner in Hong Kong emphasized, “We are prisoners, but we should not forget that we are political prisoners.”\(^2\) He wanted to stress that political prisoners should not see themselves differently from other prisoners, but they should not forget the reason for their imprisonment. This article focuses on the spirituality of five male Christian political prisoners and analyzes their lived spirituality as it arises from and responds to the challenge of their ontological security.

**What Is Ontological Security?**

The concept of ontological security was originally coined by psychologist R. D. Liang (1927-1989) in the 1950s to aid the understanding of schizoid and schizophrenic individuals. Focusing on the emotional impact of alienation from oneself and from society, Liang explains schizophrenia as the result of an inability to cope with profound ontological insecurity. Influenced by existential philosophy, he uses the descriptor “ontological” in an empirical sense. Being “denotes simply all that a man is, his being-in-the-world, his existence.”\(^3\) It appears to be the best adverbial or adjectival

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derivative of being.⁴ Liang defines the ontologically secure person as someone who experiences

his (sic) own being as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world...so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question, as a continuum in time, as having an inner consistency..., as spatially coextensive within the body, and usually, having begun at or around birth and liable to extinction at death.⁵

On the contrary, the ontologically insecure individual lacks these features. Laing explains that

[he may feel] that his identity and autonomy are always in question. He may lack the experience of his own temporal continuity. He may not possess an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness. He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable.⁶

Most people (hopefully) have a clear sense of space, time, continuity, and, in particular, their presence and reality as lived out in the world. But an individual in an insecure state cannot cognitively organize changes and challenges such that he or she can adapt and respond; instead, she feels herself to be experiencing engulfment (the loss of identity), implosion (a sense of emptiness), and petrification (the doubt of being alive).⁷ This pathological condition is not purely a medical issue. Instead, those experiencing it may be victims of a threatening society.

A. Giddens provides a sociological interpretation of Laing’s insights and elaborates on the concept by disaggregating the above definition into four distinct issues relating to “time, space, continuity and identity.”⁸ He calls this the “existential dimensions of ontological security.”⁹ The first question concerns existentialism itself and refers to the awareness that an

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⁵ Laing, *The Divided Self*, 41.
⁶ Laing, *The Divided Self*, 42.
⁷ Laing, *The Divided Self*, 43-47.
external reality exists, and that one’s own existence is a “mode of being-in-the-world,” meaning that the individual exists within the externally given world. Giddens maintains that humans answer this question not cognitively but simply by doing, by getting on with life and carrying out everyday activities. The second kind of existential question consists of the awareness that human life is finite in a world that is for all intents and purposes eternal. This is the existential contradiction. We as humans are part of nature, but we are also set apart from it through self-consciousness and awareness of our own mortality. The third type of existential question concerns the existence of other people. One answers it by realizing that they exist, that they are real and that they have selves which one can know.

The last question is the notion of self-identity, which Giddens describes as the “self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography.” Giddens explains the consequences of contemporary societies in which taken-for-granted protective structures in one’s own community have fallen apart and the individual is left alone without a sense of security. Drawing on Giddens, S. Croft explains that the ontologically secure individual has trust in his everyday life and in the world surrounding it with no fear of its current form changing. Everyday routines contribute to the individual’s ontological security. Yet, even well-functioning routines can be disturbed by “critical situations” that threaten the acquired ontological security. The rigid options of self-identity shaped by traditions give way to a situation in which “we have no choice but to choose how to be and how to act.” Thus, self-identity is one’s own reflexive interpretation of one’s continued existence, as opposed to an identity ascribed by others.

Liang’s and Giddens’s accounts differ in some respects, with Laing focusing on the individual’s phenomenological experience and Giddens highlighting the corresponding social practices. Yet their understanding of

10 Giddens, Modernity, 48.
11 Giddens, Modernity, 49.
12 Giddens, Modernity, 50-52.
13 Giddens, Modernity, 53.
ontological security is nonetheless quite similar. First, ontological security denotes one’s subjectively experienced sense of security related to one’s existence or being-in-the-world. It does not care only about survival and material gains but first and foremost about the security of “the self, the subjective sense of who one is.” However, ontological security is not reducible to matters of identity, and security of being is not the same as security of identity. Second, the ontologically secure person has a stable sense of being, a certain measure of trust in the narratives on which that sense of being is established, and the ability to accept these narratives as contingent to some extent. As B. Steele notes, the narratives on which we base our sense of ontological security are both rigid and fragile, able to provide a common sense upon which we can rely and yet also open to change and challenge. It is in this dynamic, for Giddens, that the ontologically secure person is able to realize a sense of agency.

Apart from Liang’s and Giddens’s usage, the notion of ontological security has been recently employed in the field of international relations. It examines how states interact with one another in moments of conflict and crisis. Since this article focuses on individual political prisoners, the use of ontological security in international relations will not be addressed.

