The Legacy of an Accommodative Secularism: Religions and Taiwan's Responses to COVID-19

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Abstract

Throughout the two years of this pandemic, Taiwanese public authorities have obtained cooperation from religious organisations in limiting and mitigating the contagion, and the population was largely spared the influence of conspiracy theories about the virus' origins. I have found no trace of any significant doomsday theologies among the major religions practiced in Taiwan emerging in the public health emergency caused by COVID-19. What explains this largely cooperative relationship? From the perspective of public policy, why has the government obtained the compliance of most religious actors to its directive and faced little or no opposition coming from them? I use a historical institutionalist approach to argue that decades of toleration from political leaders of all trends towards religions have generated a path dependency of mutual trust and that legacy predates the period of democratisation. The article explores the extent to which this outcome results from three factors: Taiwan's religious diversity, or the absence of a religious hegemony opposed to the state; pragmatic and flexible theologies; and/or convergence between successive Taiwanese governments' social policies and the social teachings of religions.

Keywords: COVID-19, Taiwanese popular and communal religions, Matsu pilgrimage, Buddhism, Presbyterian Church, Welfare regimes

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Introduction

Taiwan's ability to tackle COVID-19 from the beginning constitutes an extraordinary achievement of global proportion. At the time of writing, it stands out worldwide as one of the countries with the smallest number of cases per capita, as well as one with the lowest number of fatalities (CSSE 2021). While China has stood out for its rapid and comprehensive response to the pandemic, the public confinement measures it has enforced have not generated much enthusiasm from democratic countries (Jacob 2020). However, as cases in Western democracies have raised to unsustainable levels for health care systems, questions have emerged about their hesitancy to restrict temporarily freedom of movement and the unthinkable has become commonplace: isn't there an authoritarian advantage over contentious democracies? This is where the example of Taiwan appears so important. It has managed to address the pandemic decisively, early on, with public measures that have implied some state surveillance, but to a limited degree that did not infringe on fundamental rights (Alon, Farrell, and Shaomin 2020; Cole 2020; Huang 2020; Lo 2020; Rowen 2020). Moreover, the public health measures instituted by the government did not meet with much contestation from citizens. And of relevance to the problem explored in other articles in this issue of the journal, it has achieved that without significant opposition from religious associations. On many important occasions, as I discuss below, it obtained crucial forms of support from them. Why was the Taiwanese government so successful in rapidly obtaining this kind of cooperation from religious associations in tackling COVID-19? The argument advanced here is that Taiwan benefited from the path dependency of cooperative relations with religions across the authoritarian and democratic regimes. This has implications for democratic regimes with religious diversity as well as regimes undergoing political transition or contemplating that possibility.

Taiwan is a society where tensions between religion and the state have been relatively minor and limited, in comparison with what one observes elsewhere. In authoritarian regimes, whether they claim to be secular/atheistic like China, or deriving their authority from a clergy, such as Iran, the state seeks to control religious affairs. This means limitations on the registration of religions considered as legitimate, control of activities by worshippers outside of places of worship, and persecution of the faithful in dissident faiths. When Taiwan was under authoritarian rule, the government had imposed restrictions on the registration of some religions, but it did not resort to extremes such as the execution or imprisonment of members of religious minorities because of their faith. In democratic societies, tensions between religions and state can emerge when political parties, in the name of a religious belief shared by much of the population, advocate constitutional or legal changes to conform with their credo. Taiwan has avoided such trend as it entered its process of democratisation. The outbreak of COVID-19 has exacerbated these kinds of tension in democratic

societies, with the emergence of conspiracy theories often linked to the fringes of some religions. Taiwan largely avoided such issue from arising by obtaining cooperation from the religious milieus whose teaching most often resonated with the concerns of the government. In the initial stage of the pandemic, the government policies to limit the spread of the new virus were met with brief and sporadic hesitancy from some religions, but nothing that escalated to the levels observed in Western Europe and North America.

The Puzzle of Taiwan

Before we examine why Taiwan easily obtained cooperation from most religious associations in responding to COVID-19, I situate the significance of this achievement by setting that outcome comparatively, with a few relevant observations from worldwide responses to COVID-19 by religions and governments. There is no doubt that the pandemic and the measures undertaken to stop it have upset the traditional rituals central to religions that accompany major aspects of life: birth, marriage, funerals. It has affected worship, and even theologies (Isiko 2020). The role of religion has been both detrimental, mostly in terms of transmission, but also beneficial, in terms of mitigation and adaptation, in responding to COVID-19 (Lee et al. 2022). Such ambiguities exist in most religious traditions and the responsibilities of religious leaders matter considerably when comes the time to promote measures that limit the spread of an epidemic or, on the contrary, exacerbate it.

The meetings of worshipers and pilgrims present high risks for public health during the outbreak of communicable diseases as they work as super-spreader events: they have contributed to the early spread of contagions (Rocha, Pelayo, and Rackimuthu 2021; Wildman et al. 2020). When the pandemic extended worldwide, some political and religious leaders undermined medical authorities and public leaders by advocating dubious alternative approaches. For example, leaders of the *Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha* (All-India Hindu Union) advertised in a well-publicised campaign the benefit of drinking cow's urine to prevent COVID-19 at the onset of the pandemic (Daria and Islam 2021; Siddiqui 2020). No evidence has emerged of such kind of cures being promoted in the religious milieus of Taiwan. In many countries, conspiracy theories, some of which from fringe religious movements, have fed into movements of vaccine hesitancy that slowed down public campaigns to tackle the pandemic, or even contested it outright (Ullah et al. 2021). Taiwan has been spared those toxic trends as well. In sum, although a significant proportion of the population defines itself as religious, Taiwanese society has shown to the world the efficiency of a science-based approach to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the central puzzle of explaining religious deference to secular authority in a society of many devout.

It is too early to make mid-level generalisations from observations made about countries that share a religious tradition or even within regions: the pandemic has spread rapidly in societies with a wide range of traditions (Bretelle-Establet 2020; Ebrahim and Memish 2020; Mubarak 2020; Quadri 2020; Singh 2020). Conversely, even three societies with similar standards of living and a shared cultural heritage, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, have grappled with that challenge in quite different ways from each other. The Japanese society dealt with some difficulty with a wide variety of responses from different religions (McLaughlin 2020), while South Korea considered restrictions on the Sinchŏnji 신천지/新天地 Church, deemed responsible for the contagion (Kim et al. 2020). As I will comment below, the Taiwanese government quickly obtained the postponement of a mass event, the Matsu traditional pilgrimage (Shan 2020).[1] Most other religious organisations in Taiwan cancelled events and adapted to the new situation by going online.

The public response to the pandemic and the restriction they imposed brought in the open concerns about religious freedom and freedom of conscience as parts and parcels of a broader preoccupation over civil and political rights, in a region that stands on the frontline of the emerging ideological debate over the respective advantages of democratic and authoritarian regimes (Chu et al. 2008). In the case of the three liberal democratic East Asian societies, this speaks to a reality that older citizens have experienced in their lifetime, with Japan re-emerging as a democracy in the late 1940s, and South Korea and Taiwan transitioning to democracy even more recently, in the late 1980s. For the Taiwanese, the proximity of China, magnified by a shared language, by Taiwanese investment in China, and until recently the influx of Chinese tourists in Taiwan, brings home that contrast even more vividly. Thus, the most remarkable feature of Taiwan's response to the pandemic has been that it achieved success in combatting COVID-19 without resorting to limitation of people's civil rights (Wong 2020). It has managed that in a context where all sort of groups, religious and secular, air out their views freely; in a context where media face the constant challenge of an unrelenting psychological warfare coming from China, which actively seeks to destabilise the public by spreading false rumours and exploiting any of the disagreements normally seen in any democratic society (Kao 2021).

