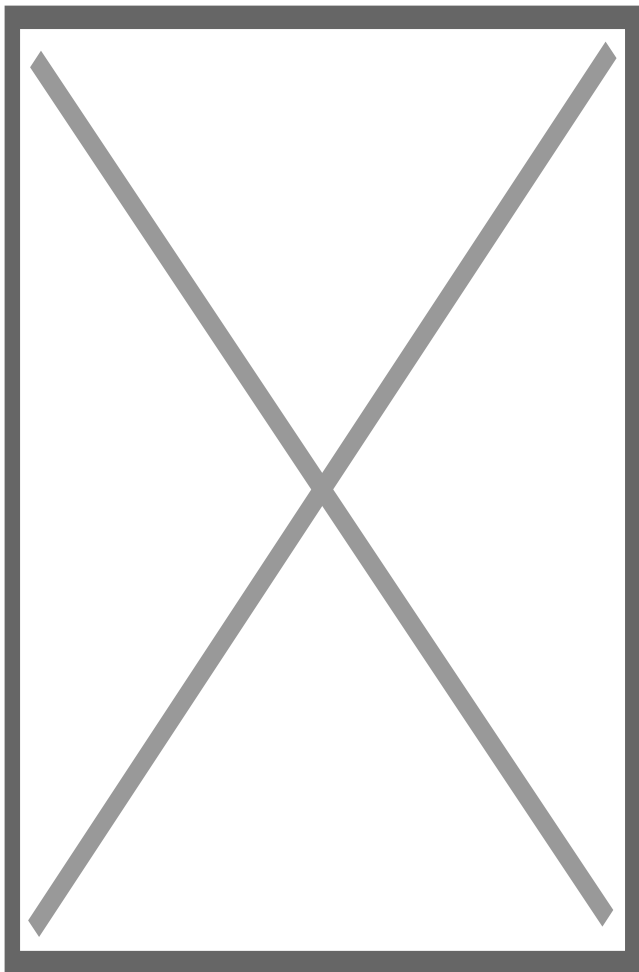


Wisdom makes a comeback

By [William C. Placher](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love

David F. Ford
Cambridge University Press

David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, is one of the important British theologians of his generation (he recently turned 60). He has written on everything from 2 Corinthians and Christian-Muslim relations to Karl Barth and the future of religious studies; edited the widely used book *The Modern Theologians* (Blackwell), now in its third edition; and played an important universitywide role in thinking about the future of Cambridge. Study at Yale with Hans Frei early in his career and regular visits to Princeton's Center of Theological Inquiry tie him to theology in the United States.

As Ford remarks right at the start of this book, “Wisdom has on the whole not had an easy time in recent centuries in the West, . . . yet it may be making a comeback.” The Wisdom texts of Hebrew scriptures address the practices of ordinary life more than the great events of history; they attend to those who suffer. The early 21st century, so filled with human suffering, so threatened by great powers’ indifference to ordinary life, may be a good time to think again about wisdom.

But what is wisdom? Ford distrusts slogans and oversimplifications. He never gives a single answer. But some themes keep emerging: We should love God for God’s own sake. Theologians should listen hard to cries—of suffering, joy, bewilderment and gratitude. Theology should operate in all five moods: indicative (affirming what we believe), imperative (calling to obedience), interrogative (struggling with hard questions), subjunctive (exploring possibilities, as Jesus’ parables do so well) and optative (desiring in hope). Theologians have too long limited themselves to the indicative and the imperative.

Ford also emphasizes the rereading of scripture. He often introduces texts, biblical and otherwise, with unusually long quotations and then circles around and approaches them from several different angles. His analysis begins with Job as a paradigmatic wisdom text, but he also considers 2 Corinthians, the Gospel of Luke and the prologue to John. He compares Job to the poetry of his lifelong friend Micheal O’Siadhail, especially in *The Gossamer Wall*, a collection of poems O’Siadhail wrote in witness to the Holocaust. Seeking wisdom, Ford says, involves learning to read poetry, growing suspicious of formulae, attending to complexities, listening to others (especially the suffering) and rereading in love.