POLITICAL PRISONERS AND AN EXISTENTIAL SELF

In general, prisoners as actor-subjects experience different degrees of disintegration of the self during incarceration, such as experiences of “fear, anxiety, loneliness, trauma, depression, injustice, powerlessness, violence and uncertainty.” Irving Goffman’s classic study also reminds us of the profound

impact that imprisonment can have on a person’s basic identity. He describes
the process of entering the “total institution” as a “mortification of the self”
and “personal defacement.”20 Andy Watts explains,

While authentic spirituality integrates the various elements of ordinary
human life, the spirituality of prison disintegrates the human spirit. It
does so first and foremost by denying everyday experiences and common
human interaction to prisoners. Second, it replaces those relationships
with scripted, stressed, aggressive, competitive, distrustful, and suspicious
interactions constantly negotiated through favors, behavior points and
discipline.21

Living in a highly structured routine that is socially threatening, lacking
autonomy and privacy, and boring is damaging to one’s well-being. Such
deteriorating effects continue in prisoners after release. A concrete example
is that there is no clock in prison, and prisoners can only know the time
through announcements and/or after they finish daily labor. The officer
explains that this arrangement is for security reasons, but prisoners have said
that it deprives them of a glimpse of hope.22 Since prison life is boredom,
they are not able to count the days. A clock helps to give them hope in the
midst of daily life. Ironically, the experience of total institution also happens
to prison officers. Many of them describe themselves as accompanying
prisoners and they hold negative attitudes toward prisoners.23 They are
cynical, aauthoritarian, and pessimistic. Both prisoners and prison officers
reciprocally create a breathless and heartless environment in prison. What
are the unique experiences of ontological insecurity of political prisoners
in Hong Kong?

Do prisoners charged for political reasons consider themselves political prisoners? All five of my interviewees answered with a definite yes. Interviewee A (male, aged 20-25, single, charged with riot, guilty,

22 Kin-Man Chan, Letters from Prison (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Publisher, 2021), 82-87 (in Chinese); Ka-Chun Shiu, A Study of Prisoners’ Emotions (Hong Kong: Blue Sky, 2023), 26 (in Chinese).
23 Ka-Chun Shiu, Prisoners’ Life, 135-139.
and sentenced for fifty-two months, newly converted to Christianity, interview taken during his time on bail) said, “I don’t plead guilty because the judge is blind to justice.” Interviewee B (male, aged 45-50, married, charged with both incitement and sedition, a churchgoer, interview taken during custody) said, “I am a victim of speech crime. It is a political charge, indeed.” Interviewee C (male, aged 50-55, unmarried, charged with incitement, guilty and sentenced for forty months, a non-church Christian, interview taken after release) said, “I am a prisoner, but I would not see myself as a prisoner required for rehabilitation because I am imprisoned for Hong Kong. I have done nothing wrong and I don’t need rehabilitation.” Interviewee D (male, aged 55-60, married, charged with sedition, a churchgoer, interview taken during custody) said, “If I am guilty, my charge is that I reject hopelessness, but spread the seed of hope.” Interviewee E (male, aged 55-60, married, charged with incitement, guilty and sentenced for sixteen months, a non-church Christian, interview taken after release) appealed against the verdict and said, “Different from general crimes, the intention of civil disobedience is for social justice and the sentence should be kept minimal, but this is not.” The government denies there is such a category as political prisoners. It argues that they break the law, create social unrest, and so they are criminals. This is also the attitude of some people in Hong Kong, and they welcome the court sentences. However, political prisoners maintain that they receive different treatment in prison due to their political status. My friends as prison chaplains confirm this with me. This more or less confirms that there are political prisoners, although the government denies it.

In comparison with general prisoners, many political prisoners have received various kinds of support, including financial support for their legal services, materials needed in custody and prison, information about prison life, regular visitation, pastoral care, and others. Though political prisoners have relatively good preparation for imprisonment, the moment that the judge announces them guilty still affects their ontological security deeply. Due to incarceration, they immediately experience a different degree of physical insecurity, such as food, living conditions, and time management. Most of them claim that they can accommodate to the change after a few weeks or months of imprisonment, though there are moments of emotional ups and downs. To be fair, the prison conditions in Hong Kong
are relatively acceptable compared with many Asian countries.\textsuperscript{24} For instance, friends from Myanmar tell me that political prisoners may go missing in Myanmar prisons and prisoners have to pay in order to receive better treatment.\textsuperscript{25} Despite this, political prisoners have unique experiences in their existential insecurity.

First, according to Giddens, ontological security depends on our ability to have faith in social narratives and routines in which we are embedded and through which our self-identity is constituted. Due to factors in China, people in Hong Kong consider that the rule of law holds a very special place in Hong Kong’s imagination and identity.\textsuperscript{26} Since the implementation of the national security law, the rule of law is being challenged, and this disillusions Hong Kong’s social narrative.\textsuperscript{27} Nearly 5 percent of the population has chosen to leave Hong Kong, and the government admits the challenge of brain drain.\textsuperscript{28} The five interviewees express deep suspicion of the fairness and equality of the judicial system. They criticize judges for giving more weight to public order than to the protection of human rights. Maintaining the status quo is seen as more important than social justice. They consider that the Hong Kong judicial system has lost its independence and is more subject to the Chinese government’s interests than to the benefits of Hong Kongers. Like many Hong Kongers, the ontological


\textsuperscript{26} Ryuta Hagiwara, “Key Challenges Facing the Rule of Law in Hong Kong,” \textit{Social Transformation in Chinese Societies} 18, no. 1 (2021): 88-103.


insecurity of political prisoners comes not only from their loss of faith in the judicial system but also from their experience of being the victims of the dissolution of judicial independence. In Chinese, their imprisonment constitutes Yuan Yu (miscarriage of justice). It is a term stirring our memory of Yuan Yu in Chinese history as well as in contemporary Chinese history. People in Yuan Yu lament, demand justice and to address the public to judge the matter. People come to realize that the best solution to Yuan Yu is to have and implement the rule of law, but the political prisoners witness that the authoritarian regime skillfully uses law to rule in the name of the rule of law.