The sequence of actions taken by the Taiwanese government are by now well-known. Following the trauma of their poor response to address the previous epidemic of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, and the sense of national failure that ensued (Wong 2020: 267), authorities had established a Center for Disease Control (CDC) with special powers in case of a health emergency. As soon as the evidence of a new strain of coronavirus emerged in late December 2019 from Wŭhàn, the CDC coordinated with health authorities a series of public measures (Cheng, Li,

[1] The spelling of Matsu 媽祖 is inconsistent; some of the academic literature writes Mazu. I follow the usage in Taiwan.

and Yang 2020; Wang, Ng, and Brook 2020). It put in place contact-tracing and quarantining to isolate travellers from Wǔhàn and the persons they had seen upon their return to Taiwan. It also promoted social distancing, including for religious events (Chen and Ko 2020). The respect for these directives proved crucial to prevent further contagion. These actions were followed by a more draconian closure of the borders, with restrictions on international travel. The CDC put in place an efficient communication strategy ensuring that the public received timely information about the extent of the contagion and recommended measures to stop its spread. The government also coordinated with the private sector in ensuring the production of masks and medical supplies in a noticeably short time. Manufacturers responded well to this mobilisation and Taiwan was able to turn self-reliant in the early stage of the pandemic (Kuo, Huang-Tz, and Wang 2021). A key factor in strengthening the state response was strong state-society relations favouring transparency that trace their roots in democratic institutions (Yen 2020).

In the face of these challenges, the religious responses to the pandemic have been predominantly cooperative. After a brief period of negotiation between the central government and the organisers of the Dajia Matsu 大甲媽祖 Pilgrimage, which is an annual procession occurring in the third month of the Chinese calendar, an agreement was reached to suspend the procession to facilitate infection control (Hsieh et al. 2021a: 523). This action contributed massively to prevent a super-spreader event: in normal times, the pilgrimage stops at close to a hundred temples dispersed in twenty-one townships and districts that are distributed in four counties of central Taiwan. One year after this decision, the event could proceed as usual, with the participation of foreign diplomats (Chen 2021). In his blog on the postponement of the procession, Fang I-chu (2020) noted how the authorities addressed the initial reluctance of the Jenn Lann Temple Foundation 財團法人大甲鎮瀾宮, which was organising the event, and claimed that "Matsu will protect everyone." Instead of criticising the Foundation, however, the Health Ministry chose to use social media and, in addressing the population, framed its response with a religious language, claiming that "Matsu will hope everyone takes health as their highest priority" (Fang 2020).

Churches also closed without much protest. The pastors of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) first did not agree among themselves about the best way to respond to the outbreak of the pandemic. Many of them decided to livestream the Sunday service via YouTube due to safety concerns. However, there were exceptions: Rev. Wang Chih-zang wrote in a pastoral letter from the PCT general assembly that "substantial" worship and service should continue, "unless the 7/24 convenience store is ordered to lockdown!" (Lin et al. 2020). As it became clear that the communion and other sacraments could not be implemented in person during the pandemic in local churches, the clergy sought to address the issue from a theological perspective. For example, Rev. Hsiu Shu-ping of the Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary 玉

山神學院 wrote that sharing the bread and wine online did not deviate from the teachings of their faith (Chiu 2020). Overall, the attitude of the PCT proved helpful to public safety. Aware that some vulnerable populations faced risks of contagion, the PCT cooperated in the early stages of the outbreak with the Workforce Development Agency of the Ministry of Labour to protect about 3,000 migrant workers in the fisheries industry, supplying them with medical masks, instructing them on necessary hygiene methods, and how to practice social distancing (Lin 2020).

During the second year of the pandemic, some religious organisations went further in supporting the efforts of the government. The actions of the Buddhist philanthropy Tzu Chi (Cíjì 慈濟) provide a good example. At the time, Taiwan faced difficulties with vaccine shortage (Huh and Dubey 2021: 14). These difficulties related to limited capacity to produce the vaccine and bureaucratic delays imposed on the Taiwanese government when it decided to import doses from the Shanghai-based branch of a German producer of vaccines. Taiwan could not directly receive the doses because of political conditions imposed by the Chinese government. The Taiwanese government allowed Tzu Chi to bid on its behalf, along with two Taiwanese tech firms, TSMC and Foxconn, and the Yong Lin Charity and Education Foundation 永齡教育基金會 of Hon Hai Precision Industry (Tzu Chi 2021). After buying the doses, the three partners gave them to the government for distribution. Via this joint effort, the Health Ministry acquired a total of fifteen million doses, of which five million were obtained by Tzu Chi (Reuters 2021). This donation matched those of TSMC and Foxconn and exceeded the number of doses offered by the United States and Japan, at over four million each (Chen and Lin 2021; Martina 2021).

The Taiwanese state agencies obtained compliance from citizens to their directive based on pre-existing trust of the population towards the government. One of the benefits of that cooperative relation between authorities and the people was the resuming of normal economic and social activities, including school attendance and religious activities after a few months of restrictions. Hence, the nine-day long Matsu pilgrimage, one of the most important religious events in Taiwan, started off in June 2020, after being postponed earlier in April (TT 2020). This outcome contrasts with the experience of many Western governments, which have faced difficulties in achieving similar outcomes. Lack of trust towards public authorities, including medical ones, have hampered the efforts of governments in the United States and through Europe. The spread of conspiracy theories, which can be part of fringe religious beliefs, secular alternatives to religions, or which are about religions (Dyrendal 2020), have contributed to the problem as a source of alternate truth to official discourses (Allington and Dhavan 2020; Mietzner 2020). In societies that cherish freedom of expression and freedom of conscience, confronting this kind of movement without resorting to censorship and exercising police repression represents an exceedingly difficult balancing act. This issue is magnified in societies with deep religious diversity. One remarkable aspect of Taiwanese society is that it has a high

degree of religious practice, yet, in contrast to other equally diverse societies, it managed to obtain compliance to its directives, and did not meet with the extent of scepticism against authorities observed elsewhere (Hsieh et al. 2021b).

Taiwan is a secular state, as its agencies maintains distance with religions, and many people profess indifference to religion or even atheism. However, a wide diversity of religious beliefs flourish, and by all accounts, have increased after the end of martial law in 1986 (Katz 2003; Weller 2001). The measures to fight the pandemic are put in place in a society that is deeply religious, with many claiming to belong to a religious organisation, and many others validating belief in supernatural phenomena such as Karmic retribution, life after death, etc. The Constitution of the Republic of China (ROC) promotes no state religion and protects freedom of conscience, showing full respect for these principles in periodic international overviews of religious freedoms by governments monitoring such issues. All forms of religious practices co-exist, and a wide variety of theological positions can express themselves, including some that have apocalyptic views. Taiwan's religious diversity does not exclude the fact that there exist some challenges in relations between religions and state, but Taiwan has been largely spared the kind of cultural war over the proper relations between religion and state often observed in the United States. For example, issues such as same-sex marriage, which have generated mobilisation by conservative churches against the government on the right end of the political spectrum, have been rare in Taiwan (Ho 2020). Sometimes, the opposite happens. Hence, religious organisations supporting the labour rights of migrant workers have established with government agencies shelters and legal support to address the violation of their rights. To accurately assess the legacy of cooperation between state and religion requires looking at the latter as institutions, although I will use the terms "associations" and "organisations' when I refer to bodies associated with a religion such as churches, Buddhist foundations, popular religions' temple committees, etc.

