

K. H. Ting's Theological Thoughts Enlighten the Further Contextualization of Chinese Christianity

丁光训神学思想对基督教中国化的启迪

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Introduction

Bishop K. H. Ting (1915-2012) was a prominent Chinese Christian leader, and just like Y. T. Wu, provided a model of patriotism and love for the church. He was the principal of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary from 1952 to 2010. Between 1980 and 1996, he served three terms as Chairperson of the Chinese Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and as the President of the China Christian Council. At one point, he was also the Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the Chairman of the China Committee on Religion and Peace (CCRP). Bishop Ting was not only a religious leader, but also a theologian and thinker. The idea of "Theological Reconstruction" in the Chinese church was a concept he began to advocate and promote in 1998. Besides giving us a wealth of inspiration and guidance, the idea has provided an important foundation and resource for advancing the further contextualization of Christianity in China.

The Ideological Background of K. H. Ting

Bishop K. H. Ting's theological thinking had deep Christian roots. He grew up in an Anglican family and was influenced by Anglicanism from childhood. In the Anglican tradition,

state and religion were closely related, reflected very much in the close connection between the Anglican Church and the British state. He also believed that faith was not just a private matter, but one that involved state and society. As he used to say, “theology is a form of refined politics.”¹ The Anglican Church attaches great importance to liturgical worship and values the true, the good, and the beautiful in religion, believing that all these come from God. His Anglican-influenced faith background provided a good basis for him to value service to one’s country, to cultivate the right political identity, and to advocate for the tolerance of religious beliefs, respect for all goodness and the promotion of inter-religious harmony.

Bishop Ting’s theological ideas were derived from two great eras: one was an era of transition from the old to the new in which the Communists worked hard to build a new China. In earlier days, Bishop Ting had worked at the Shanghai YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association), where he had close contact and connection with the Communists and was deeply influenced by Y. T. Wu, who held a favorable view of the Communists and saw them as a progressive force.² Later, he went to Geneva and served as an executive staff of the World Student Christian Federation, where he came into frequent contact with communist intellectuals from Eastern Europe. For the most part, he never hesitated to express his approval of Marxism and the social ideas of the Communists—with the exception of atheism. These encounters led to profound shifts in his religious thinking, including his endorsement of socialist society.

1 Chen Zemin, “Preface”, in Ding Guangxun, *The Collected Words of Ding Guangxun*, Nanjing: Yilin Publishing House, 1998, 1.

2 Ding Guangxun, “The Advanced Mr. Wu” in *On the ‘Three-Self’ and Church Construction*, and the Theological Thought Construction, Shanghai: CCC&TSPM, 53.

The second era marked the transition from the end of the “Cultural Revolution” to the era of “Reform and Opening-up.” In 1980, Bishop Ting presided over the Third National Chinese Christian Conference³ and was selected as the third chairman of the Chinese Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the founding president of the China Christian Council. With the spring breeze of the “Reform and Opening-up,” he cooperated with the Communist Party and the People’s Government in implementing religious policies, restoring and advancing the cause of Chinese Christianity, which was in need of rejuvenation. He deeply appreciated the sincerity of the Communist Party and the government in implementing the policy of the freedom of religious belief and was determined to lead Chinese Christianity into the great era of “Reform and Opening-up,” to become part of the Chinese people, and to run the Chinese Protestant Church as an integral part of Chinese society. Bishop K. H. Ting was determined to walk alongside the Communist Party, the People’s Government, and the people so as to consciously adapt Chinese Christianity to socialist society.

In 1993, Comrade Jiang Zemin, who was then General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, articulated “three sentences” about religious work at the National United Front Work Conference: conscientiously observe the policy of freedom of religious belief; strengthen the administration of religious affairs in accordance with the law; and actively guide religions in adapting to socialist society. Bishop K. H. Ting felt deeply about the importance of “actively guiding religions to adapt to socialist society.” The center of gravity in his thinking shifted and he felt that the focus of Chinese Protestantism must be to consciously adapt to socialist society at the level of theological thinking.

3 Ding Guangxun, “Retrospect and Prospect” in *On the ‘Three-Self’ and Church Construction, and the Theological Thought Construction*, 9.

His thoughts became more mature after years of deep pondering. In August 1998, he delivered a speech entitled “The Call to Renovate Religious Ideas” at a meeting of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) on Nationalities and Religions in Xi’an.⁴ This “call” stirred up multiple waves of responses with a single stone. Within religious circles, Bishop K. H. Ting had taken the lead in proposing that religions in China, including Christianity, should consciously and actively adapt to socialist society, especially at the level of religious or ideological thought. The religious community should move from merely acting in accordance with the requirements of the Party and Government to become active responders and conscious actors.

