

The way of wisdom: The practical theology of David Ford

by [David S. Cunningham](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

If the United States and Great Britain are “two nations separated by a common language,” then perhaps Christian theologians of the two countries are “separated by a common theology.” American and British theologians often find themselves in significant agreement—drawing on similar sources and reaching shared conclusions—but geographical distance as well as the very different church-state relations in the two nations have meant that Christians in one region are often unaware of theological developments in the other.

For example, although David Ford’s work is much respected among academic theologians, and he is one of the most important public theologians in the UK, his name is probably unknown to most Christians in the U.S. Educated in Ireland, Germany and the U.S. (as well as in the UK), Ford brings a wide range of intellectual resources to bear on his interpretation of the faith. His writings include scholarly reflections, works of spiritual guidance and literary interpretation, scriptural commentary, and a number of texts used in the training of clergy.

Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, Ford is a man of profound learning, quick wit and sparkling humor. He is much sought after as a preacher and lecturer. An adviser to the bishops of the Anglican Communion, he has written and spoken widely on themes as diverse as the role of theology in the university, the spirituality of the L’Arche communities, and contemporary Irish poetry

Scripture has been very important in your theological work, but your approach is different from those who treat the Bible as a rule book or a guidepost. You encourage people to enter its world and allow their imaginations to be fired by its structures, as they would in reading a novel. Is that a fair description?

I think that's a partly adequate parallel. I wrote my dissertation on Karl Barth and biblical narrative, and I was very much influenced by Hans Frei and the Yale tradition of understanding scripture in terms of narrative.

My own engagement with scripture began when I was a teenager. I read the New English Bible translation, and found there a freshness and a gripping power. If the church is to remain true to its calling and to respond to new situations adequately, it has to be fed with scripture and to inhabit scripture. If the whole imagination of the church is to be able to resist the very powerful forces that try to co-opt it or subvert it, then it has to have a scriptural imagination.

As for the "novel"-like reading of scripture, I'd add that the issue of genre is important. When I wrote *Praising and Knowing God* with Dan Hardy, the Psalms and the poetry of the Bible were more primary than the narrative. And now the genre that most fascinates me is wisdom. It's a sort of integrative genre, gathering together the prophetic, the legal and the poetic into a very rich understanding of reality.

The theme of wisdom runs through much of your recent writing—wisdom not only as a genre of biblical literature, but as a theological category.

The wisdom tradition represents the self-critical side of the Hebrew scriptures. It's thus a very good model for what theology should be doing: paying close attention to tradition while thinking through the difficult and dark questions. Wisdom demands an integration of rigorous thought with imagination and also practical concerns—how things actually work out in the living of life. Part of its fruitfulness for me has been that it acts as a check on theology's being too doctrine-centered, and not taking account of the imaginative and the practical.

I would never want to run down the importance of the intellect; I spend a lot of my time reminding people that you need to be at least as intelligent in your faith as in the rest of your life. But given our very pluralistic environment, in which you're likely to come up against five different worldviews in the course of a day's encounters with the media, you need a way of thinking, imagining and acting that makes deep sense, and that allows you to adapt and improvise in relation to these diverse views.

So wisdom is able to integrate theory and practice?

Yes. The opposite of wisdom is foolishness, and very few people are in favor of foolishness.

Did your thoughts turn to theology fairly early in life?

My father died when I was 12, so during my teenage years I was asking a lot of the hard questions. I almost led a double life, playing a very active role in school while pondering deep questions about the meaning of life. The key thing, as I look back, was the reality of God: if God is real, then that affects everything. I had no hint at all, during that period, of becoming a theologian. But accidentally I picked up, for a school prize, a paperback copy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. Why it should be in a Dublin bookshop still puzzles me; but there it was. I read it with fascination; it was beyond me in many ways, but it was clearly both intellectually very rigorous and highly practical. It sowed the seed of the idea of what good theology might be like.

Was the church playing any role for you at this point?

My parents were not particularly practicing. Just before his death, my father did become more interested, and I think that affected me at some level. Irish Anglicanism was very much centered on the Book of Common Prayer, and in my experience of the liturgy, repeated time and time again, the words and concepts and images were like empty booklets that could slowly be filled with meaning. But nearly all my contemporaries at school gave up on church, and I had a very tenuous relationship with it. My main engagement with Christianity was through books and conversations. When I went to the university I intended to study classics, and my preferred careers at that point were either with the Irish Diplomatic Service or with management in industry.