A Historical Institutionalist Approach

The argument that cooperative institutional relations have shown strong continuities deep enough to transcend major political changes recalls the arguments of Historical Institutionalist theory about the path dependency of established relations and critical junctures when patterns for these relations are established. Critical junctures define a chain of events becoming hard to reverse, which then create a path dependency affecting institutions (Hogan 2019; Soifer 2012). Critical juncture can appear as inter-state conflicts, regime transformation—whether through a coup d'état or a process of constitutional reform, or even, in milder form, in a change of government, or the enactment of new policies. During these evolutions, rules and regulation vary according to the new configuration of power between the main institutions in society.

For example, critical junctures such as the American War of Independence (1775–1783) and the French Revolution (1789–1799) contributed to the development of the modern state and the establishment of new patterns of relations between church and states. Critical junctures can extend for several years of cumulative changes that eventually amount to major transformations reaching out to the whole society, such as the chancellorship of Bismarck (1871–1890) that prepared the emergence of the welfare state or the Meiji era (1868–1912) that launched Japan on a path dependency of modernisation.

Earlier statements from Institutionalist theory have privileged state institutions such as constitutions, courts, parliaments, federalism, party systems, electoral systems, and separation of power to understand political change and stability (Lecours 2005). In relation to understanding the evolution of social policy, it has paid attention not only to state regulations and social programmes, but also to the effects the market, trade unions, and civil society exercise on public policy (Pierson 2000). Yet, although religions have established throughout history social institutions that have at times competed directly with the political authority of rulers, they have not received the same amount of attention for the understanding of social policy (Pavolini, Béland, and Jawad 2017). For this article, I focus on changes and continuity in relations between religion and state to understand the sources of the current cooperation between the two revealed during the COVID-19 crisis. A key puzzle is the extent to which at the two critical junctures experienced by Taiwan, which saw in the establishment of authoritarian and democratic regimes fundamental changes in the constitution, the party system, and the courts, nevertheless saw continuity in the relations between religion and state.

Relations between religions and state serve mutually constitutive purposes for both types of institutions. For example, religious organisations can seek legal recognition from the courts to protect their right to worship and secure their property and can look for tax exemption from fiscal authorities to make their activities sustainable. The state, in turn, can call upon specific religious associations to support its policies. Governments have relied on religious values in the promotion of national identity (Kurth 2007; Myhill 2006; Antoni et al. 2002; Hamayotsu 2002) or looked for tangible assistance in the implementation of specific policies, in realms such as education (Bruno-Jofré and Valle 2020), health care (Oman 2018), social assistance (Göçmen 2013), and disaster relief (Bush, Fountain, and Feener 2015). Religious organisations have performed a range of activities in these four domains of state intervention before the expansion of the modern state and have even competed with the state to continue to do so, aware of the legitimacy they derive from this. Relations between states and religions have experienced during the processes of state expansion a wide range of forms that included innovation, imitation, cooperation, and usurpation (Loveman 2005).

Whereas religions have stood out as autonomous social actors that can influence the state and continue to do so in many cases, three caveats are relevant to Taiwan and other non-Western societies. Firstly, while religious institutions seldom figure as part of the state structure itself, there are important exceptions. For example, constitutions can proclaim a state religion, as the governments of Thailand, Saudi Arabia, and Greece have done. Other states that do not proclaim a state religion, such as Indonesia and Turkey, have established a bureaucracy that regulates the statements made by the clergy (van Bruinessen 2018; Ropi 2017; Ulutas 2010). In a most extreme case, the state apparatus or that of the ruling party can set up an agency regulating all religious affairs, as the Chinese government did with the State Administration of Religious Affairs until 2017, when it was incorporated into the Communist Party's United Front Work Department (Wang 2019). Taiwanese religions have experienced a form of state oversight that came close to this during the period of martial law.

Secondly, another aspect of religious life that complicates its operationalisation as an institution is the social practice of polytropy, which rests on the recognition that there exist simultaneous paths to salvation. A concept originally used to describe religious practice in South Asia (Carruthers 2000), it applies also to most East Asian societies, where the practice of mutually exclusive religions is a minority fact. Finally, religions, as systems of belief and associated rituals, do not always constitute autonomous institutions, as the distinction between diffused and institutionalised religions reveal. This dichotomy aptly described societies like Republican China, when worship of ancestors, patrons of guilds, and city gods were intimately related to other social institutions, such as the family, craft associations, and local governments (Yang 1994 [1961]). The validity of this distinction between diffused and institutionalised religions remains so to a degree in Taiwan today. While the PCT and Tzu Chi count as institutionalised religions with high degree of bureaucratisation and division of labour between monastics and clerics, on the one hand, and lay people, on the other, the pilgrimage to Matsu and popular religions in general represent cases of diffuse religion because of their intermingling with local politics and social life at the communal level. This distinction between institutionalised and diffuse religion is more ideal-typical in a Weberian sense than a reality on the ground; however, as the discussion below explains, it remains valid with respect to the close interactions between religions and state bureaucracy.

In societies with religious diversity, the path dependency of relations between religions and state presents added complexity. Depending on the nature of the diversity: do we see a monopolistic or oligopolistic situation with one or a few religions influencing politics more than others? Numerically dominant religions may receive benefits that are inaccessible to minority ones, as we can see in societies where Buddhism, Catholicism, and Islam are practiced by most of the population. Religious associations may have been able to exert influence, as the Christian right has tried to do in the United States, or through participation in government, as the Soka Gakkai-

sponsored Komeito has done in Japan (Fisker-Nielsen 2012). In societies with weak or divided governments, such participation by religious organisations is possible, but less likely in societies ruled by strong centralised states. Once it has become clearer whether religious diversity or homogeneity gives religious organisations the capacity to influence politics, it becomes important to pay attention to the theological dimension of that impact and ask which one(s) of many theological teachings are more likely to shape policies.

Are the theological differences marginal or substantial between the different religious organisations? Before the emergence of the modern state, the religious and political authorities were often intermingled. Theology was often political, and both religious and political views about the good life, the ideal ruler, and the conditions for peace intertwined. European notions such as the divine right of kings come to mind. The reference to the ideal ruler—the Cakravartin—who must abide by the rules of the *dhamma* offers the example of another configuration in societies where Theravadin Buddhists live (Harris 1999). The uprisings inspired by the Yellow Turban in the Han dynasty almost twenty centuries ago was the first of many examples of movements with a political aim inspired by a religious vision in Chinese society (Hendrischke 2007). State authorities in most contemporary societies may have succeeded at establishing their monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, but this does not mean that the political consequences of theology have become irrelevant. I argue below that theology appears especially important in relation to contemporary social and health policies. The focus on social policy and the response of specific religious associations to COVID-19, naturally, leads us to pay attention to the record of accomplishment by different religions in providing social services, whether out of their own theology and volition or under the government-mandated obligation to do so.

In sum, both religious diversity and theology matter. However, I argue that a more fundamental element could explain cooperation between religion and state in the case of Taiwan and other societies: state and religious institutions may find a mutuality of interests in the choices made by the government for a social policy that rely on non-state actors to provide services. This may apply especially for institutionalised religions, when such a provision of services receives theological support and reinforces the position of a given religious organisation, among others, within a given society. Research on that issue remains scarce in the case of contemporary Western societies where the welfare state provides a wide range of social services. It appears on the margins of broader research about how states in non-Western and developing societies outsource their delivery of social services to civil society and non-state actors (Cammett 2014; Gough et al. 2004). The hitherto limited attention paid on state outsourcing to religious associations is slowly changing with the study of the early stages of Western welfare states. The emergence of a research agenda on the long-term effects of religion on social policies brings together studies

of the welfare state's origins in Western Europe and North America with such emergence in non-Western societies.

