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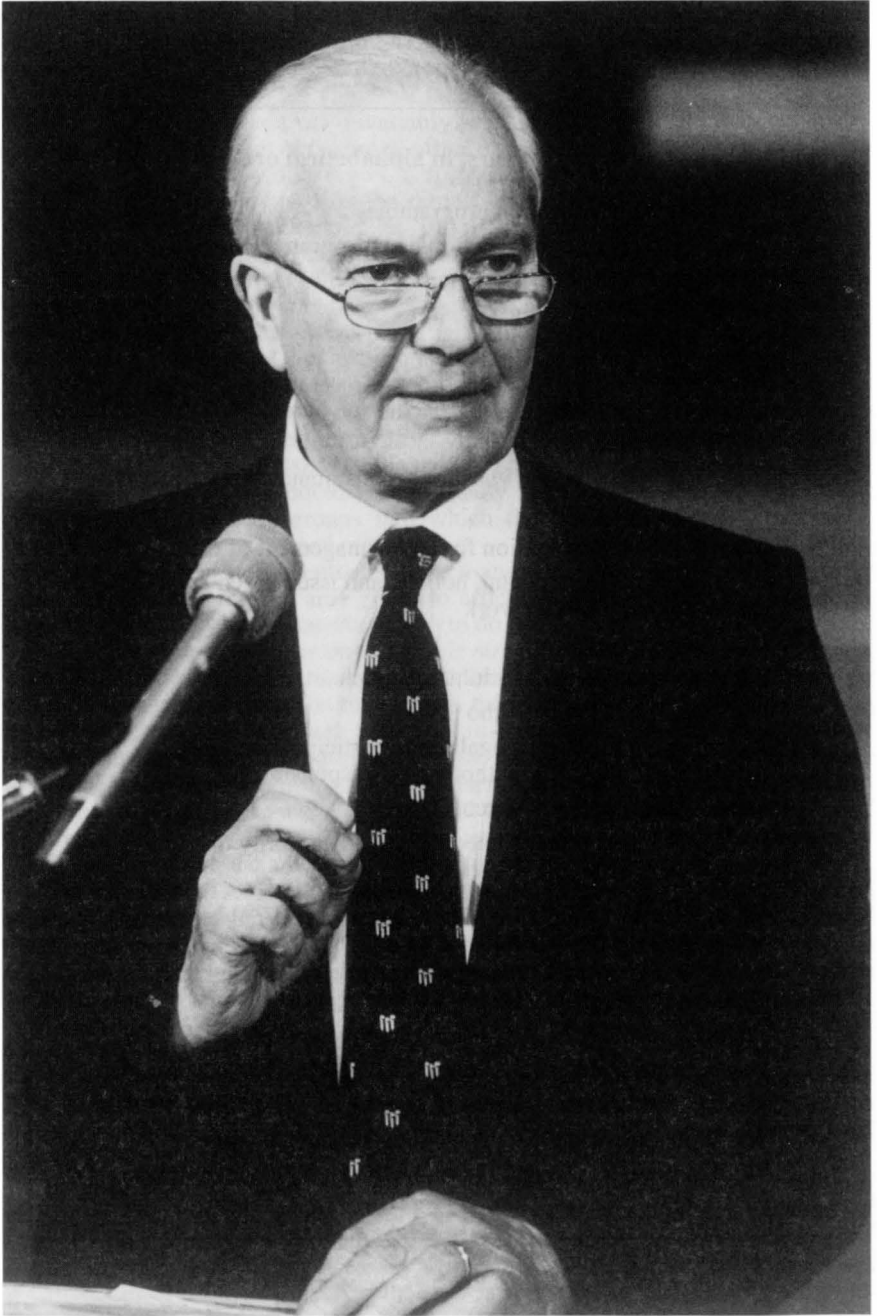
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Profile: Thomas F. Torrance

ALISTER MCGRATH

THOMAS F. Torrance was born on 30 August 1913, at Chengdu, in the Szechuan region of China, to missionary parents. Thomas Torrance senior had been deeply affected by the work of the great British missionary David Livingstone, and determined that he himself would undertake missionary work, eventually ending up working for the China Inland Mission in Chengdu. There he met and married Annie Elizabeth Sharpe, who had also been working in that region of China with the China Inland Mission. They had five children, Thomas being their second-born.