Second, prisoners as actor-subjects fall into a deep existential tension or inner conflict between pleading guilty and not doing so. In the current practice of sentencing, almost every defendant who pleads guilty before trial is given a one-third reduction from the starting point for sentencing. One day, one month, or a year in prison means a lot to prisoners. In the light of a prisoner’s dilemma, prisoners are inclined to the utilitarian consideration in pleading guilty to the charge, but political prisoners are concerned more about their authentic self. Political prisoners consider they have good cause to challenge the law. It is the government to be judged, not them, so pleading guilty to the charge is against their conscience. Since they do not have faith in the fairness of the judicial system and the judicial system is simply a game, should political prisoners learn how to play with it rather than to take it seriously? Interviewee A said, “I cannot betray my conviction and I will not bow down to injustice. I refuse to plead guilty.” Interviewee B did not plead guilty at an early stage, but after more than two years of custody, he changed his mind and finally pleaded guilty. He shared, “Since we cannot expect justice from the court, we should learn how to play with it wisely.” Interviewee C said, “Civil disobedience starts from the road, meets in the court and ends in prison. This is the fate of people engaged in civil disobedience and I cannot avoid it.” Interviewee D pleaded guilty and said, “I plead guilty, which has nothing to do with trading off a possible one-third reduction of sentencing. Rendering myself as liable to punishment is my honor to civil disobedience even though the law itself is unjust.” Interviewee E said, “I see my days in prison as an accusation of the unjust authority.” The interviewees reflect a very Confucian belief, “Do not bow because of five measures of rice” (five measures of rice was
the annual salary of a country magistrate at that time). Their refusal to plead guilty is criticized as unrepentance. Apart from the concern for their own integrity, they have other considerations, such as the needs of their families, the public perception of the protest, and the invisible pressure on other political prisoners. This is the ontological insecurity caused by relationships with others.

Third, suspects and detained persons have had a very long wait to be brought to trial, and this has created significant ontological insecurity for them. Interviewee A was arrested in November 2019, and the trial took place in May 2022. He was released on bail, but he could not plan for his future, for study, or for dating because he did not know when he would be summoned to court for trial. He said, “Every day I live in anxiety because I do not know what will happen to me the next day. I live each day as my last day of freedom. This hurts my mental health.” Interviewee B was remanded in custody in September 2020, and the trial commenced in April 2023. He said, “The trial has not yet commenced, but I am treated as convicted. This is demoralizing.” He continued, “Some political prisoners choose to plead guilty because they do not want to live in the unknown. They want to know how long the sentence will be.” Interviewee D was remanded in custody in May 2020 and the trial commenced in April 2023. Their time in remand in custody was longer than usual. No matter whether they were on bail or remanded, they lived in uncertainty and anxiety because they lived in borrowed time and space, and they did not have much autonomy within it. This has seriously damaged their well-being.

Fourth, related to the third point, incarcerated people have virtually no control over their day-to-day lives, including when they wake up, what they eat, what their jobs are, what they can read and write, and when they can access recreation. Besides, prisoners must obey the prison’s regulations and there is no space for discussion. Command and obey are the only modes of interaction between officers and prisoners. Attacks on the prisoners’ ego and sense of self-worth are intrinsic to incarceration. Since many political prisoners are human rights advocates, they are very conscious of the violation of human rights in prison. Living within a culture in which human rights are less respected remains a challenge to them. Put bluntly,

their conflict between voicing out and mouth-shut is a challenge to their conviction. Interviewee B expressed his discontent with the prison policy publicly, and in return, he was put in solitary confinement for a week as a punishment. In the visitation, he asked me to share his unfair treatment publicly. I responded, “Are you prepared to receive similar punishment again?” After a moment of thought, he said, “Don’t share the news.” Interviewee C said, “I am labelled as a troublemaker because I always raise a lot of questions on the prison’s policy. I can be deprived of freedom, but not dignity.” It is because of their disobedience of an unjust law that they are charged and imprisoned; but ironically, they have to obey unjust prison regulations. Such an imbalance between belief and practice one way and another diminishes their integrity.

Fifth, imprisonment means the loss of physical and intimate connection with loved ones. All interviewees indicated to their families that they felt sorry. Interviewee A said, “I will have a meal with my grandma before the verdict is announced. I do hope that she survives until I am released.” Interviewee B felt badly that he was not able to be with his beloved dog on her last day. He wrote after receiving the news of the death of his dog, “I have been in custody for 19 months unjustly, and I never cry for myself and others. But now I finally cry.” Interviewee D told me how sorry he felt for his wife, because she had to face all challenges on her own. Interviewee E felt guilty for his family and shared that he was really disappointed when he was not able to provide an opinion to his daughter in her tertiary education. An intense guilt is evident among them, though, except for interviewee A, their families show understanding and support to them. They question themselves as to whether their commitment to democracy is a mistake or not, and whether they have been selfish in pursuing their vision. Their experience raises an important issue about whether it is appropriate to extend the punishment of prisoners to their families by depriving the families of the right to meet prisoners regularly and barring them from physical contact with each other.30 Unfortunately, the prison sees making prisoners feel guilty about their families as an effective punishment.