In 1968, my middle year at Trinity College, there were student riots and revolts all over, including in Dublin. It was also the time of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, setting off the period of "the troubles." Trinity Dublin was one of the few places where people of very different religious and ethnic persuasions were trying to come to terms with what was going on in Ireland at the time.

Large questions were at stake—questions about the meaning of life, the meaning of history, of society, of justice, of human flourishing. I think that the stimulus of the radical political people made me realize that superficial answers wouldn't do. And so I was driven to ask what theological approaches there might be.

At the end of my study of classics, I went through the interview process for different companies and got offered jobs in British Steel and Rolls Royce, and could well have gone that route. But I was offered a scholarship to St. Johns College, Cambridge, to study anything. Since I was fascinated by the subject matter of theology, I decided to take two years out, figuring I could always go into industry after that.

What happened during that time, such that you never went back?

I encountered some superb theologians who combined a great intellectual ability with a Christian faith that was deeply convincing. I think of people like Donald MacKinnon, Charlie Moule, Geoffrey Lampe, Steven Sykes, John Robinson, Brian Hebblethwaite and Don Cupitt. A very varied group of people, who were often in quite confrontational debate with each other. But the theological enterprise was certainly authenticated by people like that, and I was in no doubt that these questions which already gripped me were worth pursuing in a more thorough way.

Your first teaching position was in Birmingham—perhaps England’s most multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious city. That must have had an impact on you.

Birmingham was an extraordinary experience. I was living in the inner city and it was a reasonably tough area. I lived with someone who was working to renovate derelict houses, so I lived in some of them before they were renovated and later became a house manager for one. I was also involved in a local Anglican church in the evangelical tradition. I deeply appreciate that strand of Christianity and was profoundly affected by it. At this time, the Church of England was taking the inner cities very seriously—this was the Thatcher era, when the government was seen as really neglecting the poor.

Birmingham was a place where hospitality was essential. I had not really come up against other faith traditions, but there I was, living in a house among tower blocks, with a house mosque on the corner of my road. And the department of theology at the University of Birmingham was also very concerned about these encounters. John Hick was one of its leading members; he himself had been converted to a multifaith perspective by life in Birmingham, although he and I developed very different theologies. There was a monthly discussion group that used to meet in people’s homes—an extremely diverse group of people who tried to face up to some of the key issues of that time and place.

Were you satisfied with that department's evolution toward a more interreligious, interfaith orientation?

Partly, yes. I wasn't at all against focusing on a variety of faiths, but I was against "religious studies" in any traditional sense. A department of "theology and religious studies" needs to allow each of the traditions to be studied not just in a phenomenological way, but also with an eye to their "truth and practice" questions.

There is no future in universities for theology that is confessional in a narrow sense (not being open to the range of disciplines and of religions); but neither is there a future for religious studies in a supposedly ideologically neutral sense, which fails to engage with truth-and-practice questions. The healthiest ecology for the subject in the modern university is one in which theology and religious studies are integrated.

I see the field of economics as a (perhaps surprising) parallel. Money may be the nearest thing we have to the bottom line in our culture, but we take it for granted that people just don't study the phenomenon of money and its history and systems. The study of economics should be relevant for business, for management schools and so forth. What is good enough for money is good enough for God.

Has your experience working in various interreligious departments of theology and religious studies been reflected in your own work?

I find that the image of hospitality is very helpful. Each of the religious traditions is both host and guest in relation to the others—sometimes more in host mode and sometimes more in guest mode. The ideal mode is that of friend. Guests and hosts may turn into friends—and that has certainly been my experience.

At its best, this process of engagement across the boundaries of faith is one which should call you to go deeper into your own tradition, to ask fresh questions and to have new dialogue partners, so that whatever you write is in a sense accountable to those who are deeply rooted elsewhere.

This does not mean that you compromise; nevertheless, it really matters to consider before whom one is doing one's thinking. And to have in mind, as one is writing one's Christian theology, particular Jews, Muslims, atheists, Buddhists. In all sorts of subtle ways, thinking about such readers makes you do it differently.

I understand that you are also involved in a conversation about scripture among Christians, Jews and Muslims.