Torrance was initially educated at the Chengdu Canadian Mission School (1920-27), before returning to Scotland to continue his education at Bellshill Academy (1927-31) when the political situation in China deteriorated and the situation became difficult for foreign missionaries and their families. Torrance went on to enter the University of Edinburgh in 1931, gaining his MA in Classical Languages and Philosophy in 1934. He would have liked to study for longer, but the family's financial situation was difficult. Torrance senior had returned to minister in China, leaving the family to live and work in Edinburgh until his final return in 1934.

Torrance had always longed to study for the ministry, perhaps becoming a missionary like his father, and proceeded to New College, Edinburgh, in 1934, gaining his BD (with specialisation in systematic theology) in 1937. He subsequently undertook further research work at Oxford and Basle, where he studied under Karl Barth, and was awarded a doctorate from Basle for his work on the doctrine of grace in the writings of some early Christian theologians.

After a year spent as Professor of Systematic Theology at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York State (1938-39), he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister, and served as parish minister at Alyth, in Perthshire 1940-47, including a period spend on chaplaincy service with the British Army during the Second World War (1943-5), seeing action during the Italian campaign. He returned to parish ministry at Alyth, where he remained for two years before going on to minister at Beechgrove Parish Church, Aberdeen (1947-50).

Torrance's pastoral ministry was much appreciated. However, he had come to believe that he was called to some form of teaching ministry within the kirk. His opportunity to develop his gifts in this field came in 1950, when he was appointed Professor of Church History at Edinburgh University and New College. Although Torrance enjoyed this position, his real love was Christian dogmatics rather than church history.

When G. T. Thomson announced his retirement from the chair of Christian Dogmatics at New College in 1952, Torrance realised that he might be able to arrange for an internal move within New College by which he would transfer from the chair of church history to that of dogmatics. This move was resisted by John Baillie, who was at that time both Principal of New College and Dean of the Faculty of Divinity. It was a formidably powerful position. Baillie was aware that Torrance was sympathetic to Barthianism, a theological school with which he had little sympathy. He was also aware that Torrance was a mere 39 years of age at the time of the request. If he were to succeed Thomas, he could

expect to spend a quarter of a century in the position – ample time to shape the future theological direction of New College in a manner which Baillie rightly suspected that he would not appreciate.

Baillie's attempts to block the appointment, however, proved ineffective. The fact that an internal reallocation was being proposed made it easier for Torrance to secure support for his proposal. He was duly appointed Professor of Christian Dogmatics at Edinburgh and remained in this position until his retirement in 1979. Baillie was able to score a modest victory by arguing that the internal nature of the appointment meant that an inaugural lecture was inappropriate. Baillie was still smarting from the implied criticism of his 1950 work *Belief in Progress* contained in Torrance's inaugural lecture as Professor of Church History, later published as *History and Reformation*.

Yet Torrance saw himself as a churchman as well as an academic. Theology was there to serve the church – a theme which Torrance maintained vigorously throughout his working life. He was actively engaged in theological debates within the Church of Scotland and served as Convener of its Commission on Baptism over the period 1954-62. He was also extensively engaged in ecumenical work, especially in dialogue with the Church of England (1950-58), and in the 'Faith and Order' movement (1952-62). In addition to his important academic responsibility, Torrance served as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland from 1976-7. He was awarded the immensely prestigious Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1978, partly on account of his pioneering work in the field of the relation of Christian theology and the natural science. Since then, he has lived in retirement in Edinburgh, and written more than 250 books and articles. The word 'retirement' hardly seems appropriate to describe this new phase of his life.