From the perspective of Chinese Christianity, this “call” of Bishop Ting, on the one hand, was made to consolidate the achievements of the “Three-Self” movement; on the other hand, like a prophet, he had perceived that with the progress of “Reform and Opening-up” and the development of globalization, hostile forces from the West would infiltrate China’s religions in various ways, and might gradually “de-contextualize” them. I still remember Bishop Ting once saying, “The challenges are greater than the opportunities” and this was the reality. The key to preventing and resisting such a process to “de-contextualize,” was to strengthen the reconstruction of Chinese Christianity, by starting with theological thought. By consolidating the foundation, we could resist “de-contextualization” and advance the “further contextualization of Chinese Christianity.” Although Bishop Ting had retired from the leadership of both the CCC and TSPM (*lianghui*) he was still recognized as the ideological leader and theologian because of this important idea. In November 1998, the “Collected Works of K. H. Ting” was published, and in the same year, the joint meeting of the National Committees of the CCC&TSPM was held in Jinan.

4 Cao Shengjie, *The Oral History of Cao Shengjie*, Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Press, 2015, 22.

This meeting decided to promote theological reconstruction. Bishop Ting personally “steered” the whole discourse on theological reconstruction and led Chinese Christianity to adapt to socialist society at the level of theological thought.

The Main Content and Inspiration of Bishop K. H. Ting’s Thought

As a former student of Bishop K. H. Ting and one of his successors in the work at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, I deeply appreciate the significance of his theological ideas concerning the further contextualization of Christianity in China. His theological thoughts are not slogans or catchphrases but are interpretive and practical. Through the study of doctrines and the scripture, Bishop K. H. Ting has explored and interpreted how the Christian faith has been adapting to socialist society, providing a model for us to follow and establishing one of the paradigms for the further contextualization of Christianity in China. Bishop Ting’s Thought is profoundly rich with three aspects standing out as the most prominent:

The Cosmic Christ

Bishop Ting’s article on “the Cosmic Christ,”⁵ explains one of his most important ideas. His main point is that the greatness of Christ is cosmic as He is the Creator of the universe, and has created all things with love. Therefore, we cannot understand Christ only through the perspective of denominational beliefs and doctrines, but should understand His work in the larger social context.

5 Ding Guangxun, *The Collected Works of Ding Guangxun*, Nanjing: Yilin Publishing House, 1998. This book is actually an “anthology of Ding Guangxun,” which contains only some of his articles, not all of them.

He noted in his book, “When we recognize the great love of Jesus and that He is the Christ of the whole universe, we are able to know that God is the loving One of the universe and the loving Creator, just as Christ has revealed.”⁶ This idea of Bishop K. H. Ting comes from the book of Colossians: “He [The Son] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:15-17, NRSV); “To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:27-28, NRSV). It is easy for believers to understand and accept this idea as it comes from the Bible; additionally, it has been influenced by Western process philosophy, represented by the theories of Alfred North Whitehead and Teilhard de Chardin. In particular, Teilhard de Chardin was a Catholic paleontologist who believed in the theory of evolution and was friendly to China.

Most Christian intellectuals in the West are familiar with Teilhard de Chardin’s ideas so it was not difficult for Bishop Ting’s theological view of the “Cosmic Christ” to be understood in Western Christian circles. After 1981, whenever Bishop Ting visited and lectured in churches in the West, he would speak about this idea. The antithesis of the “Cosmic Christ” is the “Christ of the Church.” Historically, Christology has been a source of church divisions resulting in numerous denominations, sects or cliques. The “Christ of the Church” was something that could easily be misunderstood and lead to exclusivism.

6 *Ibid.*, 110.

Why did Bishop K. H. Ting carry on a discourse on “the Cosmic Christ?” He did so because church and doctrine have always been central in the Western world and in Christian tradition, leading to the exclusion of many progressive things and ideas. He wanted people to take a broader view of the Christian faith, to affirm all that is true, good, and beautiful in the world, including all that is good in the Communist Party and New China, to affirm all the good deeds of the people, to help Christians in the West correct their prejudices against China, and finally to help Chinese Christians correct their prejudices against non-believers.