Although my interviews focused on five Christian political prisoners only, I found that many political prisoners more or less shared their experiences, that is to say, that the self was uprooted, they struggled to

30 Ka-Chun Shiu, Prisoners’ Life, 16.
integrate their actions with the self, and they were not able to fit the actions of others into their narratives. Their experiences bring us to reflect the nature of the rehabilitation program offered by prisons, that is, whether the rehabilitation program benefits the growth of prisoners or whether it is government ideology. How do the interviewees respond to their ontological insecurity experienced in prison? Or is there any other framework available for them to articulate their experiences? Here I find St. John of the Cross’s dark night of the soul as a possible lens.

**The Dark Night of the Soul**

The Christian doctrine of eschatology teaches that God’s promise of the new world to come is realized in Jesus’s resurrection. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18). But the full realization is yet to come. Therefore, how to live in the interim between here and now and the new world to come remains an issue for Christians. How can Christian hope sustain people who suffer from ontological insecurity? Or how can people with ontological insecurity find hope when the power has deprived them of their personal consistency, a capacity of exercising agency, and a faculty of transcendence?

The Dark Night of the Soul by St. John of the Cross (1542-91) was composed in 1578 after a nine-month imprisonment in a 6-by-10-foot cell with no light except for a small light high up on the wall at the Toledo monastery prison because he refused his provincial superior’s request to return to the house of his profession in Medina. His work is not a reflection on his experience of imprisonment, but the “night” in the monastery-prison of Toledo stands out as the most important chapter in his life and sheds much light on his doctrine, especially on the symbol of night with which we are concerned. The only light that lit that obscure period of his life was his living faith and a burning love for his Lord, the Beloved of his heart. It is in these supreme moments of utter exterior and interior darkness that his heart burst into song, wherein the symbol of night takes the most definitive shape.

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The metaphor of dark night is used to describe the state and experience of loneliness, anxiety, depression, helplessness, powerlessness, and desolation in one’s life associated with a crisis of faith or with profound spiritual concerns about relationship with God. Ironically, it is in such a darkness that one can experience light in everything and even be enabled to stretch forward, divinely, and to experience the fruition of all things both above and below, yet to preserve its unrestricted liberty of spirit in them all. It is not the darkness liberating the person, but God’s liberation giving way to the appearance of darkness. St. John explains,

[It is] a principle of philosophy, namely, the more clear and self-evident Divine things are, the more obscure and hidden they are to the soul naturally. Thus the more clear the light the more does it blind the eyes of the owl, and the stronger the sun’s rays the greater the darkness of our visual organs; for the sun, in its own strength shining, overcomes them, by reason of their weakness, and deprives them of the power of seeing. So when the Divine light of contemplation shines into the soul, not yet perfectly enlightened, it causes spiritual darkness, because it not only surpasses its strength, but because it obscures it and deprives it of its natural perceptions.32

St. John writes that there are the night of the senses and the night of the spirit. The first phase is a purifying of intention and motivation, the second is a process of living by radical faith and trust. The state of darkness is the process of purification or transformation leading one to union with God (St. John called this deification) and to grow in maturity. First, it is a spirituality of nada (nothingness). Second, for St. John a virtuous character is a necessary condition for a contemplative life. The contemplative life presupposes this idea of virtuous living as “second nature.”33 The experience of the dark night is about detaching oneself from questions concerning one’s level of achievement. The pain in darkness is because the former ways of understanding, imagining, thinking, feeling, experiencing, enjoying, and so forth, come to an end, including the disappearance of the former understanding of God and life, and the end of former feelings

of consolation and delight in God. St. John concludes that the soul must press on through the deepest darkness, seeking God alone in order to be at rest and to be properly prepared for the divine union that awaits. The devil will be able to torment the soul in a spiritual way as one final trial. But God permits this trial during the period of betrothal only to purify the soul on the deepest level.

The experience of dark night seems to suggest that it is more related to people with a passion to be united with God, and therefore it has less relevance to people without such a passion or to non-Christians. First, though a spirituality of the dark night is inclined to be hierarchical in St. John’s understanding, such as from the dark night of senses to the dark night of the spirit, simul justus et peccator in Martin Luther’s teaching opens a different horizon of spirituality, that sinners may not have a less profound spirituality than saints. In fact, the emergence of the dark night has nothing to do with one’s merit. Second, God works freely on people, including people without Christian faith. Although non-Christians would not use Christian language to articulate their dark night, they can experience spiritual enhancement because spirituality is a fundamental capacity in human beings. This is the capacity for authentic self-awareness as well as a sense of self-transcendence. It is not bounded by doctrines and religions. Therefore, the dark night is about St John’s experience more than a definition and monopoly of dark night. In the following, I will expand the exploration of dark night in dialogue with psychospirituality, virtue theory, and a theology of the cross.