Torrance is widely regarded as the most significant British theologian of the present century. He was a pioneer of English-language Barth reception, and was heavily involved in the editing and translating of Barth's massive *Church Dogmatics*. However, it would be quite incorrect to depict him simply as an advocate of Barth's theology, in that Torrance himself was active as an original thinker in his own right. It is widely agreed that this is best seen from his long-standing interest in the relation of the natural sciences and Christian theology. Among his major writings to deal with the theme, the following are widely regarded as being of particular significance:

- *Theological Science* (1969), which was based on the Hewett Lectures delivered in 1959 at Union Theological Seminary, New York.
- *Reality and Scientific Theology: Theology and Science at the Frontiers of Knowledge* (1958), based on the Harris Lectures at the University of Dundee in 1970.

In view of the importance of this area of theology – given added weight by writers such as Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, and John Polkinghorne – it is proposed to concentrate upon this in this 'profile'. Torrance argued that there was a 'hidden traffic between theological and scientific ideas of the most far-reaching significance for both theology and science . . . [which shows that they] have deep mutual relations'. Of the various convergences which Torrance identifies, the most important is that both are *a posteriori* reflections on an independent reality which they attempt to describe in their respective manners.

Torrance draws a careful and critical distinction between 'religion' and 'theology'. The distinction is important, as many discussions of the interaction of religious and scientific ways of thinking often treat the issues of 'science and religion' and 'science and theology' as synonymous – different was of speaking about the same thing. Drawing partly on a Barthian perspective, Torrance insists that this is unacceptable. 'Religion' is to be understood as concerning human consciousness and behaviour. Religion is essentially a human creation. Theology, on the other hand, has to do with our knowledge of God:

Theology is the unique science devoted to knowledge of God, differing from other sciences by the uniqueness of its object, which can be apprehended only on its own terms and from within the actual situation it has created in our existence in making itself known . . . As a science theology is only a human endeavour in quest of the truth, in which we seek to apprehend God as far as we may, to understand what we apprehend, and to speak clearly and carefully about what we understand.

Both theology and the natural sciences are thus determined by the reality of the object which is to be apprehended. They cannot set out from preconceptions of their own devising, but must allow their inquiry to be guided by the independent reality which they are seeking to understand:

Christian theology arises out of the actual knowledge of God given in and with concrete happenings in space and time. It is knowledge of the God who actively meets us and gives himself to be known in Jesus Christ – in Israel, in history, on earth. It is essentially positive knowledge, with articulated content, mediated in concrete experience. It is concerned with fact, the fact of God's self-revelation; it is concerned with God himself who, just because he really is God, always comes first. We do not therefore begin with ourselves or our questions, nor indeed can we choose where to begin; we can only begin with the facts prescribed for us by the actuality of the subject positively known.

Torrance is thus critical of the use of *a priori* notions in both science and theology, believing that both should respond to the objective reality with which they are confronted, and which they are required to describe. Theology and the natural sciences are to be seen as *a posteriori* activities, conditioned by what is given.

Torrance argues that both theology and the natural sciences are thus committed to some form of realism, in that they deal with a reality whose existence is prior to their attempts to comprehend it. Both require openness to the way things are, and their modes of inquiry are conformed to the nature of the reality which they encounter:

We are concerned in the development of scientific theories to penetrate into the comprehensibility of reality and grasp it in its mathematical harmonies or symmetries or its invariant structures, which hold good independently of our perceiving: we apprehend the real world as it forces itself upon us through the theories it calls forth from us. Theories take shape in our minds under the pressure of the

real world upon us . . . This is the inescapable 'dogmatic realism' of a science pursued and elaborated under the compelling claims and constraints of reality.