According to Bishop Ting, we should not stand in the way of unity between believers and the people on the grounds that “believers should not be yoked together with unbelievers,” nor should we deny all that is true, good and beautiful among non-believers by simply saying that “those who believe in Jesus will go to Heaven and those who do not will go to Hell.” Instead, we should accept each other in love and harmonious coexistence, promote unity, and contribute together towards social development. His high degree of confidence in the socialist system was well manifested in his “Cosmic Christology.” Bishop K. H. Ting was exemplary in “speaking positively about religion in China,” which he had been doing since 1980. The value and significance of this “Cosmic Christology” lies in the fact that it is a theological reflection on a non-Christianity-centered world, just as it is also a reflection and construction of a new Christology.

God is Love

“God is love” is the second important position held by Bishop K. H. Ting. In 2004, his earlier works in English, *Love Never Ends* was re-published, with some new additions, by the Cook Group under the title “God is Love.” This is another one of his powerful and influential thoughts.

In his book, he mentions that “God is love, and His loving nature makes Him love all His created children,” and “because of His loving nature, God does not want His will to be fulfilled by giving

orders that must be obeyed.” Rather, through “education, training, discipline, salvation, and sanctification, He wants to create countless new human beings who are both self-aware and self-respecting, who could fully cooperate with Him and with others, who are able to share His will and His way, and have communion and fellowship with Him, the highest point in His vision of creation.”⁷

This thought of Bishop Ting was drawn from the Book of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet of Israel who was convinced that God would punish the Gentiles. Jonah saw God as a tyrant who would destroy the entire city of Nineveh, a city of Gentiles. However, God revealed himself as a loving God who gave people the opportunity to change for the better and that he would not callously destroy humankind. Bishop K. H. Ting perceived that Chinese Christians held a similar view of God, regarding him as a tyrant who loved to punish people. For instance, in the early days of the founding of New China, there were some Christians who were so deluded that they even prayed to God to stop the PLA from crossing the Yangtze River, or to drown the PLA in a tidal wave, just as God had drowned the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. When in 1998 there was a huge flood caused by the Yangtze River, resulting in a crushing disaster, some Christians argued that it was God’s punishment for the Chinese people. Bishop Ting immediately attempted to correct their misconceptions, by pointing out that “God is Love,” not a tyrant who liked to punish people, and that disasters were not necessarily God’s punishment, but opportunities for people to learn and progress, thus people should look at things dialectically.

7 Ding Guangxun, “God is Love” in *Collected Writings of Ding Guangxun*, pp. 54-58.

This view of God is of great importance. “God is Love” requires Chinese Christians to take “Love” as the starting point for understanding society and the world, and to set “Love” as the ultimate goal in practicing the teachings of Jesus, to practice Christ’s teaching of “loving your neighbor as yourself,” to love our country, people and culture, and to “build up the Church in love.” In 1986, Bishop K. H. Ting focused on a single topic: that the Church should build itself up in love.⁸ All the work of the Church should be aligned with the truth that “God is Love.” Whether the Church could stand with the country, the people, and society depends on the view of God that she embraces. By believing that “God is love,” it would be quite natural for Chinese Christians to love both country and the Church.

The Theology of “Harmonious Coexistence”

The third important theological thought of Bishop K. H. Ting is the theology of “harmonious coexistence,”⁹ in which he argued that the pattern of Chinese theology should not be represented by a circle with only one center, but by an ellipse with two centers. These two centers are represented by two “C’s”, which means “Christ and China” coexist and do so harmoniously.

8 This is a speech delivered at the closing ceremony of the Fourth National Chinese Christian Conference in Beijing on August 23, 1986. Cf., “The ‘Three-Self’ and Church Construction, and the Theological Thought Construction,” 129-138. Bishop Ding expressed a very special ecclesiological idea in this speech, which also guided the direction of his work for the next ten years (he retired from leadership in 1996), that was from striving to building, and this speech changed many Christians’ view of him, and improved their impression of him.

9 Professor Woodrow named this thought as “restoration.” He said that “Bishop Ding Guangxun proposed the idea of ‘restoration’ and ‘theological reconstruction’”. Cf., Woodrow, “The Theology of Harmony: Searching for the Roots and Development of Chinese Christian Theological Thought from the ‘Southern Wei and Northern Zhao’”, Hong Kong: Sanlian Bookstore, 275.

Bishop Ting believed that Chinese Christianity had gradually moved away from the “Mediterranean Pattern” (which represents the Greek and Latin patterns of early Christianity), and into the Chinese context and culture, consciously identifying and uniting itself with the Chinese people. Not only should Chinese Christianity break out of the Mediterranean mould, but should also eradicate the Western colonial pattern, and move from the “three-selves” (self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation) to the “three-wells” (govern well, support well, and propagate well), be “salt and light,” consciously serving Chinese society. To this end, Bishop Ting advocated and promoted the founding of the Amity Foundation to serve Chinese society better.