Emmanuele Pavolini, Daniel Béland, and Rana Jawad (2017) have presented an extremely helpful account of the current scholarship about such influence of religion on the development of the welfare state in Western societies. They started with the observation by Philip Gorski (2005) that religious values have influenced the evolution of the welfare state (Pavolini, Béland, and Jawad 2017: 244) and agree with the scholarship brought together by Kees van Kersbergen and Philip Manow (2009) that the welfare state results from more than interactions between the labour movement and social-democratic parties (Pavolini, Béland, and Jawad 2017: 244; Wilensky 1981). An important finding is how much governments have adopted policies of "crowding-in" religious institutions in the provision of social welfare in Central and Southern Europe (Pavolini, Béland, and Jawad 2017: 247). This development contrasts with the previous trends in the early development of the welfare state, which often saw the "crowding-out" of religious organisations in the provision of social welfare in the social policies developed by the state. The latter situation describes the nature of social policies implemented by the Kuomintang (KMT, or Nationalist Party of China, *Guómíndǎng* 國民黨) in the early twentieth century, when it sought to convert temples into schools in Mainland China (Nedostup 2009). As discussed below, however, this changed when the KMT relocated its government in Taiwan.

Van Kersbergen and Manow (2009) found that church-state conflicts often centred around who should provide education and protection for workers and their families. Historically, churches have been providers of health care, social care, and education, and they saw state involvement in these domains as a violation of the separation between the private and public sphere in Southern Europe. Mara Loveman's (2005) account of post-colonial resistance to census in Brazil found a similar dynamic at work. Pavolini, Béland, and Jawad (2017: 245) found from the existing literature that three institutional factors helped explain differences in the welfare state in societies influenced by Christianity: the role of political-institutional factors such as electoral rules; political dynamics such as state-church relations; and cultural conditions such as the presence or the absence of a confessional monopoly. Based on these observations, they have noted that national conditions in the evolution of religious institutions and their relations with the state have influenced differently the development of the welfare state. They accordingly identified four clusters of path dependency of welfare state trajectories: Mediterranean countries with a Catholic or Orthodox majority; Protestant Nordic countries; continental European countries with mixed religions; and English-speaking countries with religious diversity. The latter two clusters could arguably offer more relevant lessons to Taiwan, a country which does not have a religious majority nor a national religion, but rather a condition of religious diversity.

Pavolini, Béland, and Jawad (2017: 245) also outlined the importance of other factors that could be present in all four types of welfare regimes, such as electoral rules, the role of "faith-based organisations" and their relations to political parties, and the welfare mix when government "crowd-in" religions in the provision of social services. Electoral rules matter little in authoritarian regimes, and the relevance of faith-based organisations diminishes in such kind of regimes when they enforce a corporatist regime of representation for social organisation. These two factors predominated in the period of martial rule in Taiwan. However, the welfare mix adopted by Taiwanese authorities early on represents a key continuity between the authoritarian and democratic regimes. Moreover, the Taiwanese state did not qualify entirely as an "enabling state" when it encouraged non-state actors to provide social services. That concept was used in the context of welfare retrenchment (ibid.: 247; Gilbert 2002), while Taiwan has experienced during the democratic transition the opposite trend of welfare expansion (Wong 2005; Aspalter 2002). However, the KMT and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, *Mínzhǔ jìnbù dǎng* 民主進步黨) governments were "enabling" to the extent that they have relied on religious associations to provide social services to categories of people existing social policies had failed to reach.

The three important takeaways of the research summarised by Pavolini, Béland, and Jawad are that specific national conditions of religious diversity or lack thereof, theology, and conflict or cooperation between church and state have influenced the different trajectories of welfare states observed since the nineteenth century. Examining the extent to which these observations can cast light about Taiwan requires a comparative historical sociology that investigates the configuration of religious diversity in Taiwan; the social teachings and practices of social service by religions; and whether the latter put religions and states in situations of competition or opened the way for cooperation. In their survey of the scholarship on religion and social policy, Pavolini, Béland, and Jawad wrote about the challenge of replicating or adapting to non-Western societies their findings about Western societies. In the case discussed in this article, the Catholic Church never came close in Taiwan to the monopoly it held in Europe or Latin America. Likewise for Protestant denominations. Buddhism comes the closest to the Christian institutions, but it never exercised a monopoly either. Even when Taiwan was under martial law and the corporatist regulations mandated that all Buddhists register under a single national association, it did not have a single uncontested authority (Jones 1999). The institutional position of Daoism and all the other religions has been even weaker than that of Buddhism since 1945.

Our understanding of relations between the state and religions can fruitfully benefit from the above debates about the nexus between religions and state within the context of social policy. These policies can encompass a wide range of programmes and responsibilities ranging from health care to education and social security, for

which both religious and state authorities derive much legitimacy. The public response to COVID-19 displayed in Taiwan mobilised some of the same ministries and agencies dealing with health and internal security that have interacted with religious organisations for decades. The next section outlines the remarkable continuity that Taiwan has experienced in the relations between the state and these organisations in two vastly different political regimes.

A Path Dependency of Cooperation Throughout Regime Changes

Taiwan's history since 1945 has gone through two vastly different political regimes. From 1945 to the late 1980s, it experienced an authoritarian regime under one-party rule by the KMT, which enforced martial law for thirty-eight years. After the founding of the DPP in 1986 as an opposition party, Taiwan moved into a democratic transition that culminated with the general election of 2016, which saw the DPP win a majority in the Legislature and the DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 (b. 1956) achieving a clear victory in the Presidential contest (Rigger 2019). Both regimes were established following political crises with vastly different causalities and consequences. First, the authoritarian regime followed from turbulent times after the defeat of Japan in World War II and the arrival of troops from Mainland China, which brutally repressed protest movements on February 28, 1947. Two years later, the KMT-led government of the Republic of China relocated in Taipei its "provisional" capital following its defeat in the Civil War against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Wang 1999). The martial law regime ensued. The democratic regime, then, followed from a combination of pressure from civil society and popular mobilisation, social changes that saw the rise of the middle class in a rapidly growing economy, the increasing international isolation of Taiwan after 1979—when the United States recognised the People's Republic of China (PRC) instead of the ROC as the representative of China—and top-down measures were undertaken by KMT liberal factions headed by President Lee Teng-hui 李登輝 (1923–2020; p. 1988–2000) (Jacobs 2012; Chao and Myers 1998).

The key puzzle is the extent to which the authoritarian and democratic regimes, which differed significantly in terms of civil rights protection by the constitution, the nature of the party system, the independence of courts and the justice system, saw continuity in the relations between religious associations and the state, despite the two vastly different path dependencies left by the critical junctures of Taiwan's history from 1945 to 1949, and between 1987 and 1992. The continuities shown between the two regimes in their relations with religious associations do not suggest that these relations have remained unchanged within each period: evolutions were incremental, and to a certain degree predictable, as they unfolded gradually under a set of recognised rules and principles maintained throughout the two regimes. Hence, the policy towards religious associations that the KMT implemented in

Taiwan represented a continuation with some trends already apparent in Mainland China before 1945. If the earlier approach of the more radical factions of the KMT adopted a hard-line attitude towards popular religions and religions in general at the beginning of the Republican period (Duara 1991), this changed in the late 1920s with the ascendancy of Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975; p. 1948–1975) as KMT leader, when he promoted a conservative policy that rejected the actions of his predecessors. While the KMT had carried to Taiwan its distaste of popular and communal religions (Ahern 1987), it encouraged a much more positive attitude towards Christianity, Buddhism, and Daoism.

