

REGENT COLLEGE

INTERPRETING THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF BISHOP TING'S
ENGAGING WITH SOCIETY IN CHINA

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From the early church period to postmodernism, the relationship between church and state has been controversial. Some argue that Christianity is inner-focused, non-political, with an other-worldly emphasis. Others think that Christianity is outer-focused, politically engaged, with a this-worldly emphasis. These controversial views are born in different social contexts within biblical principles. Unlike western countries, the state's leaders in China are distinctly atheist. There are also two different Christian responses to the state in China. Philip Yuen-Sang Leung describes the "God-centred", "scripture-oriented" and prayer-emphasizing Christians as "Marys" and those "intellectual Christians" who advocated social-political reform and thought that Christianity was highly relevant to the social change of Chinese society as "Marthas".¹ Alex Chow, an American-born Chinese Christian scholar, observes that Bishop K.H.Ting (1915-2012) and other fellow Chinese theologians developed "a public faith" for social engagement.² Bishop Ting proposes that God is love and the church needs to bring witness to society; therefore, Chinese Christians ought to engage with society and could work with socialists. In this paper, my aim is to interpret Bishop Ting's spiritual practice of engaging with society in China from 1951 to 1985. My method is firstly introducing the Chinese socio-cultural context from which Bishop Ting emerged and how Bishop Ting's life experience shaped his opinion of engaging with society. Secondly, I will discuss Bishop Ting's theologies which relate to social engagement and certain spiritual practices he promotes. Lastly, I am going to critique his contributions to the Chinese Christian faith and provide some cautionary observations. This paper argues that although Bishop Ting's spiritual practice of engaging with society seems not balanced with Christian inner life, this practice

¹ Philip Yuen-Sang Leung, "Conversion, Commitment, and Culture: Christian Experience in China, 1949-99" in *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald M. Lewis (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2004), 89.

² Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

was promoted within the Chinese context and made a big contribution to the growth of the Chinese church.

Bishop Ting's spiritual practice of engaging with the society emerged under the socio-cultural context in China and his life experience. Religious life in China is pluralistic.³ In the 19th century, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, folk religions, and Christianity coexisted. Confucianism had a bigger influence than other religions. Since the Han dynasty (206 BCE-22CE), Confucius was regarded as a teacher of wisdom and guided people's behavior in every aspect.⁴ Confucianism is a political philosophy which contains moral principles and guidance about living in community with others.⁵ It mainly focused on this world and avoided referring to extraordinary gods.⁶ This Confucian ideology shows that Chinese people are concerned about ethical behavior in community when they choose faith.⁷ With this understanding, some missionaries in the liberal wings made a lot of effort in the spirit of social service. They sought to deliver the Christian message through social service to the Chinese Confucian mind.⁸ When the May-Fourth Movement began to protest the Japanese invading China in 1919, China experienced a series of social changes.

During those social changes, Bishop Ting's spiritual practice of engaging with society began to emerge. He was the one of the first who sought to take social responsibility with morality in the Christian faith. His early Anglican church life was significant for forming Ting's social engagement. Ting's father was one of the first priests in the Episcopal church in

³ Sathianathan Clarke, "The Task, Method and Content of Asian theologies," in *Asian Theology on the Way: Christianity, Culture, and Context*, ed. Peniel Rajkumar, (Minneapolis, MN : Fortress Press, 2015),7.

⁴ Pingye Li, "How Do Social Psychological Needs Impact Christianity in China?" in *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, ed. Mikka Ruokanen, and Paulos Huang, (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2003), 214.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 215.

⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁸ Wing-Huang Lam, *Chinese Theology in Construction* (Pasadena: W. Carey Library, 1983), 29.

Shanghai in the 1910s.⁹ Ting was born and was baptized as an infant at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in 1915 in Shanghai.¹⁰ During his time at St. Peter's church, his Anglican rector, Dong Jianwu, had a significant impact on his theological thought and practice of engaging with society. Rector Dong was Ting's youth pastor, who formed his Christian faith.¹¹ He had shown Ting how to engage with the world through serving the poor in the war and working with the Communist Party for national salvation.¹² Dong's support of the Communist Party was due to their righteousness, compared to Nationalist disloyalty. Influenced by the May-Fourth Movement in 1919, the Nationalist Party and Communist Party had cooperated together to protest Japan invading China.¹³ However, the new Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek started to chase the Communist Party army in 1927.¹⁴ China was then in the midst of civil war and the Second Sino-Japanese War. A lot of cities were in ruin, a lot of people suffered, and it became urgent to seek national salvation. More and more Chinese Christians thought that it was important to engage with the communists to achieve national salvation. So did Ting. This life experience at St. Peter's Church is significant to understand his spiritual practice, because it foreshadowed his Anglican priesthood and his spiritual practice of socio-political involvement.¹⁵

Not only did Ting's church life inspire him to engage with society, but also his involvement with student movements and his theological education. During his first year at St. John's University in Shanghai, Ting attended some student conferences, and he discovered that the church has a very important role in national salvation.¹⁶ To understand the

⁹ Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China : K.H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Maryknoll : Orbis Books, 2007), 19.