Bishop Ting was particularly against creating a contradiction between “believers and unbelievers” among people. He argued that if too much emphasis is placed on the saying that “those who believe in Jesus will go to Heaven and those who do not will go to Hell,” without preaching the full Gospel, Christianity might become more and more alienated from the people, create “ill feelings” or lead to an “either/or”

extremist model and become marginalized as a clique. Given this situation, he even proposed to “dilute the doctrine of Justification by faith.” Of course, he did not mean to oppose the Christian doctrine, but was against holding a negative view that excluded other people and other religions, disregarded the existence of the true, the good, and the beautiful outside of the Christian world, and provoked strife and conflict to the detriment of stability, unity, and social harmony.

Bishop Ting believed that Christians are patriots, messengers of peace, and conveyors of the need to “glorify God and benefit people;” therefore, we Christians should learn to get along with the Chinese people, coexist harmoniously with them, expand our unity and influence, so that we can spread the great love of Jesus Christ and proclaim the good news of reconciliation.

These are the three important theological thoughts of Bishop K. H. Ting: he always quoted from the Bible based on the reality of Chinese society, using Christian doctrine to interpret the truth that the Christian faith is compatible with socialist society.

Bishop Ting advocated theological reconstruction in order to adapt Christianity to the development of contemporary Chinese society. Although the term “Further contextualization of Chinese Christianity” had not been put forth in his time, his theological thought had long been and was always based upon the teachings of the Bible and his experience as a Christian in interpreting what it means in regard to political identification, cultural integration and social adaptation. The thoughts of Bishop Ting are deeply theological, insightful and enduring, and have been inspirational and helpful to current efforts in promoting the further contextualization of Christianity in China.

In his speech at the 2015 National Conference on United Front Work and another important speech at the 2016 National Religious Work Conference, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that “we must actively guide religions to adapt to socialist society, we must adhere to the direction of the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity, must improve the level of the legalization of religious work, must take a dialectical view of the social role of religion, must stress on exerting the influence of religious figures, and we must guide religions to industriously serve to promote economic development, social harmony, cultural prosperity, national unity and the reunification of the country.” General Secretary Xi’s speeches were given from a high and comprehensive perspective pointing out the direction for the development of Chinese religions. For Christianity, we should build on past achievements and strive for new progress on adhering to the “Three-Self” principle, inheriting Bishop K. H. Ting’s important idea of theological reconstruction, and holding high this thought as an important resource in promoting the further contextualization of Christianity in China.

Between September 22 and 24 in 2015, the National Committees of the CCC&TSPM jointly held a special seminar in Beijing to commemorate the centenary of Bishop K. H. Ting's birth and the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity, at which many experts and scholars concluded that Bishop K. H. Ting's Thought is an important resource for the further contextualization of Christianity in China: we should research and learn from his important thoughts and pass them on. According to Professor Zhuo Xinping, "the typical embodiment of the theological thought for the further contextualization of Christianity in China is the 'theology of love' which was advocated and constructed by Bishop K. H. Ting."¹⁰ This showed that Professor Zhuo Xinping had captured the core essence of Bishop K. H. Ting's theology. Meanwhile, Professor Philip Wickeri, the author of Bishop Ting's biography, said, "Bishop K. H. Ting is a practitioner of politics, morality, and scholarship." "I can say that it is Bishop K. H. Ting who taught me how to play well the two roles of Christian and scholar. For me, the demeanor of Bishop K. H. Ting is like 'a high mountain with flowing water.'¹¹ This showed that Professor Wickeri had captured the essence of Bishop Ting's "theological mission and goals."¹²

10 Zhuo Xinping, "Bishop Ding Guangxun and the Exploration of the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity", *Proceedings of the Symposium on the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of Bishop Ding Guangxun and the Further Contextualization of Chinese Christianity*, Shanghai: CCC&TSPM, 2016, 114-122.

11 Philip L. Wickeri, "Bishop Ding Guangxun and Chinese Church Construction," *Proceedings of the Symposium on the 100th Birth Anniversary of Bishop Ding Guangxun and the Further Contextualization of Chinese Christianity* (Shanghai, CCC&TSPM, 2016), 123. Philip Wickeri, an American who was an overseas co-worker of Bishop Ting, was involved in the work of the Amity Foundation, and worked closely with him for 15 years.