That began about a dozen years ago when some of us Christians used to sit around the edges of the Jewish Textual Reasoning Group, which brought together Jewish scholars and philosophers at the American Academy of Religion. Some of us decided that it would be good to have a Jewish-Christian group, which was called the Scriptural Reasoning group; later on, it included Muslims as well.

We bring our scriptures to the table and study them in dialogue with each other. We have extremely lively debates and sometimes arguments, and we work with an alertness to the ways in which those scriptures have been interpreted in our communities over the centuries and today. And we find that this way of engaging with each other allows us all to be hosts and guests simultaneously.

This is in principle something that could go on in all sorts of contexts, not just in universities or congregations. Wherever there are Jews, Christians, Muslims involved in medicine, in chaplaincies, in business or whatever, this engagement with scriptures can be a way to begin a fruitful conversation.

Argument, in this case, can be the basis for friendship.

Yes, but I wouldn't be sentimental about it. The deepest arguments tend to happen between husbands and wives, parents and children. Argument is dangerous; there are big issues of truth and life at stake. But the possibility of friendship across deep divides is an extraordinary one. Key friendships have provided something generative at the heart of the core commitments in my life.

I wonder if some of those friendships are part of what has encouraged you to see the visual arts and poetry as significant for theology.

It's always seemed to me a natural implication of the fact that God is related to everything; if that is so, then obviously everything is related to God. So I am intrigued by the interrelations of disciplines, of different spheres of life, of different traditions which can feed into a basically biblically focused theology.

A particular Irish poet has been a significant conversation partner for you.

Yes, Micheal O'Siadhail, who is also a friend. Talking to him and reading his extraordinarily rich poetry have been remarkably helpful for doing theology. He is

not by any means a “religious poet,” but his depth of engagement with the big questions is such that the resonances with my approach are consistently fruitful.

I sense that your theological perspective has been expanded in quite a different direction as a result of your friendship with Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche communities.

That friendship began about ten years ago, through Frances Young, my New Testament colleague at Birmingham (with whom I co-wrote a book). She cares for her severely disabled son (now in his 30s), and she got to know Vanier and the L’Arche communities. The two of them and Donald Allchin gathered a group of theologians about ten years ago, and some of us have continued in the role of “theological accompaniment” with L’Arche, helping the community to think about what constitutes the “wisdom” of the movement. I have found it an immensely moving and formative experience to know the people in these communities.

One of the most powerful things for me has been to see people who are weakest, who are most marginalized, who well know that they are “nonpersons” in our society, and to see what happens when one centers a community on them—honoring them, seeing them as gifts of God, of having vocations, of having gifts, of being able to love and be loved. One of the most repeated things in L’Arche communities is the testimony of assistants who have gone there and found that they are transformed by their friendships with these people.

L’Arche is doing something that’s prophetic for our culture. It’s not so much about “doing good” for the disabled as it is about seeing that we are all God’s children and that we all have vocations. And that is a sign of hope for our world.

Hospitality, generosity and friendship—these seem to be recurrent themes. Have they emerged elsewhere in your work?

One area would be in my work with the archbishops of the Anglican Communion. At the Lambeth Conference in 1998, I was invited to head up a team that was organizing the opening and closing plenary sessions. It was an extremely good conference at the small-group and section level; there was a deep convergence on issues like homosexuality in a group that included people as diverse as Bishop John Spong and some of the leading African bishops. They had come to something of a common mind about what should and what shouldn’t be said. But that result was hijacked by a rather disturbing political process, and the section’s report was largely

ignored.

Clearly, the archbishops of the Anglican Communion—the primates of the 38 provinces worldwide—had not come to a common mind, and had been caught somewhat unprepared at the conference’s plenary session. So they decided to have annual meetings, the first of which was in Portugal. Because I had been involved in Lambeth and knew all these people, I was invited to lead the Bible studies at that meeting. There were deep divisions, but there was also a strong focus on worship, regular Bible study, and an agenda that focused on the big issues of the world as well as the church, so that no one issue was seen as dominating the entire church.

And the next year at Kanuga, in North Carolina, we had once again a combination of worship, detailed scripture study in small groups, and sessions on global issues such as AIDS. These sessions really helped the archbishops to come to more of a common mind; there were still differences, but they were far less significant.