¹⁰ Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China*, 21.

¹¹ Wickeri, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

role of the church in China, he switched to theological education at St John's University in 1937.¹⁷ The theology at St. John's was liberal and Anglican.¹⁸ Anglicans are not against socialism. According to the current Archbishop Michael Ramsey, Anglican Christians regarded socialism as a friend who could illuminate the incarnation of Christ.¹⁹ Besides that, within Anglican tradition, one role of the church is to respond to the concerns of society.²⁰ This social concern later became Ting's most significant and controversial theological practice: political involvement.

During Ting's undergraduate degree, he also worked closely with Progressive Christian Student movements, especially University Christian Fellowship and YMCA.²¹ In the student fellowship, he organized students to discuss how should they respond to the society and nation during the Japanese occupation.²² Ting realized that students had a stronger social and political consciousness than the church.²³ Ting's second theological degree at Union Theological Seminary (1947 to 1948) furthered his understanding of the church's involvement in society.²⁴ Ting and other Chinese students focused on religious education which could apply to social concerns.²⁵ Ting was deeply influenced by his professor, Harrison Sackett Elliot. Elliot thought that Christian education could open the way for political actions.²⁶ This idea helped Ting develop his view of the role of church in society in the 1940s.

¹⁷ Wickeri, 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jieren Li, *In Search of the Via Media between Christ and Marx : A Study of Bishop Ding Guangxun's Contextual Theology* (Lund: Center for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund Univ., 2008), 48.

²² Wickeri, 30.

²³ Li, *In Search of the Via Media between Christ and Marx*, 48.

²⁴ Wickeri, 71.

²⁵ Ibid., 72.

²⁶ Ibid.

After Ting returned to China in 1951, the People's Republic of China was established. Facing social change, Ting joined the Three-Self Movement due to his social concerns in 1954. This movement intended to build an indigenous church that was self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.²⁷ He was elected to the committee. Soon Ting was consecrated as the Anglican bishop of Zhejiang in 1955. From the 1960s to 1990s, Bishop Ting put his thoughts of engaging with society into practice with some fellow Christians in China.

Bishop Ting's spiritual practices of engaging with society are developed from two major theological ecclesial themes: Church as witness to the world, and church as servant to the community. First of all, Ting thinks that the Christian church is the witness of Christ to the world.²⁸ This view is based on his Christological understanding. He thinks that Christ is in the centre of human history, the scripture tells the church to be a witness, and the incarnation of Christ is the example for the church.²⁹ In addition, Christ taught the church how to be the witness in the world.³⁰ Ting points out that in order to bear witness, the church needs to associate closely with others as well as be separate from human sin.³¹ This means that the church is called to be holy as the people of God, but to stand as witnesses of God towards other non-Christians. Besides this, Ting thinks that being a witness is Jesus' commandment and every Christian's duty.³² In Ting's view, being a witness involves worship to God and proclamation of the gospel.³³ The most important job of the church is to worship God.

²⁷ Wickeri, 118.

²⁸ K.H. Ting, "The Nature of Witness" in *No Longer Strangers ; Selected Writings of Bishop K.H. Ting*, ed., Raymond L. Whitehead (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 89.

²⁹ Chloe Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 192.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

³² Ting, "The Nature of Witness," 89.

³³ *Ibid.*, 89.

Authentic Christians would kneel down and have sweet communication with God every day in prayer.³⁴

In order to let the church become the witness to China, Ting worked with Communism to improve its religious freedom policy. Due to Ting's earlier experience with Communism at St. Peter's Church and his Anglican influence in theology studies, Ting had a very positive view on working with Communism. He believed that Christian theology is related to all aspects of social life so that Christians could support and supervise political decisions. Ting said:

Chinese Christians support all the positive changes in our society brought about by socialism. Religious commitment and spirituality--whatever the theology--cannot really remain untouched by social and political stance, although in many cases the changes are just "touches" and nothing drastic. It is for the theologians to be sensitive to these touches and to reflect them honestly and reverently in their work.³⁵

Generally, Ting proposed that Christians could make good contributions to the social construction with theological understanding. In this way, socialists would know and value Christians' worldview. This view moved him to become a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the National People's Congress (NPC) when the door opened.³⁶ Theoretically, these two organizations have the highest state power, except for the Communist power.³⁷ Through CPPCC and NPC, Ting gave advice and represented the Chinese Christian Community at a national level. For instance, after the Cultural Revolution, Ting spoke publicly about the implementation of the religious freedom policy as a religious representative in the CPPCC in 1978.³⁸ Eventually, the government made their promises and publicized policies on religious freedom at home and abroad.³⁹ It is important to be aware of

³⁴ Ibid., 92.