First, no one would enjoy living in the dark night. Nor do we actively seek the dark night. Most of the time we are passively thrown into the dark night. Inspired by St. John, Thomas Moore, the psychotherapist and former Catholic monk, writes, “The dark night calls for a spiritual response, not only a therapeutic one.”34 The goal is not to relieve one’s suffering but to find meaning in the dark. Likewise, the dark night itself is not a disease, something purely negative and damaging, but it is part of the price we pay for being vulnerable human beings. The dark night shows us that life is never as bright and successful and meaningful as you might imagine. Psychologically, the dark night can be understood as demoralization. It

is “an overarching psycho-spiritual crisis in which victims feel generally disoriented and unable to locate meaning, purpose, or sources of need fulfilment.” Nevertheless, Moore explains that the dark night calls upon the affected person “to remain in the present, not bound or deluded by the past and not imprisoned in a fixed and defensive idea about the future… the most difficult challenge is to let the process take place, and yet that is the only release from the pressure of the dark night.” The dark night is an invitation in which people learn to give up the mentality of control, to accept uncertainties in life, and to rely on the things or beings beyond human capacity. Moore gives examples of how survivors have found—or rather, created—new meaning in their lives, but he admits that there are people who fail to survive in the dark night. It is important to distinguish between the spiritual sense of dark night and depression, and to distinguish between a dark night emerging from social injustice and a dark night as part of being human. Regarding the first distinction, people in the dark night can discern the glimpse of hope while depressed people cannot; healing in the dark night is more understood as self–discovery—the birth of a newly felt bodily sense of self—while depression is more identified with mental, emotional, or bodily recovery. Regarding the second distinction, living in a dark night demands that we be patient, flexible, open, and self-reflexive so that we have a greater capacity for embracing faith, hope, and love, and this has nothing to do with accommodating to injustice. The dark night of the soul involves a process of sense-breaking; I will come back to this point later.

Second, St. John shows that the dark night is something like a purgatory in which people are cleansed by love, and so the perfect purgation of the soul in the present life can act with infinitely greater power. What does Chinese culture say to the dark night expressed in suffering? Buddhism perceives suffering as an essential part of life, and this is about Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. People are encouraged to endure suffering by protecting the self from disturbances in order to gain insight and spiritual

36 Moore, Dark Night.
37 Gerald May, The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection between Darkness and Spiritual Growth (San Francisco: Harper One, 2004); J. Font i Rodon, Religio’, Psicopatologia i Salut Mental [Religion, Psychopathology and Mental Health] (Barcelona: Publicacions Abadia de Montserrat, 1999).
liberation. One of the spiritual practices is mindfulness, particularly the sitting meditation. The sitting meditation is not confined to Buddhism. Rather, it is a Buddhist contribution to spirituality. Interviewee C and E say that practicing Zen Meditation helps to ease their unpleasant emotions. In Daoism, everything, including suffering, has a natural course that one should appreciate and follow. *Tao Te Ching* says, “Good fortune follows upon disaster; disaster lurks within good fortune.” *Wu Ji Bi Fan*, a saying inspired by Daoism, carries a similar meaning. It means things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme. This belief gives prisoners hope because the darkest would not be the end and the light will come after it. Unlike Buddhism and Daoism, Mencius (372-289 BC), one of the great masters after Confucius, shares with St. John the belief that adversity has potential for character building. Mencius said,

> When Heaven is about to confer a great office on any man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty. It confounds his undertakings. By all these methods it stimulates his mind, hardens his nature, and supplies his incompetencies. Men for the most part err, and are afterwards able to reform. They are distressed in mind and perplexed in their thoughts, and then they arise to vigorous reformation. \(^{38}\)

Suffering comprises mental and physical pain. Mencius indicates that the mind can be strengthened and the character can be hardened through suffering. A dark night is seen as a kind of initiation, taking one from one phase of life into another, that is, becoming more of a person and entering life more fully. In Confucianism, the dark night as suffering can be seen as a positive means enhancing our humanity while in Buddhism and Daoism, it is a course of life, and so we should not be frightened but learn to live with it.

Third, the dark night, according to St. John, is more than human suffering. It is also about God’s suffering and participating in God’s suffering. This is reflected in Martin Luther’s theology of the cross. A theology of the cross is that God chooses to reveal himself in a hidden way through the cross rather than through glory. P. Althaus explains Luther’s theology well:

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The cross is opposed to...the theology of glory, and in two senses, is the cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian. The theology of the cross works with a standard exactly contrary to that of the theology of glory and applies both to man’s knowledge of God and to man’s understanding of himself and of his relationship to God. This standard is the cross. This means: The theology of glory seeks to know God directly in his obviously divine power, wisdom, and glory, whereas the theology of the cross paradoxically recognizes him precisely where he has hidden himself, in his sufferings and in all that which the theology of glory considers to be weakness and foolishness.39

Inspired by Luther, Kazoh Kitamori (1916-1998), a Japanese Lutheran pastor and theologian, published his book *The Theology of the Pain of God* in 1946. He argued that “the heart of the gospel was revealed to me as the pain of God.”40

We conclude from this that God’s pain was fitting for him. To be fitting means to be necessary to his essence. The pain of God is part of his essence! This is really the wonder. God’s essence corresponds to his eternity. The Bible reveals that the pain of God belongs to his eternal being.41

