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978-0-521-87545-5 - Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love

David F. Ford

Excerpt

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## Introduction: theology as wisdom

Wisdom has on the whole not had an easy time in recent centuries in the West. It has often been associated with old people, the premodern, tradition and conservative caution in a culture of youth, modernisation, innovation and risky exploration. Yet it may be making a comeback. It may be just the heightened alertness that has come from a decade or so spent writing this book, but it has been striking how many references to wisdom I have come upon.

This has been especially evident in areas where knowledge and know-how come up against questions of ethics, values, beauty, the shaping and flourishing of the whole person, the common good, and long-term perspectives. Wisdom is now regularly mentioned in discussions of poverty, the environment, economics, governance, management, leadership, political priorities and policies, education at all levels, family life, the health of our culture, the desire for physical, emotional and mental health, and the resurgence of religion and ‘the spiritual’. In most premodern cultures wisdom or its analogues had immense, pervasive and comprehensive importance. It was taken for granted as the crown of education, and as what is most to be desired in a parent, a leader, a counsellor, a teacher. The critiques and crises that all such traditional figures and wisdoms have undergone in recent centuries have not, however, been able to dispense with the elements that went into them at their best.

It is still necessary to try to combine knowledge, understanding, good judgement and far-sighted decision-making. The challenges and dilemmas of prudence, justice and compassion remain urgent. Choosing among possible priorities, each with a well-argued claim, is no simpler today. There is no scientific formula for bringing up children or coping

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with suffering, trauma or death. The shaping over time of communities and their institutions is as complex and demanding as ever. The discernment of meaning, truth and right conduct in religion has not become any easier, despite many confident and well-packaged proposals from religious, non-religious and anti-religious sources. The potential for disastrously foolish judgements, decisions and actions is illustrated daily.

So it is not surprising that wisdom, or the desire for it, crops up more and more, often under those other categories such as good judgement, appropriate decision-making, discernment of priorities, understanding that combines theory and practice, how to cope with complexities, contingencies and difficulties, or how to avoid being foolish. Recognition of the need for wisdom is sometimes partial and restricted to an immediate problem, but if the matter is serious it usually connects with larger issues requiring fuller wisdom. There is also the attraction of wisdom packages with all the answers – religious or ideological formulae that offer clarity, security and certainty in the midst of the confusions and complexities of life. Any wisdom needs to take seriously the desire both for some sense of overall meaning and connectedness and also for guidance in discernment in specific situations.

What if the overall meaning and the discernment in specific situations involve God? That is one way to approach this book's concern with theology as wisdom. What follows is my attempt as a Christian thinker to search out a wisdom for living in the twenty-first century. Christianity, in terms of the sheer number of those who are in some way directly identified with it (a common estimate is around two billion), might be described as at present the largest global wisdom tradition. This means that it is of considerable importance how Christian wisdom is conceived, taught and worked out in practice, both for Christians and for the large number of others who engage with them or are affected by them.

The main thrust of this book is to explore key elements of Christian wisdom and its relevance to contemporary living. Within that, the focus is especially on the Christian scriptures and their interpretation today. The Bible is vital to practically all past and present expressions of Christian identity. Any attempt to articulate Christian faith afresh or to work out its implications in new circumstances also must appeal to the Bible in some way. This is not only a non-negotiable element in Christian wisdom but also the fundamental criterion for its authenticity as Christian. So it makes sense for the Bible to play the leading role in working out Christian wisdom for today.

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[More information](#)

There is a primary theology that can be distilled from reading and rereading the Bible. This is not simply about information, or even knowledge, but about the sort of wisdom that is gained from reading scripture alert both to its origins, reception and current interpretations and also to contemporary understanding and life. This ‘wisdom interpretation’ of scripture is the core concern of this book. But it is very important that this is not simply about asking what an ancient book said many hundreds of years ago to its original audience. That ‘archaeological’ interest (as LaCocque and Ricoeur call it, see chapter 2 below) is important, but the text has also been received by and has nourished readers over the centuries and around the world today through its testimony to God and God’s ways with the world. It has continued to be extraordinarily generative for imagining, understanding, believing, hoping and living. Its interpretation has required the making of endless connections with past, present and future, and with a range of disciplines, spheres of life, aspects of self, religions, worldviews and experience. The very abundance of meanings, which are often in tension or even in conflict with one another, calls for continual rereading and discernment.