As an alternative to Barth’s identification of God as “the One who loves in freedom,” Ford speaks of “the God of blessing who loves in wisdom.” He thinks that Barth focuses too much on knowledge and not enough on wisdom, too much on indicatives and imperatives, not enough on interrogatives, subjunctives and optatives. Ford then explores the nature of the church, presenting each of its four traditional attributes—one, holy, catholic and apostolic—as both a blessing and a call, something given and something Christians are challenged to become.

In the last three chapters before his conclusion, Ford turns to three concrete contexts for putting wisdom into practice: the Scriptural Reasoning movement, the University of Cambridge and the L’Arche Federation.

L’Arche is a loose federation, founded by two Catholics in 1964 and now including 130 residential communities around the world, where people with mental disabilities live with “assistants” who help in their care. Some assistants are permanent members of the community; others come for a year or so. The communities operate on the assumption that the assistants have more to learn from the disabled community members than the other way around. Ford has been an observer of the movement for more than ten years, and he finds it a “school of wisdom and desire” that listens to cries and cultivates wisdom in the way he describes throughout the book.

The contemporary university is of course a much more ambiguous institution. Ford rejects the standard definition of the modern university as secular. He insists that Cambridge, at least, is best described as secular and religious. In order to face today’s challenges—how to combine teaching and research, how to train specialists who also receive an all-around formation and how to preserve collegiality in a large institution, for example (Ford has interesting things to say on each point)—universities need to draw on the wisdom of traditions, religious traditions among them. Ford describes the contributions that a faculty of theology and religious studies can make to a secular and religious university in a way that sounds quite wonderful—if rather utopian when one tries to imagine transferring Ford’s ideas to this side of the Atlantic.

In the Scriptural Reasoning movement, interfaith groups meet to read and discuss specific texts from their respective scriptures, not employing the methods of modern historians but together meditatively reading the plain sense of the text and then freely developing contemporary equivalents to the midrash on it. No one in the group seeks consensus or conversion, but all hope that others will bring wisdom to help them learn to read their

own scriptures more richly. The Scriptural Reasoning movement began among Jewish scholars like Peter Ochs, now of the University of Virginia, in the early 1990s when they found some connections between what they were doing and the postliberal theology developed by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck at Yale. Some Christians, including Ford and Daniel Hardy from Britain, joined the project, and later some Muslims did as well.

It is a fascinating enterprise. Much interfaith conversation had previously taken place among liberals of each faith—those most comfortable distancing themselves from the traditional part of their tradition. But in Scriptural Reasoning more conservative or traditional approaches turn out to be fully compatible with friendly, hospitable interfaith conversation. Scriptural Reasoning might turn out to be much more than just an interesting academic movement.

David Ford is a polite reader and thinker. This is not a defect, but it does impose some limitations on his work. His readings of others are always generous; he draws on what he finds valuable and mostly ignores the parts with which he might disagree. His summaries often take the form of eight to ten theses rather than a single slogan, and if his theses criticize his opponents at all, they do so only implicitly. Those who read theology for the sake of slashing polemics or quick answers will be disappointed.

At times this volume feels like a collection of essays struggling to be a book. For example, I was immensely grateful to be introduced to the poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail, and the chapter on the university was to me the most interesting, but I had to figure out why these discussions belonged here; on the other hand, I wouldn't have wanted them left out.

A final word. On November 15, Daniel Hardy died in Cambridge. An American who had spent most of his life in Britain, with professorships of theology at Birmingham and Durham, he was Ford's father-in-law, colleague, collaborator and next-door neighbor. Hardy was an original theological thinker who spent much of his career reflecting on wisdom, and he was a gracious mentor to theologians on both sides of the Atlantic. Ford will be one of many to miss him.