Just sharing meals together for a week—that’s something these busy archbishops do with very few other people. The role of worship, scripture study, and a realistic way of facing the agenda of the world and the church together—all provided a context for genuine unity that could never have come about by just battling away on issues that are highly unlikely to be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction anyway.

Was there a single point of theological commonality?

It was on the importance of the cross in relation to unity. The blood of Christ unites us. When you ask people from Africa or Asia, “What would ever lead you to abandon your family?” it’s very hard to find anything. But the one thing that might engender even more loyalty than family is the church: those to whom you are united by the blood of Christ. It should be almost unthinkable that one would turn one’s back on Christian’s brothers and sisters for anything less than the central creedal tenets of the faith.

Anglican theology has recently been stirred up by the emerging school of "Radical Orthodoxy," associated with the names John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock. Could you comment on that movement?

The first thing to be said is how immensely encouraging it is to find such enthusiasm and intellectual energy in an effort to renew mainstream Christianity. My main concern would be about the movement’s use of the Bible. It’s puzzling that a

movement that makes such a strong appeal to Augustine and Aquinas should almost completely lack that very strong mark of both—of being deeply immersed in scriptural interpretation.

I'm also somewhat allergic to its tendency to make large-scale generalizations about historical periods, and particularly about modernity. I see signs of this being moderated; but my own tendency is not to be so hostile to modernity. I do agree with some of Radical Orthodoxy's critique of the ideology that has dominated much of Western social science. But there is another dimension of the social sciences in modernity: their engagement with the details of life, the actual contours of human existence over time. Radical Orthodoxy has tended to move toward intellectual ideas at the expense of a wisdom that takes account of those particularities.

It's important to say also that it's a very small and very young movement. In order to make a splash, it's helpful to have provocative slogans. It's actually one small dimension of a much wider, though less well publicized, set of movements in theology, associated with places like Yale and Duke, and the universities of Virginia and Cambridge, which are orthodox and radical but not necessarily Radical Orthodox.

Could you reflect a bit on the recent evolution of the divinity faculty at Cambridge? Once focused almost exclusively on Christianity, it has evolved into a multifaith venture, and has just moved into a glorious new building.

When I came in 1991 to Cambridge, the faculty was facing something of a crisis; it had already outgrown its building, and the lease was running out. And we knew that in the process of attending to the building, we needed to undertake a renewal of the faculty with a new vision. We tried to gather all of these strands together, and what emerged was a comprehensive development with five thrusts: the new building; the new Center for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies; endowed research posts; the parallel development of the consortium of theological seminaries in Cambridge; and curriculum development.

We succeeded in getting two new posts in Islamic studies, as well as a new post in New Testament and a new endowed post in theology and natural science. We worked to strengthen the Cambridge Theological Federation (our consortium of Anglican, Methodist and United Reformed seminaries), which also includes a new Roman Catholic institute and a new institute for Orthodox Christian Theology. The

Center for Jewish-Christian Relations has been a great success, and has brought the whole dimension of interfaith engagement to the seminaries.

All of this must have required some serious money. Did you find yourself drawn into a fund-raising operation?

I had never seen it as part of my job description, but I found it to be quite an education. One met with a wide variety of people from all areas of life and got to communicate with them about the nature of the field.

For me, a basic theological truth came out of this effort: that generosity is at the heart of the universe. God is a good and generous God; when one is generous, one is most deeply in line with the true grain of the universe. I became more convinced of that, and I found that it rings true to people. There are things that distort and block our generosity. But the world is best understood and acted in as a place that is created for generosity and mutuality and love. That conviction should be at the heart of the spirituality of fund raising.

The project was much more than this building, but it is quite a building.

We decided, very wisely I think, not to have religious symbols in the building, but the architect came up with the idea of having a core of light down the center of the circular part of the building going right up to the roof of the library at the top. You can now look up there and see the sky and look down and, on good days, see the sky reflected on the ground floor as well. It looks as if you're suspended between infinity and infinity.

And in the entrance we inscribed, in seven scriptural languages, seven scriptural texts on the theme of wisdom. The longest and most passionate discussions in the faculty, as you might imagine, were about which languages and which scriptures to include.

The English quotation, I noticed, is "Teach one another in all wisdom."

And the Latin is from Proverbs: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum*: Wisdom has built herself a house.