What sort of theology results from this? It might be described as ‘scriptural-expressivist’ in its concern to draw from reading scripture a lively idiom of Christian wisdom today, one that forms its expression in sustained engagement with scripture’s testimony to God and God’s purposes amidst the cries of the world. It is ‘postcritical’ in its attempt to do justice simultaneously to the premodern, modern and late modern (or postmodern or, perhaps best, ‘chastened modern’),<sup>1</sup> taking seriously the critiques of Christianity generated in recent centuries, but not letting them have the last word. It might be termed a ‘theology of desire and discernment’ in its attempt to unite in a God-centred discourse the love of wisdom and wise loving. It is also a ‘theology of learning in the Spirit’ in its combination of a pedagogical thrust with an attempt to be alert to the ways God continually opens up texts, situations and people to newness of understanding and life. This learning is dialogical and collegial, located in theological communities understood as ‘schools of desire and wisdom’. Above all, the schooling is in loving God for God’s sake, resulting in a

1. David F. Ford, ‘Holy Spirit and Christian Spirituality’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 269–90.

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[More information](#)

theology which seeks a wisdom of worship, prayer and discerning desire that is committed to God and the Kingdom of God.

During the final year of writing this book I tried to formulate this sort of theology in thesis form for the epilogue to the third edition of an edited work covering Christian theology from 1918 to the present. The twelve theses that resulted articulate the main elements of what I hope twenty-first-century Christian theology might be about and are the horizon within which this book has been conceived. They are:

1. *God is the One who blesses and loves in wisdom.*
2. *Theology is done for God's sake and for the sake of the Kingdom of God.*
3. *Prayer is the beginning, accompaniment and end of theology: Come, Holy Spirit! Hallelujah! and Maranatha!*
4. *Study of scripture is at the heart of theology.*
5. *Describing reality in the light of God is a basic theological discipline.*
6. *Theology hopes in and seeks God's purposes while immersed in the contingencies, complexities and ambiguities of creation and history.*
7. *Theological wisdom seeks to do justice to many contexts, levels, voices, moods, genres, systems and responsibilities.*
8. *Theology is practised collegially, in conversation and, best of all, in friendship; and, through the communion of saints, it is simultaneously premodern, modern and postmodern.*
9. *Theology is a broker of the arts, humanities, sciences and common sense for the sake of a wisdom that affirms, critiques and transforms each of them.*
10. *Our religious and secular world needs theology with religious studies in its schools and universities.*
11. *Conversation around scriptures is at the heart of interfaith relations.*
12. *Theology is for all who desire to think about God and about reality in relation to God.<sup>2</sup>*

Within that horizon the rationale for the chapters that follow is best understood by surveying their contents.

Two of the key themes took me by surprise. I anticipated neither in the first conception of this book. They arose from grappling with the Bible in the context of life and worship. Chapter 1, 'Wisdom cries', introduces *the first theme of the cry*. The more I have searched for Christian wisdom the more I have been struck by its core connection with cries: the cries for wisdom and the cries by the personified biblical wisdom; cries within

2. David F. Ford, 'Epilogue: Twelve Theses for Christian Theology in the Twenty-first Century' in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford with Rachel Muers, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 761.

Cambridge University Press

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[More information](#)

and outside scripture that arise from the intensities of life – in joy, suffering, recognition, wonder, bewilderment, gratitude, expectation or acclamation; and cries of people for what they most desire – love, justice, truth, goodness, compassion, children, health, food and drink, education, security, and so on. Christian wisdom is discerned within earshot of such cries, and is above all alert to the cries of Jesus. Doing justice to diverse cries is at the heart of this theological wisdom. The insistence of the cries lends urgency to the search for wisdom. The persistence of the cries, together with the diversity and, often, novelty of their challenges, constantly expands the search and refuses to allow it to rest in any closure.