He suggested an analogy of pain (*analogia doloris*). The pain of God can be known through our own pain, and our pain witnesses to the pain of God by becoming the symbol of the pain of God.42 The pain itself is meaningless, but since humans understand the pain of the loss of the beloved, humans may understand the pain of God. Kitamori did not rationalize human pains and sufferings but only claimed that human pains are instruments revealing the pain of God. Another example of a theology of the cross is that of Jürgen Moltmann. He exhibits a radical kenotic Christology that Jesus becomes the God of the destitute by abandoning his divine identity at the cross. He thus identifies himself with all the forsaken, poor, oppressed, and homeless in the world. Since God is a God of suffering, through the cross, identification with him is by joining in suffering. Moltmann writes,

Christian identity can be understood only as an act of identification with the crucified Christ, to the extent to which one has accepted the proclamation that in him God has identified himself with the godless and those abandoned by God, to whom one belongs oneself.  

This action involves a risk to one’s own identity, a crisis of identity, so to speak, an “existential testimony which is ready for sacrifice,” since it is a giving of oneself to the struggle on behalf of the alienated and oppressed. In this action, “a man abandons himself as he was and as he knew himself to be, and, by emptying himself, finds a new self.” This is the essence of Christian life, “to take one’s cross upon oneself in imitation of the one who abandoned his divine identity and found his true identity in the cross (Phil 2).” In the light of the theology of the cross, the dark night is participating in God’s suffering in order to bring salvation to the world.

In the light of the dark night of the soul, the ontological insecurity of political prisoners can be seen as a purgatory. Its strengths are: first, the dark night is not a punishment for crime or sin, and this breaks through the dualistic framework of prison designed by authorities. Second, the dark night expresses a non-rigid notion of life, and life is paradoxical. This is something that prisoners must accept and learn in order to live the incarcerated life. Third, the dark night is not only about darkness, but it can also be an opportunity for one to grow in maturity. This is not saying that incarceration is good, but that God is among us. In the light of Martin Luther’s “alien work of God,” prison can be both grace and punishment. How do political prisoners experience and interpret their imprisonment as dark night?

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44 Moltmann, The Crucified God, 15.
45 Martin Luther introduces the dialectic between opus alienum Dei, God’s alien work, and opus proprium Dei, God’s proper work. The alien works refer to “putting down, killing, taking away hope and leading to desperation,” and the proper works refer to “forgiving, giving mercy, encouraging and saving.” However, these works result from the same love of God, and the proper works are veiled in the alien works and take place concurrently with them.
None of the five interviewees expressed their doubts about the presence of God in their difficult times. Surprisingly, several political prisoners were converted to the Christian faith. Interviewee A is an example. Interviewee B sometimes questions the silence of God, but he does not give up his faith. All interviewees embrace a Chinese proverb, “ren zai zuo, tian zai kan.” It means the heaven (God) is watching over your doing. No matter if the wicked are in power, God watches over them and God will act in responding to them. They will not be able to escape from God’s wrath. The belief in God is about a belief in justice.

Those identifying themselves as Hong Kongers are inclined to show greater sympathy to and solidarity with political prisoners, such as writing letters to them, visiting, attending court hearings, and so forth. The belief that “they (political prisoners) are suffering for us” is commonly found among them. Some Hong Kongers aged fifty and over even said, “We haven’t done enough to work for a more democratic and just society in the last 20 years, and so the young protestors bear our failures. They are for Hong Kong.” These two remarks carry three theological insights.

First, Pope Francis uses the phrase “ecumenism of blood” to describe Christian martyrs in 2015 and how Christians are united in suffering. He said,

They are persecuted and killed because they are Christians. Those who persecute them make no distinction between the religious communities to which they belong. They are Christians and for that they are persecuted. This, brothers and sisters, is the ecumenism of blood.46

Christian unity is brought about by martyrs while political prisoners bring Hong Kongers into unity. Political differences are no longer important among Hong Kongers because both the radical protestors and conservative protestors share the same fate, imprisonment. When Hong Kongers condemn some political prisoners as betrayers for accepting the role of prosecution witnesses, Interviewees C, D and E have shown sympathy for

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their change of status rather than condemnation. Interviewee D said, “They may have difficulties that we may not understand.” Their imprisonment breaks down the binary concept of prisoners as bad guys and non-prisoners as good guys, violation of law as immoral and compliance with law as moral. Their imprisonment implicitly builds a closer contact between the public and prisoners and reduces the social stigmatization of prisoners. Apart from these, political prisoners in the light of the ecumenism of blood effects an emergence of a social narrative characterized by suffering, and hopelessness as well as solidarity and a passion for justice. The ecumenism of suffering provides the emergence of an imagined community. It is not a defeated and hopeless story but a story of solidarity. Unlike the discourse of Hong Kong illustrated by the authorities and characterized by “from chaos to order, from order to prosperity”47 (condemning the 2019 protest), Hong Kongers endeavor to construct a Hong Kong story based on the 2019 protests with an emphasis on truth and justice. This imagined community unites Hong Kongers who move to foreign countries with those in Hong Kong and challenges the official discourse.

