

Tribute to David Ford, Regius Professor 1991-2015

By Professor Janet Soskice

For his Retirement Dinner on 4 June, 2015

David Ford. Where to begin? It's never easy to pay tribute to a colleague in an after dinner speech and in the case of David Ford, strictly impossible – and this from someone who has worked quite a lot on apophaticism. I can barely mention all the accolades, academic and otherwise, David has received over the years – Honorary degree from Birmingham, the named lectures, including up until almost this moment, the Bampton Lectures, the international visits and tributes, Presidency of professional organisations and of course his recent OBE. Instead I will concentrate on his gifts to us, individually and collectively, as a colleague in Faculty and Federation. It's a pleasure to do so as a colleague for what is now 24 years. It's a chance for us to reflect, not only on his remarkable career, but on some significant staging posts in the history of the Faculty.

David took up the Regius Professorship of Divinity in 1991 at a critical moment in the life of the Faculty. Few of us then realised how critical. The senior Statesmen of the Faculty (and they mostly were men apart from Morna Hooker who was perhaps a Senior StatesPerson) realized as perhaps few of us then more junior did, that the University's failure to come through with a promised new building on the Sidgwick site left us vulnerable. The Professors (there were only the 3) of a previous generation had handed over the building (which I believe technically they owned) in a three way exchange with St. Johns and for a promise of a new building near Oriental Studies, Classics and History. But, despite having a plot on Sidgwick Site no such building, nor even an rumours of funding for it, was forthcoming. It was increasingly evident St. Johns would not let us remain where we were and the danger was that, without our own Faculty building, we'd be placed here and there above hair salons and Tandoori restaurants, making is not only disjoint but easy prey for a Vice-Chancellor who might, as so many have done to other TRS faculties in recent years, effect savings by moving one lectureship to History, another couple to Philosophy, some to Oriental Studies, and so on. WE needed not only a building, but a vision for our field - Theology and Religious Studies – not as a mocked up modern amalgam, but as a diverse but unified branch of study in its own right. David Ford brought us both.

It was clear that we needed to fundraise and in those days the University did relatively little of this, and ARTS faculties virtually none. I remember vividly a meeting at which David Thompson pointed out the severity of our circumstances and the inconceivably large sum we needed to try to raise (as I recall 6 .5 million pounds. In the end it was over 9 million). I don't think David Ford had joined the Faculty at that time. Into aghast silence David Thompson dropped words to the effect that, while it looks impossible, one thing is for certain, if we don't try to raise the money, we won't raise the money. This truth of definition was enough to get us going.

David Ford came in with a brief to build us a house and it is a brief he fulfilled beyond any of our expectations, and even his own. Working with former Archbishop Runcie and the development committee (for this was a team effort), David took the lead and pushed us on. The University, in response to agile pressure amounting almost to blackmail from David Thompson, kicked in a large sum but nearly enough for by now we had fire in or belly – we wanted not just a building but a fine building, our own building not a shared facility and one with a research wing (this became CARTS) and research posts and projects to put in it.

David proved a natural networker and in speaking to people about our needs and vision, he discovered that benefactors would give not just for bricks but for academic posts and projects. David was successful not just because through Irish charm but through deep conviction of the importance of the study of a subject called 'Theology and Religious Studies'. Initially put off 'interfaith' work by the common denominator approach of John Hick, his colleague at the University of Birmingham, through close friendships, notably with the Jewish philosopher, Peter Ochs, and the mentoring of his own father-in-law, Dan Hardy (of beloved memory), David came to feel that Judaism, Islam and Christianity could speak to each other without dissolving into well-meaning mulch, but precisely in their acute particularity, especially in the reading of their scriptures, and with the common good in mind. Devising and developing of Scriptural Reasoning with these friends and others– now a movement and a practice involving hundreds of groups around the world, has been especially important to David. This was all, by the way, long before 9/ 11 and the acute circumstances which now thrust 'the troubles of religion' into our papers every day. David often cites, as a guiding thread, the question put by his great friend, the poet Michael O'Siadhall, 'Does a love of one voice hear more or less?' In an age where the media persistently insists that to love one religious voice is to of necessity hate the others, David begs to differ.

David threw himself into building the building and building the Faculty to go into it with these thoughts in mind. He was not alone in either project – and I need to mention, in sharing his vision of the Faculty, the contribution especially of Nicholas Lash and Tim Jenkins.

But David was the lead on fundraising and establishing seven new posts in our Faculty – some building on historic strengths, but others – the two posts in Islam held by Tim Winter (Sheikh Zayed) and Tony Street (Hartwell), the Study of Religions post held by Tim Jenkins, the lectureship in modern Jewish thought held by Dan Weiss (Polonsky-Coexist), and the Sultan Qaboos Chair held by Garth Fowden – entirely new and pushing out the frontiers of our discipline.