*The second key theme is loving God for God's sake.* It was introduced through the book of Job's question: 'Does Job fear God for nothing?' – 'for nothing' in the sense of gratuitously, as a gift, without expecting a reward. This theme too has become more and more important for my conception of Christian wisdom. It is about letting God be God, acknowledging who God is, and living from that acknowledgement whatever the circumstances and whatever the consequences. It is the nerve of wise living before God. But, since this God hears the cries of the world and is compassionately committed to it, acknowledgement of God for God's sake also involves discernment of cries and living according to what is discerned.

At the end of chapter 1 a third pervasive theme is introduced. Faith is explored in terms of five 'moods' rooted in cries: the indicative that affirms or denies; the imperative of command and obedience; the interrogative that questions, probes, suspects and tests; the subjunctive exploring possibilities of what may or might be, alert to surprises; and the optative of desire. These five run through the book and how they are interrelated is vital to its conception of wisdom. Indeed in formal terms the shaping of wisdom might be seen as the constantly changing interplay of the five moods. *The theological wisdom of faith is grounded in being affirmed, being commanded, being questioned and searched, being surprised and opened to new possibilities, and being desired and loved.* The embracing mood for a wisdom that is involved in the complexities of history while being oriented to God and God's purposes is the optative of desire. The longing for God, and the passion for realising the truth, love, justice and peace of God, are together at the heart of the Christian desire for a wisdom that responds with discernment both to the cries of God and to the cries of the world.

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[More information](#)

Chapter 2, 'A wisdom interpretation of scripture', attempts both to exemplify and to describe the seeking of this wisdom through scripture. The prologue of the Gospel of John together with the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are the main examples, opening up a set of critical issues: the centrality of God; the horizon of the whole of creation; immersion in history and the contemporary world; the interplay between Jewish scriptures and testimony to Jesus Christ; and the community of those who read scripture and seek to live in its light. Interpretation is a matter of reading and rereading scripture. Yet this apparent simplicity can – and, if the goal is a wisdom that has been open to all available sources of understanding, should – embrace many elements. I explore three of these, scholarship, hermeneutics and doctrinal theology, before summarising some guidelines for a wisdom interpretation of scripture in nine theses and ten maxims.

Chapter 3, 'Job', and chapter 4, 'Job and post-Holocaust wisdom', are the outcome of years of fascination with a classic of Hebrew wisdom literature, the book of Job. This daring, profound and mysterious work continues to inspire an extraordinary range of responses. *Job is the core wisdom text of the present book*. It resounds with passionate cries: God is to be feared 'for nothing'; creation is of value apart from its human utility; all five moods are vigorously in play; and the most challenging issues, centring on a limit case of human affliction and misery, are wrestled with chapter after chapter. This wisdom pedagogy works through radical searching, debate, controversy and powerful poetry to suggest a way of living wisely before God in the face of extreme testing. There are no neatly packaged answers, and religious tradition is brought face to face with its limitations in coping with cries from the midst of trauma. The wisdom is embodied in someone who cries out, who refuses the friends' packaged traditional answers, who searches and is searched, and whose passionate longing for God is fulfilled in ways that elude conceptual capture.

The book of Job is largely poetry, and I bring it into dialogue with Micheal O'Siadhail's testimony to the Holocaust in poetry, seeking resources for a post-Holocaust wisdom. This leads into one strand of Jewish post-Holocaust thinking and then into its Christian analogue. Christian wisdom in the twenty-first century needs to be sought within earshot of the cries of those who suffered and died in the Shoah; like the tradition of Job and his friends, Christian tradition today is radically tested by this trauma. How might it learn from Jewish post-Holocaust wisdom in seeking its own wisdom?