12 The mission and goals of theology is a very important concept in the 21st century and politics, morality, and scholarship are necessary elements of the theology of contextualization. Here, "politics" refers to political issues, so that theology has a political task; "morality" refers to moral issues, a subject on which traditional theology puts great emphasis; and "scholarship" refers to academic tasks. All three aspects have been contributed to and exemplified by the ancient Church Fathers. The theological task of the further contextualization of Christianity in China must also include these three elements. Professor Shen Xuanren discusses this very well in his article "Christian Theology and the Pluralistic Meaning of Theology - The Way for the (sic) Contemporary Ecumenical Theology" in Guo, Hongbiao, and Du, Jianwei, eds, *Theological Agenda for the New Century*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Institute, 2002, 1-24.

According to Professor Duanqi, “As the leader of the Christian church in China, Bishop Ting put great emphasis on the integration of Christianity with contemporary Chinese society, that is to say, he thought mostly about how Christianity could better survive and develop in today’s China, a socialist country, and how it could be accepted by the vast number of non-Christian Chinese people. His theological thought also orbits around this point.” “Indeed, Bishop K. H. Ting’s theological thought is not just theological speculation, it is a distillation and summary based on the reality experienced by Chinese Christians, and a product of the close integration of Chinese Church and society.”¹³

The point that Professor Duanqi focused on is that Bishop K. H. Ting’s theological approach is that of practical theology, which is also a theological approach in contextualization,¹⁴ and this is the methodology of the further contextualization of Christianity in China. As for the kind of inspiration that Bishop Ting’s theological thought has given to the further contextualization of Christianity in China, I think I do not need to say much, as the three scholars have made it very clear—if we could work hard in accordance with Bishop K. H. Ting’s “core essence of theology,” “theological mission and goals,” and “theological model and methodology,” the study of the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity will have richer content and meaning.

13 Duan Qi, “Bishop Ding Guangxun and the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity,” in *Proceedings of the Symposium on the 100th Birth Anniversary of Bishop Ding Guangxun and the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity*, Shanghai: CCC&TSPM, 91.

14 The methodology of practical theology is to generate reflections that arise from the encounter between faith and situation, and its mode is practice-reflection-practice. Through constantly practicing and revising, theology becomes a living theology; its theory can be found in Shen Yahong and Dong Jiahua’s “A Brief Introduction to the Methodology of Practical Theological Research,” in Chen Junwei ed. *Theological Methodology*, Hong Kong: Tian Dao Bookstore, 443-468.

Conclusion

This article was originally written for the “political consultative thematic meeting” of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) on Nationalities and Religions held on November 26, 2019. The title of this meeting was “The Core Socialist Values Guide Religions to Make Interpretations of Religious Doctrines and Rules that Meet the Requirements of the Development of the Times.” Comrade Wang Yang, a Standing Committee member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Chairman of the CPPCC National Committee, attended this meeting and delivered an important speech, which was reported by CCTV (China Central Television) for seven minutes. Because of the time limitation, my speech was only six minutes long and consisted of about 2,500 words—I mainly focused on explaining that Bishop K. H. Ting was a model in this area. After this meeting, I felt the need to continue to perfect this speech into a paper, because Bishop Ting’s theological thoughts are of great significance to the further contextualization of Christianity in China. Meanwhile, his thoughts are getting more and more attention in the Western world. Not long ago, I met Mr. David Mehils, the former president of the Cook Group, which published Bishop Ting’s book, *God is Love* (English version).

He told me that he had published many books in his life, but he was so proud to have had the chance to publish Bishop Ting’s book. He also said that this particular book has been collected by many prestigious libraries around the world and was being valued and used by more and more people.

Just as Dr. Philip Wickeri puts it, “Bishop Ting was one of the greatest leaders of the church and of the world in the late 20th century. Few church leaders in any country around the world has done as much for their own churches and the churches of the world in the same period as Bishop Ting has done for the Chinese and world church.”¹⁵ “The theology of Bishop Ding Guangxun is rooted in the Bible, in church tradition, and reason.”¹⁶

If we use “faith, hope, and love” to view the theological route that has been taken, then we can say that traditional theology focuses on faith—knowing our relationship with God; the theology of Moltmann of the 20th century focuses on hope—that is, the theology of hope; while the theology of Bishop K. H. Ting focuses on love—loving God, loving one’s fellow humans, and loving the Church. We could say that the theology of Bishop K. H. Ting put a powerful exclamation point on the history of theology in the 20th century which is beautiful and significant.

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15 Philip L. Wickeri, “Bishop Ding Guangxun and Chinese Church Construction,” *Proceedings of the Symposium on the 100th Birth Anniversary of Bishop Ding Guangxun and the Further Contextualization of Chinese Christianity* (Shanghai, CCC&TSPM, 2016), 123-124.

16 Ibid.