

David F. Ford. *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN 9780199679973.

Review

David Ford, Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, provides a superb revision of his contribution to the already excellent “Very Short Introduction” series published by Oxford University Press. Professor Ford surveys both the content and the method of the field of theology, using language and terminology that is accessible without being condescending and winsome without being cloying. He is sensitive to the necessity of understanding a particular tradition deeply without being either triumphalist about the tradition he represents or obscuring particular differences in the name of facile universalism or grand metatheory. The revisions in this second edition focus especially on the relationship between faiths (stemming from Professor Ford’s work with the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme), theological responses to science, and the effects of globalization and technology on the religious landscape of the 21st century. In short, Ford advocates a “wise and creative theology” that is necessary to all human endeavors in the religiously saturated landscape in which we currently live.

Part I, “Describing the Field,” emphasizes the importance of “thinking well about the questions raised by and about the religions” in a world whose history and present is shaped by the ubiquity of religion. Theology, Ford argues, is a chance to survey the resources of history in an effort to think “knowledgeably, deeply, and relevantly.” He also carefully illustrates how a focus on a particular theology (in his case, Christian orthodoxy broadly speaking) serves a more useful short introduction than a broad survey of traditions. He then looks at the theoretical differences between religious studies and theology and concludes that the most successful institutions integrate both. Rather than describe theology along a radical/liberal/conservative continuum, he summarizes Hans Frei’s five typologies of theology, from a Type I scholar who prioritizes a certain ideological commitment or method, to a Type V scholar who claims that only the Bible is sufficient and necessary for theology. Ford observes that the best theology usually ranges from Type II (exemplified by someone like Rudolf Bultmann), Type III (Paul Tillich), to Type IV (Karl Barth).

Having described where the field of theology is situated academically, Ford turns in Part II to an exploration of specifically theological questions like God, worship, evil, Jesus Christ, and salvation. Ford outlines a classical Trinitarian theology and discusses its implications for and interrelations between each of these traditional theological loci. He examines the implications of God’s transcendence, the role of Scripture and its reliability, various understandings of salvation and their implications for interfaith relations, Christian ethics of desire and responsibility, and the importance of translatability and innovation to Christianity’s inner workings. Throughout, Ford pays careful attention to the balance between particularity and conversation, the meaning and working of language, and the importance of participation to the description of a particular tradition.

In Part III, Ford introduces suggested texts and methods for beginners in theology. He thoroughly investigates hermeneutics and Bernard Lonergan’s philosophy to highlight the importance of epistemology for theological study (particularly of an object such as the Trinitarian God that does not by definition “exist” in space-time). This section of the book may

leave lay readers or non-specialist undergraduates behind, but it does indicate Ford's understanding of the vital philosophical questions for contemporary theology.

Finally, Ford draws from his book *The Future of Christian Theology* (OUP, 2011) in Part IV to outline a "Prospect" for a "Theology for the Third Millennium." Rather than take a prescriptive or descriptive approach, he asks potential questions in an "interrogative mood," such as, "Will the question of God, and enquiry into all else in relation to God, be central to the field?", "How can theology be thoughtfully responsible in many spheres?", and "How can inter-faith theology flourish?" He finishes with a renewed call for a theology of wisdom that asks important human questions, and for creativity across academic fields and across societies to provide answers to those questions. A "Further reading" list provides a short but appropriately diverse spectrum of theologians and approaches (although this Anabaptist would have liked to see more contribution from radical theologians, there is a good inclusion of feminist and postcolonial writers).

Ford's strength throughout is his accessible writing style and his friendly and nonconfrontational discussion of the issues. Type I or Type V readers may be frustrated by his lack of an oppositional theoretical position, but Ford displays his commitments in his method and in his style. He pays attention to the wide range of religious interactions – that is, theology is not just propositional belief or individual thought, but ranges from novels to music and from ancient history to the present. One of Ford's statements about the Holy Spirit may summarize this commitment best: "For Christians the Holy Spirit is seen to be involved in the process of communication, that new meanings can emerge, and that the growing diversity of expression and embodiment can be an enrichment rather than a threat to some original normative unity." Hopefully this volume will invite thoughtful and wise persons of all ranges of conviction to communication, new meaning, and diversity of expression and involvement. The book is highly recommended for advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and interested laypersons of all backgrounds.

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