Cambridge University Press

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[More information](#)

Such Christian wisdom unavoidably requires an account of Jesus Christ. Chapter 5, 'Jesus, the Spirit and desire: wisdom christology', offers this. It rereads Job, Luke and Acts asking how they might contribute to it, and supplements them with 1 Corinthians. The result is a conception of Jesus as teaching and embodying a prophetic wisdom that integrates law, history, prophecy, wisdom (in the narrower sense of a biblical genre) and praise. He represents a transformation of desire in orientation to God and the Kingdom of God, deeply resonant with Job's God-centred desire. The book of Job's post-traumatic wisdom illuminates the 'wisdom after multiple overwhelms' distilled in Luke–Acts from crucifixion, resurrection and Pentecost. In 1 Corinthians the crucified and risen Jesus Christ is at the heart of a wisdom in the Spirit for a specific early Christian community. Paul challenges unbalanced understandings of this dynamic wisdom, wrestles with its relevance to other wisdoms, to scripture, to the relations of leaders with followers and to Christian maturity. Above all he portrays a wisdom embodied in lives, practices and communities through the continual improvising of life in the Spirit shaped according to 'the mind of Christ'.

In chapters 6 and 7, the largely scriptural exploration of wisdom in the first five chapters is worked through with reference first to tradition and worship (chapter 6) and second to the God who is loved for God's sake (chapter 7).

In chapter 6, 'Learning to live in the Spirit: tradition and worship', tradition is seen as at best a continual learning to live in the Spirit in the church, drawing from how others have lived in the Spirit. Like scripture, and in line with scripture's own wisdom about tradition, Christian tradition needs to be continually 'reread'.

Among the prime condensations and carriers of tradition is worship, at the centre of which is the identification of God as Trinity. Rather than laying out a doctrine of the Trinity (which would have meant at least another book) this chapter takes soundings on three crucial issues through contemporary thinkers who engage simultaneously with scripture, the classical Christian tradition on God, and modernity. Paul Ricoeur's treatment of being and God leads into a nuanced position on perennially conflictual issues: the Hebraic in relation to the Hellenic; theology in relation to philosophy; and the study of scripture in contexts of worship and of academic debate. Rowan Williams' examination of Arius and of the Council of Nicaea's affirmation of the full divinity of Jesus Christ opens up in a complexly historical way the wisdom of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

incarnation and its intrinsic relation to God as Trinity. He also offers a Christian theological account of tradition as the task of 're-imagining and recreating continuity at each point of crisis'. Sarah Coakley's scriptural, historical and theological rationale for the Holy Spirit as the third in the Trinity is rooted in Paul's cry-centred evocation of the wisdom of Christian prayer in Romans 8. She suggests how a life of participation in God through the Spirit not only makes deep sense of scripture and the classical Christian tradition but also can have the resources to thrive today, and to cope intellectually with historical, theological, philosophical, psychological and gender critiques.

The main thrust of chapter 7, 'Loving the God of wisdom', has already been mentioned above. It is where this book engages most with the traditional Christian dogmatic (or doctrinal or systematic or constructive) theology of God, represented here by Karl Barth. Alongside Barth is placed the distinctly untraditional discourse of Thomas Traherne, and both are drawn upon in seeking Christian wisdom on God. This is traced back through consideration of the five moods to their roots in cries. The wisdom theology of cries then reaches an exegetical crescendo through the book of Revelation, which leads into the conception of the church as a school of desire and wisdom. This also gives a brief historical survey of the precedents for conceiving 'theology as wisdom'.

Chapters 8–10 offer three case studies. Christian wisdom has to engage with other faiths and with secular forces and understanding, contributing to public discussion and deliberation as well as to the teaching of its own communities. These studies seek wisdom in three engagements: between faiths, with universities, and through community with people who have severe learning difficulties.

The number of possible case studies is virtually limitless. These three are chosen partly because I have been involved with each over many years. They also exemplify three challenges to wisdom that are both perennial and also especially acute in the twenty-first century. As conflict related to religions threatens to destroy our world, how might particular faiths come together to draw on their resources for mutual understanding and peacemaking? As higher education expands enormously, as academic disciplines and their applications continue to transform the world, and as 'information age', 'learning society' and 'knowledge economy' become popular terms to describe the results, universities have become more important and at the same time face massive challenges. How might they be wisely shaped for the future? But in a world influenced so



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

much by education, knowledge and know-how, what about those with learning disabilities – is there a wisdom to be learnt through them?