The second theological insight that “they (political prisoners) are suffering for us” is the Christian notion of redemptive suffering. A relevant biblical passage is:

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Is 51:3-5)

This passage is used to refer to Jesus. But Jesus is not the only suffering servant; political prisoners are suffering servants also. I argue in another article that the protestors are the crucified people and even the messiahs.48 The followers of Jesus are called to carry their cross to follow Jesus (Mt


48 See my article, “Crucified People, Messianic Time and Youth in Protest,” in Kwok Pui Lan and Francis Ching Wah Yip, eds., Hong Kong Protests and Political Theology (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 133-147.
10:38; Lk 14:27). This is about participating in Jesus’s suffering rather than simply accepting one’s own suffering as bad luck. Catholicism has a teaching of redemptive suffering. Every kind of suffering may possess a redemptive function, but it is only when one offers up one’s suffering to God that the redemptive nature of suffering becomes significant and prominent. On February 11, 1984, Pope John Paul II issued an apostolic letter entitled *Salvifici Doloris*, and the opening words of the letter are,

Declaring the power of salvific suffering, the Apostle Paul says: “In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.”

The letter states that “Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.”49 Christ is the model for human suffering. He embraced the whole of human suffering out of love for the Father and in submission to his will. Since Christ has enabled us to join our suffering with his ultimate sacrifice, we are able to respond to suffering with love and continue the redemptive work of Jesus. Moltmann wrote, “The human being is called to suffer with the suffering of God from the godless world. Christians stand beside God in his suffering.”50 Redemptive suffering aims for the redemption of others, not our own redemption; and people engaging in redemptive suffering long for the realization of God’s salvation. Interviewee C said, “I give a reason for my imprisonment, that is, commitment to improving the living conditions in the prison.” Interviewee E said, “Bonhoeffer reminds us that there is no cheap grace, and we have to pay the cost for our conviction.” Redemptive suffering never seeks to justify suffering, but it is to accept suffering as a possible means, if necessary, of bringing redemption for others.

A theological notion of redemptive suffering is alien to most Protestants because they consider that redemption has been fully and solely achieved by Jesus Christ, and an emphasis on the human role in redemption would give way to salvation by work. Can sufferers redeem themselves through


their suffering? Would it give an excessive burden to the sufferers? An idea of redemptive suffering is about being God’s coworkers instead of working on one’s salvation. The interviewees never considered that they were sharers in the redemptive suffering of Christ because Christ’s suffering was incomparable, but it is in them that Hong Kongers have a glimpse of light. This is something like the last moment of Jesus’s crucifixion, when the centurion said, “Certainly this man was innocent (or righteous)” (Lk 23:47). Shiu comments, “They follow Jesus, not only entering into suffering, but embody it. They show compassion instead of indifference and call for a revolution of humanity.”

The first sense of redemption is that they learn to accept all kinds of false accusations, humiliation, betrayal, and indignity. Despite the fact that the interviewees are more ready to accept punishment, they do not agree with the false accusations coming from either the authorities or their fellows. Interviewee D used Psalm 56 to express his sentiment:

> Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;  
> all day long foes oppress me;  
> my enemies trample on me all day long,  
> for many fight against me.  
> O Most High, when I am afraid,  
> I put my trust in you …  
> what can flesh do to me?  
> All day long they seek to injure my cause;  
> all their thoughts are against me for evil.  
> They stir up strife; they lurk;  
> they watch my steps.  
> As they hoped to take my life….  
> You have kept count of my tossings;  
> put my tears in your bottle.  
> Are they not in your record?  
> … in God I trust; I am not afraid.  
> What can a mere mortal do to me? …

In addition to the Psalms, the prisoners’ experience draws them near to Jesus’s experience:

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Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to, for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’ (Matt 27: 39-43)

The political prisoners come to learn to bear the sins of others as well as their own and to forgive. The status of political prisoner does not give them glory. Rather, the interviewees suggest that the best thing is to have no political prisoners, because the existence of political prisoners means that there is something wrong with society.

The second sense of redemption is that they bring light to fellow prisoners. Jesus said to the one crucified beside him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43). The interviewees see themselves as possible instruments of God to bring faith, hope, and love to their fellow prisoners (political or not). Interviewee C helps other prisoners to know more about their rights. Interviewee D organizes Bible study among fellow prisoners and comforts others. Interviewee E teaches English to prisoners. Apart from these, Interviewee B continues to write sermons to support churches and to be faithful to God. It is not clear how political prisoners are received by their fellow prisoners. The more they emphasize themselves as political prisoners, the more they distance themselves from fellow prisoners. This is why the political prisoners are clear that “we are prisoners, but we should not forget that we are political prisoners.” Besides, many people visiting political prisoners express that they are comforted by political prisoners more than that they comfort them. This does not mean that the political prisoners do not experience loneliness and pain.

The third sense of redemption is that each one becomes a better self. Their personal experience of suffering, from its temporal and historical aspect, given its new meaning in Christ’s redemptive suffering, can become a source of interior transformation and rebuilding of goodness in ourselves, with others, and with God. Interviewee A said, “I plan to apply to study in a university program.” Interviewee C said, “I will endeavor to live a normal life, that is, normal to eat, to speak, to write, to sing. This is about being
true to myself.” Interviewee E said, “I will endeavor to preserve myself from the penetration of the total institution of prison.” It is to become a better self that differs from the re-radicalized rehabilitation program. It is to become a better self so that they can counter the demoralization of prison and the hierarchy of prison culture.

