



Reviews



Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love, David Ford, Cambridge: CUP, 2007, pp. xiv, 412, ISBN 978-0521698382. £15.99

Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love is one of a pair of Professor David Ford's recent books, the other being *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, which, in Ford's corpus, share a particular affinity, as of twins. And although *Self and Salvation* was in point of fact the earlier conceived and the first published, both books share a quality which intimates that they almost came into being simultaneously, as if in a single act of creation. Both are set apart from Ford's other publications by having in common a measured responsiveness to the demands of Christians living in post-Christendom, an explicit awareness of the Other, and of the political dimensions of society. I mention the first twin for our awareness of the former may do much to licence our way of reading the latter.

Christian Wisdom: the title is perfect. We may say that Christian wisdom – as an idea of great attractiveness and usefulness – begins in the understanding that all human expressions and actions are indicative of some considerable tendencies in the collective intelligence or 'wisdom' of social groups, and that what is indicative is also causative. To speak with any sort of 'wisdom' then, is to speak not only in the avowed intentions, desires, and impulses of a particular community, but also to speak *as* a particular community. The particularity of such community is able to advocate most fully its wisdom as a *force*. Christian wisdom thereby presents to us the possibilities of life and the qualities of energy that life might have in attending to such enterprise. This is all to say that Ford develops the moral function of Christian wisdom first as a practice of Christian self-description.

Ford's comportment in such projects as Scriptural Reasoning (Chapter 8) and the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme (CIP) marks, I think, a daring move of an intellectual risking his position by trying to

reframe, re-conceive, and re-appropriate the prejudices and mores befitting academic or *Wissenschaft* theology. With other academics, Ford has taken it to be his function to organize those who are gifted and conscious into a serious dialogical entity, chiefly as it concerns the three Abrahamic religions. Despite his critics, in this enterprise he has by no means been wholly unsuccessful. Indeed, by reason of age, length of service, public respect, and finally as an elder statesman of the Church, Ford can more or less make his constructive bullet points stick. The force of his proposals lies in their capacity to always have the social end in view.

It is true that David Ford is also a theologian. David Ford-as-theologian rightly sees the rapid and violent changes taking place in modern societies, and it is *this* David Ford who is best suited to speak to our partisan passions thereby inviting us to commit to it our serious attention *as* Christians. There is a happy intelligence at work, and a wide and curious scholarship – a distinct verve – as evinced by his engagement with poets, the Book of Job (Chapter 3), post-Holocaust theology (Chapter 4), to name a few. His learned digression into the Book of Job is an attempt to speak unflinchingly of the pain of life, but a pain in terms of life’s possible joy and the life of holiness to be experienced in God. Imagination and hospitality are to him great virtues, but he believes that they rest upon something even more determinative: wisdom. Chiefly by reason of the very plainness of what he means by Christian wisdom he intends us to look at things simply and directly. Christian wisdom liberates us, finally.

It is in Chapter 9 (“An interdisciplinary wisdom: knowledge, formation and collegiality in the negotiable university”) that we see Ford at his best as a Christian witness to the public conversation, and he can be very good indeed. Within the last several years it has become an almost institutional practice of the ‘academy’ to propound the question whether the state of the ‘university’ really is moribund, and to write innumerable books and treatises on its sad demise and its proposed rehabilitation. It is significant, if not on our beliefs then on our ways of holding them, that a significant core of academia has emerged to deal with this issue and the emotions that are consonant with them.

Consequently, those of us who make any pretence to intellect are all in sufficient possession of the reasons why the university has come to occupy its present position and status. Set against this backdrop, Ford's observations and critical analysis of the modern-day university is of the first order, and its clarity and force again come in large part from his moral directness. He simply refuses to evacuate Christian public speech of its first- and second-order languages. The theologian currently competes as an unlicensed amateur alongside those of the 'hard' sciences – men and women who are ostensibly better trained to tell us what is *really* going on in society, with the result that the theologian has lost his/her once formidable status as an explorer and leader who speaks to the public register. Yet Ford directly challenges the men and women of the hard sciences who claim to know – quite without instruction – that in *science* and in *facts*, there is to be discovered wisdom. He writes:

In the course of trying to meet such challenges there are inevitable counter-challenges which the university must meet – it is the character of shared ground that the questioning is mutual. This is sometimes a matter of confronting common academic prejudices and *idées fixes*. These include: a modern parochialism that cannot take the premodern seriously in matter of truth; an incapacity to appreciate intellectual achievement in the area of religious thought; a failure to respect the large numbers of religious academics who are at least as intelligent, well-educated, sophisticated and critically alert as their secular colleagues; an insistence on religious and theological positions meeting standards of rationality that are by no means accepted throughout the university; or a blindness to the complexly religious and secular character of our world. (pp. 290-1)

What is more, the book is written without reference to its own grand ambitions, without the sweeping gestures. Ford moves slowly and subtly, but with the density of an iceberg. It is a way of trying to extend the lessons learned from such public theologians as Hans Frei

– Ford’s teacher during his time at Yale. A word more about the title of Professor David Ford’s new book: ‘Christian Wisdom’ may not be perceived in the greatest possible profundity or sympathy, but its particular import may very well reside in its cool certainty, in the face of much ‘scientific’ opinion to the contrary. But we must remember that in any vaudeville dialectic the intellectual upper hand always resides with the seemingly obtuse or the primitive. Ford shows us that such folly and the people who dare to perform its language – let us call them Christians – still have a responsibility to challenge the secular in its peculiar amoral inertia.

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James Denney (1856–1917): An Intellectual and Contextual Biography, James M. Gordon, Bletchley: Paternoster, 2006, pp. xvii, 286, ISBN 978-1842273999. £24.99

Few Scots who are at all interested in the life of the Church or the task of theology can fail to have heard of James Denney’s great work *The Death of Christ*, though few perhaps will have read it – more’s the pity. The great virtue of James Gordon’s excellent book is that it places that work – and Denney’s thought in general – firmly in the context of the theological and cultural developments of late Victorian and Edwardian Scotland. Great figures and issues flit through the pages as Gordon recounts Denney’s life and context. Thus we read of Robertson Smith and the vexed question of the nature of scriptural authority. Of Henry Drummond and his attempted reconciliation of theological and scientific world views. Of A. B. Bruce and his contention that Christianity ‘is essentially an historical religion’. All of these issues were to influence the development of Denney’s thought – positively and negatively.

Gordon effortlessly recalls a lost Scottish ecclesiastical world as he explores the religious roots of the Denney family in the Reformed