³⁵ Ting, "A Nurturing Theology" in *No Longer Strangers*, 183.

³⁶ Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 50.

³⁷ Wickeri, 207.

³⁸ Wickeri, 207.

³⁹ Ibid., 209.

the different definitions of religious freedom between China and Western countries. Chow explains that this policy encouraged “a limited and private religion” rather than “an open practiced religion.”⁴⁰ It is obvious that Bishop Ting’s participation in the political process is a witness to the nation and brings progress to the religious freedom policy even though the religion freedom policy still has limitations. Still, Bishop Ting came up with more practices to bring the church to be a witness in China.

Under the new religious freedom policy, Bishop Ting worked on reopening churches and on church reform, in order to bring the witness of Christ back to life through the church community. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, many churches were desecrated all over China.⁴¹ Now with the new religious policy, Christians are allowed to worship God in their churches and homes. To Bishop Ting, God opened the door for Christians to bring their witness. He started to help reopen Protestant churches and build new churches so that people can worship God.⁴² In addition, he founded the China Christian Council (CCC) alongside TSPM in 1980.⁴³ The mission of the CCC is to reinforce the pastoral work of local Christian churches and to “practice the principle of mutual respect in matters of faith.”⁴⁴ CCC is not a church, but an approach to reforming church in China. During that time, a lot of people who were outside of the church would think the church is simply a building to practice religion. In order to eliminate this view, Ting organized CCC to support all local churches to be the witnesses of Christ.

Discussing what the church should be in the society, Ting furthered his thoughts and practices on what the church should do in the society. Bishop Ting thought that churches and

⁴⁰ Chow, 52.

⁴¹ Wickeri, 171.

⁴² Ibid., 227.

⁴³ Chow, 50.

⁴⁴ Wickeri, 222.

Christians are called to do social service in order to show God's love. This idea comes from Ting's Christology that Jesus is the great lover of men and women, and Jesus is the cosmic Christ.⁴⁵ Ting thinks that Jesus lived in his best human nature and died for men and women for love; and he is a "true lover" of human beings.⁴⁶ This special love also expanded to the whole cosmos. God created the whole world and sustains the universe by his word of power. There are several reasons why he emphasized God's attribute on love. First, God's unconditional love is good ethical behavior which appeals to many traditional Chinese people. God created men and women. He himself redeemed us from our sin without our payment. It is unconditional love that he sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sin. God's love stands out in the gospel. In Confucianism, ethical behavior is highly valued. Love as an ethical value can help Chinese people understand and accept the Christian faith. Second, a lot of people have misunderstandings about God's love. They think that God's love is merely towards Christians while God is punishing non-believers in their misfortune.⁴⁷ Third, within the church, many people know that God's almightiness, omnipresence and omniscience, yet seldom mention God's love to all humans and creation.⁴⁸ However, the Bible shows us the importance of God's love. In Paul's epistle, he declares that love is the greatest among faith and hope (1 Cor 13:13). Without God's love in his redemption work, there is no faith and hope for salvation.

In order to bring God's love to society, Ting encouraged the church to do social service and founded the first Christian-initiated foundation. In former years, many liberal church leaders had a background in social service in order to convince the Confucian

⁴⁵ K.H.Ting, *God is Love: Collected Writings of Bishop K.H. Ting* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries International, 2004), 40.

⁴⁶ Ting, *God is love*, 40.