The third theological insight that “they (political prisoners) are suffering for us” is a paradox of agent-focus. When Hong Kongers focus on what political prisoners have suffered for Hong Kongers, they do not see themselves as martyrs or saints. On different occasions, they express that they simply do what Hong Kongers would do or behave how humans are supposed to behave. Interviewee A said, “I am simply chosen by the time.” They do not believe that they should be praised. They regard themselves as servants rather than leaders, a Hong Konger rather than a prophet. Interviewees C and D see themselves as insignificant, but God uses them. They show to us that everyone can participate in redemptive suffering one way or another, no matter whether they are prepared for it. However, I must admit that this may not be the view shared by other political prisoners.

The notions of the dark night of the soul and redemptive suffering are involved in sense-making. The interviewees have the confidence to say that they are not the losers in the current political system and they are not defeated. In the eyes of the authorities, imprisonment as punishment is to threaten and demoralize prisoners, but in the light of Jesus’s redemptive suffering, imprisonment has become a means to expose injustice and create a Hong Kongers’ social narrative. This is a generative sense-making that involves sense-breaking. Sense-breaking involves the destruction or breaking down of meaning to create a meaning void that is then filled with new meaning by drawing attention to new clues. It often involves reframing previously held conceptions to see these in a new, more positive light. Thus, sense-breaking is essentially the act of fundamentally transforming

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current understandings of an issue and infusing it with new, better, or more desired meaning, enabling the sense-maker to see alternative views or the bigger picture. First, ethically, we are used to the prisoner’s dilemma. In short, the burden is on prisoners, that is, how to produce the optimal outcome. But the sense of the pursuit of social justice by interviewees changes the game theory from prisoner’s dilemma to warden’s dilemma. The warden faces a dilemma whether to continue the tough punishment, realizing that this may lead to a further loss of legitimacy. The Hong Kong government insists on its tough policy on political prisoners and there is no sign of reconciliation, but the government has suffered from brain drain and a poor image of Hong Kong in the international community. Second, the interviewees disconnect from the previous sense-making narrative of prison, on the one hand, and give a new sense of their experience, on the other. They challenge the meaning of prison, punishment, power, and rehabilitation one way and another. Though their degree of resilience is weak or insignificant, the ontological insecurity caused by incarceration is less threatening than it is intended to be on prisoners. Nevertheless, their spiritual experience is not to endorse Cartesian mind-body dualism. It is understood within an embodied experience that occurs in-the-world (prison) rather than an inner representation of an outer world. Third, due to the current political environment, Hong Kong is pervaded by an atmosphere of hopelessness and powerlessness. This is reflected in the rise of the migration rate. The rise of the number of political prisoners gives good reason to Hong Kongers for not staying in Hong Kong, because Hong Kong may be gradually failing to accommodate individuals with diverse perceptions and values. However, paradoxically, the presence of political prisoners gives emotional support to Hong Kongers who stay in Hong Kong, because they should not abandon them.

**Conclusion**

Theologically, ontological insecurity may be further exacerbated by the question of theodicy because political prisoners expect the realization of God’s justice, but in reality this has not occurred. The five interviewees did not struggle with the question of theodicy. Interviewee A became

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a Christian while on bail. Interviewee B continued to write sermons. Interviewee D claimed that he had experienced a more intimate relationship with God than before. They are not saints, but the five interviewees showed us that, one way or another, they accepted suffering as a necessary component in the pursuit of justice and peace. The cross of Jesus not only sustains their conviction, but also the resurrection that followed Jesus’s crucifixion keeps their hope for truth and justice alive. Despite the fact that all five have experienced different degrees of depression and hopelessness during incarceration, suffering is perceived more as the dark night of the soul. It is a path to brightness rather than to death. The authorities see imprisonment as their instrument to threaten and suppress political prisoners, but paradoxically, imprisonment becomes the prisoners’ weapon to witness to the life of Jesus: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt 10:28). This is similar to what Mencius said:

Neither riches nor honors can corrupt him; neither poverty nor humbleness can make him swerve from principle; and neither threats nor forces can subdue him. These characteristics constitute the great man.

However, this is not to romanticize incarceration. In fact, the Psalms, the Book of Job, and the biblical accounts of Jesus’s passion provide them with a language and imaginaries to articulate and express their pain. These five interviewees should not be seen as the best examples for others to follow, but they show us that everyone has a different kind and degree of capacity for developing resilience. The interviewees thereby have shown us an option on how to live with ontological insecurity. Since ontological insecurity is existential security, each individual has to make his or her own choice of how to respond to it.

Finally, there are three major limitations of this study. First, the five interviewees are male, and no female voice is heard. Due to pastoral considerations, my contact is confined to male political prisoners. Second, the sample size of interviewees is relatively small, and this may not fully reflect the experience of political prisoners. Factors such as age and experience in social activism may affect one’s spirituality. People on bail and political prisoners are hesitant to be interviewed because they are afraid that their interviews may affect their cases in court and result in special
treatment in prison respectively. The released have different concerns. They may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, they want to begin a normal life, and so on. Third, due to imprisonment, some interviews have to be short and our conversations are not fully free. These limitations call for further research in order to present a more comprehensive survey of the availability and use of spiritual resources in responding to the effects of incarceration on one’s ontological security.

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