The authoritarian regime, as suggested above, came into place after Taiwan changed status as a Japanese colony into a province of the ROC. Although many Taiwanese welcomed what the KMT called the "retrocession" of the island to China, some of them resented what they saw as another colonial rule because of the ways in which the KMT armed forces behaved towards the population. These tensions came to a head with an island-wide uprising in February 28, 1947, which was followed by widespread reprisal against the local elite (Kerr 1965), with estimates about the number killed still unclear more than seven decades after the facts (Stolojan 2017). When the KMT lost to the CCP and relocated its government in Taipei, many of its soldiers and officials, along with many people who feared the change of regime in Mainland China, migrated to the island. The status of Taiwan as the bastion of the ROC regime meant that these migrants controlled the government, at the expense of the islanders. This first critical juncture led to an authoritarian rule that persecuted political opponents and repressed civil society but laid the basis for rapid economic development. These nearly four decades saw the initiation of a few economic and social policies that launched Taiwan on the road to rapid development (Wang P. 1999; Rubinstein 1999a).

During that period, the regime targeted individuals with a wide range of political views. This included, naturally, people perceived by the KMT as potential spies or a "fifth column" for the CCP, such as labour activists and supporters of political parties to the left of the political spectrum. The repression was extended to liberals and Taiwanese independence activists (Kagan 1982). One social category that appeared spared the worst of the repression, however, was institutionalised religions. The KMT had adopted in 1947 a constitution that proclaimed freedom of religion, along other measures meant to move China towards a more open political regime in an undetermined future. Even when it imposed martial law in Taiwan and relocated the government in Taipei, it did not renege on this principle. As it consolidated its government during the ensuing three decades, the KMT promoted values influenced heavily by traditional Confucian teachings in civic education (Liu 1999). It deferred to demands by the leadership of the Buddhist Association of the ROC 中國佛教會 (BAROC) to avoid temple occupation by soldiers, to obtain exemption from the land tax, and gain status as charitable associations (Jones 1999: 146) Followers of new

religions, such as Xuānyuánjiào 軒轅教 (Teachings of the Yellow Emperor), Lǐjiào 理教 (Rationalist Teachings), and Tiāndéjiào 天德教 (Heavenly Virtue Teachings) did not fear persecution. KMT leaders, many of whom identified as Buddhist, Christians, or even followers of the new religions just mentioned, did not shy away from their religious identity, in contrast with CCP members.

This state tolerance, however, did not preclude the imposition of an authoritarian framework within a corporatist structure of control, although this was not uniformly implemented. Temples were subjected to the Law on regulating temples and shrines, which imposed regulations on the management of religious affairs, while churches were exempted (Kuo 2008: 10). Religious associations (whether lay or clerical), temples, and churches had to register with an umbrella association licensed to represent each of them. In other words, all Buddhist orders, whether they followed the Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Tibetan schools, or whether they were active before and during Japanese colonial rule, had to register as members of the BAROC (Jones 1999). This system appeared on the surface like the structure imposed at about the same time in the PRC, where the CCP required Buddhist temples in Mainland China to register as members of the state-sponsored Buddhist association of China. However, there were two key differences. Firstly, Taiwan did not have a government organ for the supervision of religious affairs that compared to that of the Bureau for Religious Affairs, which would become later the State Administration of Religious Affairs. Secondly, state supervision of religions through their national associations—even if mandated by the KMT—was not premised on the withering away of religion, in contrast to what the CCP expected in China.

Not all religions benefited equally from the state relatively benign treatment. Communal religions, especially the popular religions practiced in Taiwan before and during colonial rule, based on ancestors' temples and local deities, faced more stringent oversight by local representatives of the government. Likewise, redemptive societies such as Yīguàndào 一貫道, or new religions such as Tenrikyō 天理教, the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, and the Unification Church continued to endure surveillance from the provincial police (Ho 1996). As the period of martial law entered a third decade, churches such as the PCT that were identified with the Taiwanese population also went through a period of confrontation with the regime, as some of their leaders went to jail for their advocacy in favour of human rights and the right to self-determination (Rubinstein 1999b). On balance, however, the authoritarian regime professed tolerance towards religions and made a point in its propaganda to contrast its leniency with the persecution against religions in China. Its structure of control ensured no religious movement would contest the regime on the grounds of calls for self-determination. However, it started to loosen, as the KMT realised that many of the religious organisations supported some of its socially conservative policies (Jordan and Overmyer 1986). The policy towards popular religions also changed after

the lift of martial law when the KMT saw the economic advantage of supporting the Matsu pilgrimage between Taiwan and Fujian (Chang 2017).

The second juncture saw the dismantling of the authoritarian regime in a largely peaceful manner that took a long while before achieving completion. The Presidency of Lee Teng-hui, arguably, represents the entrenchment of the critical juncture initiated by his predecessor Chiang Ching-kuo 蔣經國 (1910–1988; p. 1978–1988). After Chiang abolished martial law, Lee steered the country into a process of democratic consolidation that changed fundamentally the political landscape, the identity of most of the population, and relations between Taiwan and China, which embarked on a path of uncertainty (Tsai 2005). The process of democratisation consolidated in 2000 with the election to the Presidency of the DPP opposition candidate Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 (b. 1950; p. 2000–2008), although his tenure was weakened by continued KMT control of the legislature (Shih 2006). The second turnover of power, which saw a return of the KMT to power with a legislative majority and its candidate Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 (b. 1950; p. 2008–2016) becoming President in 2008, preceded a more significant democratic consolidation in 2016 when DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen became President, and her party secured a majority in the Legislative Yuan for the first time.

Early on during Lee's tenure, people could freely advocate the idea of independence without fear of jail for sedition. The KMT continues to oppose this option, the DPP has refrained from pursuing it openly, with the realisation that a proclamation of independence would be a *casus belli* with China. Along this recognition of the geopolitical and regional reality, another consensus shared by much of the population has consolidated: an overwhelming proportion of the population identifies as Taiwanese rather than Chinese (Wachman 2016). Civil society, which spearheaded political change during the period of martial law, grew more diverse and its activism reinforced the trend of democratisation that President Lee set in motion with legal changes to civic organisations and constitutional reforms in a series of national conferences. These movements, such as the "wild lilies" at the beginning of the Lee Presidency, and the "sunflower" movement during that of Ma, were often animated by students and received much attention from international observers. Many of these movements promoted an enlargement of civil and political freedoms, whether they promoted the rights of women, indigenous people, migrant workers, or LGBTQ. Others opposed government policies such as the construction of a fourth nuclear plant and the proposal for an agreement on trade and economic cooperation with China (Hsiao and Kuan 2016). The democratic transition has seen major political changes that had important effects likely to deeply affect relations between the government and religious institutions.