⁴⁷ Ting, 41.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Chinese. Social, economic, and political injustice hindered people from knowing God's almightiness and love, Ting thought that helping achieve "a healthier social system and a fairer distribution of the world's goods" could help men and women to find reasonableness in Christian faith.⁴⁹ In Ting's mind, every local church had a neighbourhood community. This was a good place for Chinese Christians to practice loving neighbours in services. Bringing in the same idea of YMCA, Bishop Ting founded a Chinese non-governmental organization, Amity Foundation in 1985. Amity bound all church bodies to serve among others in society in China. The Chinese name for Amity, "Ai De," expressed Ting's sense of love as God's primary attribute and the dimension of Christian practice in society.⁵⁰ Wickeri points out that Bishop Ting was breaking new ground through Amity.⁵¹ Different from other non-governmental organizations, Amity was intended to be a Christian social service network around the notion of a *diakonia* ministry.⁵² The Greek word *diakonia* means service among others, so Amity employed Christian principles and worked with Christians and non-Christians together. Bishop Ting believed that the organization like Amity would serve an important role as a "*preparatio evangelica*-a preparation for the gospel message" and indirectly serve as the witness of Chinese church to all Chinese people.⁵³ After 36 years, the success of Amity not only brings services to all over the world, but also brings God's love. Now in the Chinese church, social service has been understood as spiritual practice for Chinese local Christians to express Christian love throughout Chinese society.⁵⁴

From above, Bishop Ting developed a liberal interpretation of the Christian faith that aimed at social and political engagement within the context of China.⁵⁵ It drew from the

⁴⁹ Ting, "The Cry for Bread" in *No Longer Strangers*, 72.

⁵⁰ Wickeri, 274.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁵² Chow, 63.

⁵³ Wickeri, 276.

⁵⁴ Chow, 62.

⁵⁵ Li, *In Search of the Via Media between Christ and Marx*, 155.

Christian faith of God's love and enhanced our understanding of the role of church in life. His theological expression of God's attribute of love, fully confirmed God's presence in creation and redemption. God is creator-lover who created everyone in his love, and died for everyone on the cross. Christians are living in this unconditional love. Christ is with us in his beloved church, this reflects the "relational dynamic" in Christian spirituality.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Jesus is cosmic Christ, so that Christ is intended to redeem the whole humankind and whole cosmos with his love.⁵⁷ With this lens, Christians and non-Christians both created and inspired with "goodness" and "beauty."⁵⁸ Thus, Christian and non-Christians are both beloved by God. On the other hand, love is the commandment from God in Christian's life. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus said the greatest commandment is loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and the second is loving our neighbours as myself (Matthew 22:37-39).

Another impact Bishop Ting had on Christian faith is that the role of church is to be the witness of Christ in our social engagement. The Christian church did not exist without community. The mission of the church in the community is evangelism. Within the Chinese religious freedom policy, Christians are only allowed to worship God in church. How could we evangelize others who are outside of the church? We had to engage with society, which means that the church needed to be witnesses of God, especially letting our ethical behaviors been witnesses. What is more, social service is expressing our love language to the world. Love is a common language. Compared to other religions, God's unconditional love is unique. This love can be expressed by social services. Services open the door for evangelism. In recent years, there are more and more city and countryside Chinese churches involved in

⁵⁶ Glen G. Scorgie, *A Little Guide to Christian Spirituality : Three Dimensions of Life with God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan,2007), 69.

⁵⁷ Ting, *God is love*, 112.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

social services. Some are supporting education in rural places, and others are doing volunteer medical service for the poor. They are bearing the witness of God and loving their neighbours. Some non-Christian researchers have also confirmed the contribution the Christian faith has brought to the public.

Even though Bishop Ting's practice of engaging with the society is mainly accepted by Chinese Christians and other non-Christians, there are still some questions we have. First, at the national level, do other Christian leaders handle the relationship between church and state well? Between the church and state, we need to put the church as the priority rather than the society. The main job of the church leaders is to be the shepherds of the people of God. Engaging with the society is the secondary task of the church. On the contrary, the church is sick when they put their attention fully on politics.⁵⁹ The church is meant to be the witnesses of Christ, which means we need to put Christ as centre in our daily lives.

Second, Ting's spiritual expression does not pay enough attention to communion with God in our spiritual lives. Ting only had mentioned that evangelism is our worship to God and the witness, but there is no practice of worship and church life that he proposed. In Christian life, prayer is the centre, which can move us upward to worship God, seek personal transformation by looking inward and serve others when turned outward.⁶⁰ Ting's spiritual practice of engagement with society is always associated outwardly with the society, but we also need to emphasize the church's community life.

To conclude, Bishop Ting made a great contribution to church life through his spiritual practice of engaging with society. This practice emerged under the socio-cultural change in China. His early life in the church and his theological education formed his theological thought. This practice is still relevant to Chinese Christians. There are some new

⁵⁹ Leung, "Conversion, Commitment, and Culture," 91.

⁶⁰ Scorgie, 146-177.

social needs in our society, Chinese Christians can still offer service with God's love. Our ethical behavior can be the witness of Christ so that others can turn to God.

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