All three case studies draw Christian wisdom-seeking into engagements across the boundaries of its own traditions – although in fact those traditions have themselves already been formed by complex interplay with others from which an immense amount has been learnt. It is taken for granted that the twenty-first-century world is not simply religious or simply secular but complexly both, so that any faith community has to come to terms not only with other faith communities but also with a variety of institutions, understandings and forces that are non-religious or even anti-religious in key respects.<sup>3</sup> The case studies display different types of religious and secular engagements. Inter-faith wisdom-seeking is primarily about interrelating the traditions involved, yet all of these are also coping with secular realities. Universities in the contemporary world are primarily about secular disciplines but they have much to learn from the tradition of Christian wisdom in which they are rooted. The L'Arche communities for those with learning disabilities are complexly religious and secular, and their development and current challenges raise profound questions about how Christian wisdom is to be sought and realised today.

Chapter 8, 'An inter-faith wisdom: scriptural reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims', describes and reflects upon joint scriptural study between members of the Abrahamic traditions. This approach to inter-faith wisdom-seeking follows on appropriately after the largely scriptural exploration of earlier chapters. Its emphasis on interdisciplinary study and collegiality among the three faiths also prepares for chapter 9's consideration of universities. Scriptural reasoning is examined both as an interpretative practice and through its institutional location – closely related to the university and also to the religious 'houses' (synagogue, church and mosque) but not assimilable to either setting. It is also seen as having potential to contribute its wisdom to the

3. The terms 'religious' and 'secular' are of course subject to much debate and have no agreed meaning. I am using them in a common-sense way, 'religious' referring to the main traditions and communities usually called 'religions' (such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism), and 'secular' to those institutions, understandings and forces that would not identify themselves as religious in that sense. See David F. Ford, 'Faith and Universities in a Religious and Secular World (1)', *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 81, no. 2 (2005), pp. 83–91, and 'Faith and Universities in a Religious and Secular World (2)', *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 81, no. 3 (2005), pp. 97–106. Theologically, it is especially important not to allow any dualism of the religious and secular to imply that God is not the creator of both.

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David F. Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

public sphere, which needs the best resources of the religious communities to help serve the common good.

Chapter 9, ‘An interdisciplinary wisdom: knowledge, formation and collegiality in the negotiable university’, sees universities as surprising institutions both in their origins and in the transformations represented by the universities of Berlin and Cambridge. Taking Berlin and Cambridge as the main reference points, six key challenges facing universities in the twenty-first century are described: the integration of teaching and research; all-round educational formation; collegiality; polity and control; contributions to society; and, above all, interdisciplinarity. The urgency and scope of these challenges, and the difficulty of coping with them all together, mean that contemporary world-class universities are in danger of failing to meet one or more of them. Universities are also increasingly involved in complex negotiations among diverse stakeholders which can seriously reduce their scope to transform themselves. Yet there is also the possibility of a new ‘Berlin surprise’, reinventing the university in a way that meets all the challenges. A seventh challenge is therefore to seek the wisdom needed to generate such a surprise, and to draw on the relevant sources – including academically mediated Christian wisdom.

Chapter 10, ‘An interpersonal wisdom: L’Arche, learning disability and the Gospel of John’, describes and reflects upon the world-wide network of L’Arche communities. They are seen as wisdom-seeking communities facing many fundamental issues of twenty-first-century life, concerning human identity and flourishing, dominant values, faith and faiths, the education of desire, bodiliness, growth and maturity, suffering, trauma, death, institutional governance, celebration and friendship. Elements of earlier chapters are recapitulated and integrated in relation to the prophetic wisdom represented by L’Arche, and in particular by its founder Jean Vanier. As Vanier withdraws from official responsibilities in L’Arche, his remarkable commentary on John’s Gospel is taken as a culminating distillation of what he has learnt from the Bible, from L’Arche and from a range of religious and secular sources, offering a wisdom for generational transition. More comprehensively, he invites into a contemplative wisdom, ‘the summit of love’.

The Conclusion, ‘Love’s wisdom’, briefly recapitulates the book from the standpoint of love and then celebrates the wisdom of the Song of Songs’ desire for love. The Song has been a rich resource for some of the dialogue partners of earlier chapters – Jean Vanier, Paul Ricoeur, Cheryl