Under Lee, the Ministry of Interior, which had dealt with legally recognised religions, diminished its oversight of religious affairs. Lee's administration refrained from legislating on religious matters, as some religious associations requested the

passing of a law on religions to address what they saw as the unequal treatment of religions with respect to taxation and the obligation to devote some resource to charity. During Lee and Chen's tenure, the number of religious associations that had received legal recognition from the government had increased from eleven to twenty-eight. By then, neither party was interested in managing religious diversity through a state bureaucracy (Kuo 2008). The successive Presidents' religious beliefs had little influence on their policies, with perhaps the exception of Lee, who was Presbyterian and whose political belief about Taiwan and human rights espoused that of the Church. President Chen Shui-bian, close to Yīguàndào, did not pursue the matter of a law on religion, although some Buddhist associations have spoken out against him forcefully. President Ma Ying-jeou's Catholic beliefs did not influence the relations of his government with religions. Under President Tsai Ing-wen, mobilisation of conservative Protestant churches against same-sex marriage did not change the state non-intervention on religious affairs.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has presented Taiwanese society with a litmus test for this mutually accommodative and cooperative relation between religions and state. As mentioned above, one church in South Korea was stigmatised as responsible for a super-spreader event. Likewise, in Japan, the bizarre cures promoted by a new religious movement generated unease towards religions in that country. Taiwan had little echo of these two phenomena. As mentioned earlier, the government obtained rapidly from religious leaders that they would cancel worship in churches and postpone pilgrimages. If there were religious movements peddling conspiracy theories about the origins of the pandemic or contesting the science-based approach of the government to tackle the issue, they did not leave a trace and no story in the papers mentioned them, in contrast to what was observed elsewhere. Relations between religious associations and state have shown remarkable continuity, mostly of a cooperative nature: what explains this? Why did the period of transition between the authoritarian regime to a democratic one did not lead to conflict between religion and state, considering the grievances that could have emerged from those who felt victimised by the previous regime? Even for contested issues such as same sex marriage, why was there no escalation of tension? In the next section, I consider how relevant religious diversity, theology, and mutuality of views have been on the key issue of social welfare.

The Relevance of Religious Diversity?

There are different dimensions to religious diversity: how dominant is the largest religion in number of adherents and what are the consequences for the relation between religion and state? When much of the population identifies with a religion, its clerical and lay authorities may gain the ability to influence government and

society, especially in democratic societies, where politicians would seek to secure the largest number of votes. Taiwan, however, is not a society with such kind of religious majority: statistics have consistently shown that no religion counts more than a third of the population (Tǒngjìchǔ 1993). Religious diversity may have a vastly different impact when no religion can claim the allegiance of most of the population. To what extent minorities of relatively equal number of followers may compete for influence with the government? How much deep diversity of beliefs, defined by religions coming from different origins, whether Dharmic or Abrahamic, may matter, when one is perceived as "foreign"? Statistics from the Ministry of Interior between 1997 and 2020 show a quantitative change in religious diversity: there were three times more temples than churches, a proportion that increased to six time after two decades (MOI 2021).

Religious diversity has remained a constant throughout the authoritarian and democratic regimes, despite quantitative and qualitative differences in the legal recognition of this diversity, as mentioned above (Weller 2014; 2001; 1987). There are two other dimensions of religious diversity besides the one implied in the legal recognition of associations. Firstly, there is a difference between the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, to which very few Taiwanese identify with, and the "Sinitic" religions embraced by most of the population. Abrahamic religions are mutually exclusive: one's religious identity and affiliation excludes identification to another one. People who indicate that they identify with "Sinitic" religions often practice polytropy, which rests on the worldview according to which it is legitimate for individuals to follow more than a single religious path and form of worship. In this approach to spiritual and religious practice, there is no contradiction in finding guidance from Buddhist and Daoist scriptures or worshiping at temples identified with different traditions. Secondly, and in relation to the idea of polytropy, a major social survey done twenty years ago revealed that, although only minorities claim exclusive affiliation to a specific religion, more than half shared beliefs in concepts such as karmic retribution and abide by values such as filial piety (Zhāng 2000). In other words, similitudes in terms of religiously sanctioned social ethics transcend differences between religious affiliations. Updated surveys may show changes in social values, but as the statistics mentioned above suggest, religious identities have not changed much.

The process of democratic consolidation, with legal recognition of a larger number of religious organisations, gives the impression of a greater diversity during the process of democratic consolidation if one looks at the number of new religious movements that have emerged out of pre-existing ones (Sū 2005). However, the basic condition of religious diversity in the face of a unified state remains intact. Although political polarisation prevails within the party system, the state authority remains unchallenged domestically. However, the democratic Taiwanese state has shed the authoritarian apparatus previously put in place to monitor the different religions and

the corporate representation has changed significantly for some. For instance, the BAROC, which stood as the authority for Buddhist affairs during the period of martial law, has lost any pretence of controlling the affairs of that community, with the emergence of large lay Buddhist associations such as the Tzu Chi Foundation and the Buddha Light International Association—affiliated to the Fóguāngshān 佛光山 Buddhist order (Jones 1999). The trajectory of these two associations is instructive of how religious diversity, even during the period of martial law, ran deep. A characteristic of the democratic regime that stands out is that none of the major religions in Taiwan assert a close and exclusive association with one of the two main political parties. While some Buddhist associations have made pronouncement critical of Lee during his presidency (and his successor Chen) because of their position on relations with China, others have studiously avoided any public pronouncements on political issues.

Religious diversity affects the response of governments to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic because it adds complexity to the challenge of implementing effective measures that everyone should comply with. The associations mentioned above have a tradition of inter-religious dialogue, and their shared experience of relations with the government made their cooperation with the CDC relatively easy. However, the government faced a specific challenge with one of the most important dimensions of Taiwanese religious diversity, the flourishing of its communal temples and the religious festivals they organise. During the previous pandemic of SARS, many people had turned to exorcism and other ceremonies performed in temples of popular religions to help them cope with the epidemic (Tsai 2003). With the outbreak of COVID-19, similar religious responses emerged: a ritual quite popular in Taichung, the "expelling of the demon plague", found renewed resonance (Xǔ 2020). Although such activities provided healing, medical authorities feared that they could also act as "super-spreaders" for the infection. When the first signs of COVID-19 appeared in Taiwan, authorities briefly hesitated about the proper action to take on public religious events. However, many citizens resented the damage to Taiwan's reputation caused by the 2003 SARS epidemic and sought to avoid a repetition of that crisis in the Spring of 2020. Public pressure therefore mounted to postpone the springtime Matsu pilgrimage, a major religious event in the island. To avoid confrontation with the powerful temple association that manages the event and their many followers, the government obtained the cooperation of religious leaders to perform several ceremonies in different temples on the path of the pilgrimage, suggesting that Matsu and the gods wished such cancellation (Chao 2021). The postponing of that pilgrimage—and the shift to online worship mentioned above—showed that various forms of religious practice adapted in their own way to the new situation. This brings attention to the teachings of the main religions and how much they could be compatible with public actions by the government agencies and the main political parties.

The Nature of Religious Theology?

Religious theologies can transcend political regimes—some of them preceded the establishment of the modern state. Ideas such as karmic retribution and filial piety antedated the emergence of secularity. Yet this can only be taken so far: even established religions have evolved theologically within the short span of time examined here, as we will see below. Moreover, as will become clear, the processes of theological change have been endogenous to each religious tradition and usually independent of the political changes. It is analytically easier to assess the impact of theology on social policy development in societies where one religion predominates. However, in the situation of religious diversity, such as in Taiwan, the situation is bound to be more complex. Different religious traditions have developed a variety of approaches to the religiously sanctioned duties of believers and devotees in relation to the religious community and to those outside. As the discussion earlier showed in the case of the Western countries historically shaped by Protestantism, different denominations have adopted divergent views about responsibilities towards others. These differences are magnified in Taiwan, with fundamental differences between Sinitic, Dharmic, and Abrahamic religions, and within each of them.

Sinitic religions such as Daoism and most redemptive societies such as Yīguàndào have incorporated within their teachings the values of Confucianism and even those of Dharmic and Abrahamic religions. They often share with Confucian ethics the promotion of education in the definition of their missions. Sinitic religions may not have developed a social theology comparable to the ones discussed below but nevertheless the redemptive societies include in their soteriology the practice of charity and philanthropy (Ownby 2016; Palmer 2011). Apart from reference to social harmony and education, I could not find theological statements akin to a social doctrine in the online literature produced by Yīguàndào nor in the scholarly work that focuses on its history and recent evolution (Lǐ 1995). However, its core teaching on vegetarianism, based on the avoidance of killing and seen as a mean to preserve human nature, constitutes perhaps its clearest contribution to public health. This teaching represents a constant since the beginning, even when the religion did not receive official support.