The new Faculty building itself, RIBA award winning, opened in 2000 and remarkably was the result not of one or two large benefactions, as is customarily the case, but of many, many smaller benefactions, in their hundreds – a testimony the importance a wider community affords to what we do here. Its glass portals are as you know, inscribed with verses from the various scriptures we teach, with the Greek especially dear to David Ford:

Proverbs 9.1 'Wisdom has built herself a house.'

I think that as a memorial to David we should place a brass plaque next to it reading: 'In my Father's house there are many mansions, and David Ford has knocked on the door of most of them!'

An impressive feature of David's work and life is the way his interests have grown together. His interest in Scriptural reasoning, the living traditions of wisdom was already evident in his Inaugural lecture and blossomed in over 16 books, single and jointly authored, including the edited *Modern Theologians*, the single authored *Self and Salvation*, *Christian Wisdom: desiring God and learning in Love*, *Shaping Theology: engagements in a religious and secular world*, *The Future of Christian Theology*, and his current Bampton on the beloved gospel of John.

David was successful in fund-raising through conviction in the importance of what a faculty like ours can do. At many places in the University can religions be studied as important historical, textual and linguistic phenomena, and this is all to the good, but in a faculty like ours we also recognize the religious as living communities of practice and faith, who have their own valid contributions to make to civil society. Out of such ideas grew the Cambridge Interfaith Centre, another of David's great passions, established in 2002 after conversations with Aref Nayad, Peter Ochs, Dan Hardy, Tim Jenkins, David Thompson and Ben Quash. With the object of establishing a bridge-head in the academy for public engagement and interaction between the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities. David raised the money for the strong team that is still in place, many of you hear, but also soft money for post-doctoral positions that have been vital staging posts for a series of gifted young academics – Ben Quash, David Nimmo, Simeon Zahl, Nick Adams and Michael Higton amongst them. We must add to this the research co-ordinators and External relations officers, both in CIP and in the newly nurtured project of CO-Exist House – Barbara Bennett, Sarah Synder, Miriam Lorie, Michael Wakelin, Nadya Takolia and Sarah Snyder.

Which brings me to what I think one of David's most important and enduring contributions...the many doctoral students supervised and mentored. In post in this country Ben Quash, Mike Higton, Tom Greggs, Paul Janz, Paul Murray, Rachel Muers, Susannah Ticciati, Ash Cocksworth, Simeon Zahl...the first 5 of these in Chairs, and others around the world. In writing this speech, I've asked a number of them for comments. Time is too short to do anything but glance at these but overwhelmingly they speak of his generosity, intellectual and personal, his energy, his formidable optimism and enthusiasm, his encouragement of their fledgling theological voices. They speak of the importance of his home seminars. That being taken on as a doctoral student by David meant being taken into his family, including pets A few of their comments must suffice:

Tom Greggs, Prof at Aberdeen writes:

'Working with David was a real academic apprenticeship, one which lasted long beyond the PhD. It's impossible but to get caught up in the excitement of the osmotic personality that is David, and not to be inspired by the profound significance and importance that he recognises Theology to have. Not only, for me, did this mean being pushed to see the impact of my work on issues within the church and the faiths of the world (long before the word 'impact' was on all of our research justifications) and being freed to see the political aspects of my research, but also learning what true academic leadership looks like within a community of scholars

Rachel Muers, a Quaker, and now Head of Department at Nottingham wrote of the home seminars;

'just like that David would say - "now, what would you say are the most IMPORTANT issues here?" I think we were learning - certainly I was learning - to take our work seriously and to

think that it might make a difference; and that academic work needed other people and needed trust built up over time, so we needed to look after the relationships and communities and institutions that allow it to happen; and that it was all right to care deeply about what we thought about, and think hard about what we cared about; and also that you could do very hard academic work and enjoy it at the same time. It seems to me that it's rather easy to lose sight of all those things in contemporary academia. But I don't think David's former students are going to lose sight of them.'

I've got this far without mentioning his immense contributions to the Cambridge Theological Federation, years on the Councils of Ridley, Wescott, the Federation itself, the Henry Martyn Trust, his work as a Syndic of the Press, his immense contribution to the Church of England over the years. I suggest these groups may hold their own retirement dinners.

Let me conclude with one more comment from a former student, Simeon Zahl, now a post-doc at Oxford:

'To look at a list of his graduate students is to find Catholics and Quakers, Pentecostals and Barthians, all of whom were made to feel warmly supported in their particular project and voice. It is fair to say at this point that we are united not by a Fordian school of thought but by a quiet but powerful sensibility of generosity, of theological creativity, and of attentiveness to institutions and to the church that David formed in us, quietly but insistently, over the years. David might call all this a theologically-sourced attention to particularity; what it felt like, as his student, was grace'

I cannot think of higher praise.