In the case of the natural sciences, the 'reality' is the natural order; in the case of theology, it is the Christian revelation:

The basic convictions and fundamental ideas with which our knowledge of God is built up arise on the ground of evangelical and liturgical experience in the life of the Church, in response to the way God has actually taken in making himself known to mankind through historical dialogue with Israel and the Incarnation of his Son in Jesus Christ and continues to reveal himself to us through the Holy Scriptures. Scientific theology or theological science, strictly speaking, can never be more than a refinement and extension of the knowledge informed by those basic convictions and fundamental ideas, and it would be both empty of material content and empirically irrelevant if it were cut adrift from them.

It will be clear that Torrance's approach is grounded in an approach which stresses the priority of God's self-revelation. This is seen as an objective reality, independent of human rational activity. Although Torrance is no uncritical supporter of Barth, this would unquestionably be one area in which he identifies with Barth's agenda. This means that the approach adopted by Torrance would not find favour with religious thinkers who regard theology as reflection on human experience, or who adopt a postmodern stance, according to which there is no such objective reality in the first place.

Yet Torrance must be seen as developing Barth's theological programme in a manner which is fundamentally more friendly and receptive towards the natural sciences. Where Barth tended to be dismissive of any dialogue between theology and the natural sciences, Torrance noted that such a dialogue had considerable potential. His argument that natural theology had a role within systematic theology which paralleled the use made by Einstein of geometry is particularly important in this respect. This illustrates Torrance's role as an active interpreter of Barth, rather than a passive recipient of Barthian dicta.

To attempt to survey Torrance's massive theological *oeuvre* lies beyond the compass of this brief review. However, in concluding, it is appropriate to draw attention to two themes which emerge in Torrance's later writings – a concern for the recovery of an authentically *Christian* doctrine of God, as set out in the classic formulation of the Trinity, and a new interest in ecumenical discussions with the Greek Orthodox Church and the theological community. Torrance personally regards two of his works from this later period of his writing to be of especial importance: *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (1988) and *The Christian Doctrine of God* (1996). These works are distinguished both for their rigorous engagement with the Greek patristic tradition, especially Athanasius, and for their sustained exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity as the classic statement of the Christian understanding of God.

It is clear that Torrance has an immense amount to offer those who interact with him. In addition to fostering a sustained engagement with Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity, Torrance's writings in the field of natural science and

Christian theology have proved immensely fruitful to those engaged in this dialogue. As a theologian who passionately believes in the relevance of theology to ministry and evangelism, Torrance has much to offer those seeking to inform their pastoral practice with theological insights.

Yet it would be improper to end without returning to China. Torrance's youth was spent in Szechuan, where he grew to love the countryside through which he roamed on missionary journeys with his father. The Communist revolution in China had resulted in the suppression of Christianity in the region, the destruction of many of the churches that Torrance's father had built, and the execution of some of the pastors he had worked with. China always remained a concern. As news filtered through to Edinburgh concerning the increasingly serious situation facing Christians in China under the Cultural Revolution, Torrance wondered how the churches he had known in his youth were faring. There seemed no way of knowing.

Yet the winds of change were blowing. Even as early as 1978, the year of Torrance's retirement, it was clear that China was changing. To Torrance's delight, it became possible for him to return to Chengdu in 1986 and to revisit the sites he had known. Christianity was alive and prospering in the region, despite all the trials and difficulties it had experienced.

Torrance's massive contributions to the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, to the development of the Reformed heritage, and to the dialogue between Christian theology and the natural sciences ensure that he will be a voice to be reckoned with in the next century. Yet perhaps he himself might prefer to be remembered as one who both knew and proclaimed the faithfulness of God in the midst of the uncertainties and anxieties of this world, and saw the resurrection of the Chinese church as a symbol of that faithfulness.

List of works

There is a complete bibliography of nearly 700 books and articles in the biography by Alister McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999, pp. 249-296.

Many of Torrance's earlier works are being reprinted by T. & T. Clark (Edinburgh) or Wipf & Stock Publishers (Eugene, Oregon).

Major books

Three of Torrance's books may be singled out as being of especial importance:

Theological Science, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

The Trinitarian Faith, The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988.

The Christian Doctrine of God., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996.