As a Dharmic religion because of its origins in India, Buddhism has become a constitutive part of the Sinitic religious landscape, with some of its fundamental teachings about reincarnation, Karmic retribution, and compassion adopted by many of the Sinitic religions. Moreover, Mahāyāna Buddhism has integrated in its teachings the importance of filial piety and many aspects of Confucian values. However, in contrast to Daoists, Buddhists have developed theological innovations that pay attention to the issue of social welfare. Under the idea of Buddhism for the human realm (*rénjiān fójiào* 人間佛教), it considers charitable activities as a key element of Buddhist practice (Pacey 2005). This perspective, adopted by most of the Buddhist

associations in Taiwan, emerges most clearly with Tzu Chi, which runs a network of hospitals throughout the island and a medical school accredited by the Ministry of Education as a university. Tzu Chi advertises its approach to compassion and its social outcomes in several publications in print and online, via its television broadcast, and with the involvement of its volunteers for fundraising as well as delivery of relief, in both Taiwan and abroad (Huang 2009). And as we have seen in the beginning, it contributed actively to the government's effort to vaccinate the population. Other Buddhist associations that subscribe to *rénjiān fójiào*, such as Fóguāngshān and Zhōngtáichán 中台禪, have not run social activities to the same extent as Tzu Chi (Kuah 2022; Chandler 2004).

The Catholic social doctrine was a modern response to the emergence of socialism in Western Europe. That doctrine and its support for social programmes that helped workers and their dependents during periods of economic downturn or individual circumstances, such as illness, injury, etc., reinforced the traditional view of the family that rested on the importance of the male breadwinner. That approach encouraged the active involvement of Taiwanese Catholics in social welfare. The Second Vatican Council, which gave rise to liberation theology in Latin America and *minjung* 민중/民衆 theology in South Korea, could not have a similar impact in Taiwan because of the common ground with Marxism upheld by that approach. Taiwanese Catholics were aware of the experience of persecution in the PRC by the CCP and many were reticent with that approach. Moreover, the small number of the community handicapped any effort to implement the social teachings of the church (Kuo 2018: 160). In the 1990s, they found another opportunity to put into practice their social doctrine, with the arrival in Taiwan of many migrant workers from the Catholic Philippines looking for moral and material support, for whom they provided material and spiritual comfort in cooperation with labour authorities (Chuang 2018).

The Protestant denominations have adopted a variety of social doctrines, the most prominent one being the social teachings of the PCT, which had served in Taiwan before the Japanese colonial era with its missions among indigenous people, which would remain steadfast in its support of the Taiwanese rights to self-determination, whether under Japan or under the martial rule imposed by the KMT. The PCT has trained a clergy among the ethnic Chinese population that stood on the side of populations that have been marginalised socially and politically and, although relations with the KMT became tense with the jailing of its outspoken leader, the ruling party refrained from persecuting lower clergy because it wanted to reassure its American ally that it cared about religious freedom (Seitz 2021; Rubinstein 1999b). The Presbyterian affiliation of KMT Secretary-General and ROC President Lee Teng-hui bridged the gap between the period of martial law, which he abolished, and the democratic period in which many of the ideas promoted by the PCT had become mainstream. A translation of speeches pronounced by Lee published in 1989 had already made clear that his faith inspired his reformist agenda (Lee 1992). His faith,

however, did not prevent Lee from attending many events at temples and sites of different religions: in that sense he embodied Taiwan's religious diversity. The PCT has put into action its social gospel theology by setting up NGOs such as the Garden of Hope (GOH), which provided support to young women victims of trafficking in 1988 and moved recently to offer shelter to migrant workers in close coordination with different government agencies (GOH 2015).[2]

Taiwan's popular religions do not have a theology that could inform government policy, even less shape the development of health care or social policy. However, rituals to expel the plague have provided for centuries a sense of solidarity in the face of hardship and healing for the relatives of the deceased. During the outbreak of SARS in 2003, performance of such ritual could not save Taiwan from the infection, although local communities, invoking deities at the Qīngshān 青山 temple in Taipei's Wànhuá 萬華 district, organising the Wáng Yé 王爺procession in Táinán 臺南 County, or organising ceremonies in other temples through the island, found solace (Tsai 2003). Although the government of Chen Shui-bian had looked at the epidemics of SARS and H5N1 as security issues and attributed their outbreak on defective PRC governance (Rollet 2014), other lessons had to be learned from the local politics of communal religions. The capacity of their temple associations to influence large parts of the population brought to the fore the necessity to involve them in the design of public measures against infectious diseases.

Some theological teachings or religious doctrines have coincided with the public interest. Hence, the religious authorities that advocate vegetarianism have found vindication for their teaching with the outbreak of zoonotic infections such as SARS, Ebola, and COVID-19, related to close contact with animals for meat consumption (Chee 2020).[3] It remains unclear whether public authorities will integrate such religious teachings as part of their strategy to prevent future pandemics. There exist some obstacles of a religious and political nature that will make it difficult for secular and religious authorities to demonstrate some common grounds. For example, some communities among Taiwanese Indigenous people have religious traditions in which hunting and meat consumption constitute an important part of their rituals (Simon 2012). This reality of a diversity of theologies and ritual traditions illustrate the complexity of the necessary engagement by the state, medical, and scientific authorities with the holders of religious knowledge, to ensure that the latter can in turn influence those who look at them for guidance, inspiration, or healing. As I suggest below, commonality of views between state officials and religious leaders on social welfare may provide a solid ground for this cooperation.

[2] The source is dated 2015, but the GOH remained operational when I last visited Taipei in 2019.
[3] The original version of this short article, written in Chinese, was published by the Malaysian branch of Tzu Chi before the outbreak of COVID-19.

The Mutuality of Interests on Social Welfare

The mutuality of interests between the state and religious institutions in Taiwan were wide-ranging at the beginning. The political parties in power and the main religious organisations shared misgivings about the CCP's approach to religion in both authoritarian and democratic regimes. This convergence of views on relations with China, however, has changed over the years, fragmenting into a diversity of views in both the political and the religious sphere. For instance, the fundamentally hostile posture of the KMT towards the CCP under Chiang Kai-shek has gradually moved into a far more accommodative approach towards China, endorsing religious events promoted by the CCP on official occasions such as the visit of its then Chairman Lien Chan 連戰 (b. 1936) to celebrate the cult of the Yellow Emperor in Shānxī 山西 (Rigal-Cellard 2017). The divergence between the Taiwanese two main political parties mirrors the diversity of views that have emerged over the last two decades within the religious milieu about the ideal state of relations between China and Taiwan. Whereas the PCT appears more adamant on maintaining a firm stance on Taiwanese right to self-determination, Buddhist leaders have appeared more cautious. In other words, the consensus between political parties and the main religious associations has eroded in matters of cross-strait relations and the attitude towards the CCP. However, one aspect of the mutuality of interest between political parties and religions has remained intact: the importance of religious institutions as part of the Taiwanese welfare regime, celebrated by the time of the historic transition from the KMT to the DPP in 2000 (Zhèng 2000).

Religious philanthropy has served as auxiliary to the state from early on: when the government had little resources to invest in social policies, it welcomed the involvement of Christian denominations in health care, education, and social work (Wáng 1999). For Christian churches' adherents, the delivery of social services to those in need represented a concrete expression of their faith. During the period of democratisation, the contribution of churches to social welfare has extended to providing support to a marginalised segment of Taiwanese societies, for example, with the long-term residents invited as guest workers in the sector of care, manufacture, and fishing. The Ministry of Interior openly sponsored such activities on the part of diverse religious organisations, including not only Daoist (Lǐ F. 1994) and Christian ones (Lǐ L. 1994; Huáng and Zhāng 1994), but recognising the relevance of popular and communal religions as well (Zhèng 1994; Lín 1994). These activities contributed to the empowerment of churches vis-à-vis the state as important partners and legitimised their social relevance to non-Christian Taiwanese. However, the reliance on Christian social welfare could not represent a sustainable approach, as the growth of that community slowed down and diminished after the initial swelling of number caused by the sudden migration of Christians from Mainland China in the late 1940s.

In terms of their organisation, Buddhists represented the closest thing to an institutional religion comparable to the Christian churches in the eyes of authorities. Moreover, they have the advantage of numbers, with a proportion of the population who claimed a Buddhist identity being significantly larger than those who claimed a Christian one (Hsiao and Schak 2005). The government actively encouraged the involvement of Buddhist lay association in its social policies, granting land to the Tzu Chi Foundation in the district of Huālián 花蓮 in the 1960s and supporting its development of a network of hospitals by granting the relevant construction permits. Tzu Chi has extended its range of activities in education and, most significantly, its large membership made it an especially valuable partner to the government in times of natural disasters because of its ability to mobilise rapidly volunteers for the provision of relief. This cooperation met the aspiration of the spiritual leader of the Foundation, Ven. Cheng Yen (Zhèngyán) 證嚴 (b. 1937), of "educating the rich to help the poor" (*jiàofù jìpín* 教富濟貧), which she developed as a practical application of the teachings of *rénjiān fójiào*. Not all Buddhist associations went that way, but Tzu Chi became one of the largest philanthropic organisations in Taiwan in a few decades.

Besides Christian churches and Buddhist organisations, the followers of other religions have also contributed—according to their abilities—to support the state (Chang 2010). By definition, Yīguàndào and other redemptive societies see charitable activities as an expression of their religious values. Moreover, the involvement of religious organisations in the delivery of a variety of social services enhances their reputation to those in the population who are not defining themselves as religious. Not all religions are equally involved in philanthropy, but there is a remarkable process of emulation, with many of them advertising charity as one of their activities. The present convergence of interest between the government outsourcing of social service to religious organisations and the element of volition among the religious believers, who see in philanthropy a way to express their faith or enhance their spiritual well-being, does not exclude that some coercion has existed for the smaller religious organisations, some of which lacked resources that could match those of the Buddhist and Christian associations. Legislations which expected that the committees managing the temples and shrines of popular religions set aside part of their revenues to finance charitable activities and serve the public interest constituted one of the bones of contention in the calls for a law on religion in the 1990s (Wú 1994).[4]

The outbreak of COVID-19 has presented the religious associations in Taiwan with another occasion to demonstrate their relevance to contemporary society. Those with the largest amount of human and financial resources could seize the moment to show that they are well-placed to serve the public interest. Hence, the

[4] The 1994 official register of religious organisations indicated for most of them the nature of their charity.

intervention of the Buddhist foundation Tzu Chi to help the government procure much-needed vaccines continued its record of cooperation with the government in the provision of health care and relief in situations of national disasters. Other organisations—in accordance with their means—also demonstrated their shared concern for public health. Some other associations that had showed hesitancy in complying with state directives during the early stage of the pandemic rapidly came to the realisation that their survival hinged upon compliance with the directives issued by the CDC. The Taiwanese population did not forget that the worship of Matsu and Wang Yeh in 2003 could not protect the population during the SARS pandemic and hence the pressure to cancel the pilgrimage to Matsu in the first year of the pandemic to prevent contagion had become unavoidable in 2020. Although popular and communal religions do not have health care, educational, and welfare institutions on a scale comparable to those of Buddhist and Christian associations, the social influence of temple associations at the local levels of society made their cooperation indispensable.

Concluding Remarks

I reckon that the historical account proposed above to understand the positive relations between the state and religious associations of all kinds constitutes an institutional perspective leading to conclusions that may differ from what a fine-grained anthropological approach would have revealed. The generally positive relations between the state and religions constitutes a generalisation that I have posited in stark contrast with the outright persecution against religious minorities by authoritarian regimes and the open resistance articulated by extremist religions in democratic societies. This narrative does not deny cases of overt conflicts with the leadership of the PCT and restrictions against some others during the period of martial law. I have little doubt that the story told above may have obscured underlying tensions at the local level between pastors in churches or members of temple committees and the townships or urban neighbourhoods' officials, as well as many other stories that await investigation. Such research may reveal James Scott's (1990) "hidden script" of implicit resistance by large Buddhist associations or the organisers of pilgrimages. Such an investigation would reveal more precisely the difficulties that government authorities had to overcome to ensure the successful implementation of their policies. Despite these lacunae, the conclusion remains valid that the relationship between the state and religions has been largely positive before the outbreak of COVID-19 and that it stood the test of the challenge this has raised to that relationship.

The cooperative response of religious associations to governmental efforts to control the spread of COVID-19 could built on already established patterns of relations, in which both religious and state institutions saw mutual benefits. A key

aspect of their relationship throughout the authoritarian and democratic regimes is the convergence of view between the state policy of limited investment in social security for the elderly and other vulnerable populations in the early stages of economic growth, and the opportunity this presented to religious organisations to put into practice their religious ideals. For Catholic and Protestant believers, their charities represented the embodiment of their ethics of care; for lay Buddhists and monastics like Zhèngyán, it expressed their value of compassion. By outsourcing to religious associations the provision of specific social services to vulnerable populations, successive governments have left behind a legacy of mutual trust. The result of that convergence is that when the pandemic broke out in 2020, government actions in previous decades were not interpreted as problematic. The organisations affiliated to popular and communal religions came close to represent an exception to that approach, but in the end they confirmed this trend.

The case of Taiwan holds some important lessons for comparative purposes. Religious diversity may preclude conflict between religion and state, especially when no religious organisation claims support from most of the population. The religious diversity may come in many forms. Differences between Sinitic, Dharmic, and Abrahamic religions obviously matter to explain a variety of religious perspective on social policy, but denominational differences or plurality of organisations within one specific religion also counts. The absence of religious hegemony leaves more space for state supremacy, an equation that remains valid even in a democracy. For sure, religious diversity presents formidable challenges as the state must at time reconcile divergent worldviews: as the exceptional challenge of COVID-19 has revealed, however, the neutrality of the state in matters of belief assigned it an authority that transcended these differences. My argument is that the mutuality of interests between the state and religions have facilitated that outcome. The active involvement of religious actors in the provision of social services to fill some of the gaps left by the state constitutes the evidence of this affinity: the state sees religious organisation as a positive force in society, and religious leaders and their followers appreciate that the state gives them an opportunity to act in ways that fulfil their religious ideals. Such convergence of views has created a path dependency of cooperation. The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought to light the importance of this kind of relationship as the state did not face resistance or opposition to the measures needed to protect the population's health, but compliance and cooperation.[5]

[5] I would like to thank the external reviewers for their very useful comments and suggestions.

ABBREVIATIONS

BAROC	Buddhist Association of the ROC
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDC	Center for Disease Control
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
GOH	Garden of Hope
KMT	Kuomintang (*Guómíndǎng*; Nationalist Party of China)
MOI	Ministry of Interior
PCT	Presbyterian Church in Taiwan
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

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