

RESPONSE ARTICLE
to Alister McGrath's
"A Manifesto for Intellectual Engagement"

THEOLOGY, SCIENCE, AND THE POWER OF THE RING

Greg Cootsona PhD
Lecturer, Religious Studies and Humanities,
California State University at Chico and Project Leader
of Science and Theology for Emerging Adult Ministries
(STEAM) at Fuller Theological Seminary

gcootsona@csuchico.edu

Abstract: *This paper for the 18 November 2016 meeting of the T. F. Torrance Fellowship in San Antonio, Texas responds to Alister McGrath's reflections on Thomas Torrance's 1968 book, *Theological Science*. It begins by offering an analogy from the character of Tom Bombadil in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of Rings*—that theologians rightly respect and learn from the sciences, but should not become enamored by their power. It then builds on Torrance's reminder that there is no singular Science, but that the objectivity of a science is best constructed on a sustained attention to the particular object of study, a method that is then applied to the task of a theological science. Next, utilizing a rubric for studying Karl Barth learned from the late Timothy Lull, the paper argues that Torrance—like his mentor Barth—is convinced that theology must continually focus on Jesus Christ as its critical source of knowledge. The final sections present an assessment of Torrance's approach to natural theology and the rationality of theological science, and conclude with appreciation for Torrance as a Christian theologian.*

I am thankful to the T. F. Torrance Fellowship for the invitation to respond to Alister McGrath's reflections on Thomas Torrance's *Theological Science*.¹ Torrance, as you have already heard, is "one of the most interesting and engaging British

1 *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1969).



theologians of the 20th century.”² In addition, since I count myself within the fold of the Reformed tradition—I am a Presbyterian Minister of Word and Sacrament after all—I am also drawn to Torrance, who skillfully and creatively articulates my theological tradition.

In that light, it is worth adding that, since Dr. McGrath is also a leading voice in theology and in its relationship with the sciences (albeit in twenty-first century), there is a kind of parallel here between him and Thomas Torrance, isn’t there? I have learned from both how to pursue more effectively a central component of my identity and vocation, that is, how to create a “scientifically engaged theology.”³ I also continue to encounter Dr. McGrath’s work daily through my teaching the class entitled simply Science and Religion at California State University, Chico. His *Introduction to Religion and Science*⁴ was already assigned for this course when I joined the faculty of the public—and thus secular—university where I teach science and religion. Using by analogy the key conviction in Torrance’s work that ontology defines our epistemology because there is a “givenness”⁵ to the object of study, I can affirm that there is a “givenness” to the work of Alister McGrath in my life.

And thus I find many reasons to offer gratitude for this opportunity to respond to Dr. McGrath and to discuss the thought of Thomas Torrance.

My Method

So as to set out a nucleus for my remarks, I offer this lapidary summary of Torrance’s core thesis:⁶

Theology is a rational human enterprise or science. It bases itself on the Word of God as its Object, and its particular rationality and objectivity offer substantive connections with, as well as certain dissimilarities from, the natural sciences.

2 McGrath, “A Manifesto for Intellectual Engagement: Reflections on Thomas F. Torrance’s *Theological Science*,” (1969), 1.

3 McGrath, “A Manifesto,” 5.

4 McGrath, *Science and Religion: A New Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

5 This word first appears in the Preface (viii) and recurs repeatedly throughout *Theological Science*.

6 Here is a parallel statement from Torrance: “What we have been concerned to do, is to show that Christian theology has its place of enquiry within the field of rational knowledge, and to claim that in accordance with its attempt to behave in terms of the nature of its own proper object, it must be allowed to adopt and modify language, to shape and form its own concepts, and to delimit or expand its use of terms, like any other branch of knowledge or science” (*Theological Science*, 25).

My method in this paper will be to stay as close as possible to Torrance's *Theological Science* and to Dr. McGrath's paper—the latter I will only cite sparingly (because I will make the bold assumption that you just heard it!)—while making reference as necessary to the wider discussion of theology and the sciences and to Torrance's other work. I therefore will not engage secondary literature in any detail. (Indeed space limits me in this way.) Throughout, I will pose a few questions for Dr. McGrath to take up as he chooses.

Tom Bombadil and the One Ring

Oh yes, one other part of my method—I will introduce other important voices as relevant. One of those voices is the novelist J. R. R. Tolkien.

The natural sciences present a peculiar allure for theologians. Maybe we lack self-esteem and find ourselves envious of the cultural power of these sciences. For whatever reason, we often feel that, if we simply find the right science, then we might magically unlock a new power for theology.

As an alternative, I would promote theological use of the sciences along the lines of Tom Bombadil in Tolkien's magisterial epic, *The Lord of the Rings*. On Frodo's trip to Rivendell in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Bombadil this "Master of wood, water and hill," takes the Ring—"the One Ring of Power to rule them all"—and plays with it. He finds it beautiful, but not irresistible. Bombadil can see Frodo (the Ring-bearing hobbit) when the Ring makes him invisible to others. He can wear it himself with no effect. Bombadil even tosses the Ring in the air and makes it disappear, produces it in his other hand, and finally returns it to Frodo. Later, the Council of Elrond debates the best way to destroy the Ring, and the Elf Erestor comments that perhaps Bombadil will play a part in this because "It seems that he has a power even over the Ring." "No, I should not put it so," said Gandalf. "Say rather that the Ring has no power over him. He is his own master. But he cannot alter the Ring itself, nor break its power over others."⁷

In some ways, this is how I read Torrance's (and similarly Karl Barth's) approach to the sciences. We do not simply *play* with the sciences like Tom Bombadil, but we do admire their beauty without being overwhelmed by them. Nor do we become thinned out and invisible by using them. This might be a way (citing McGrath) that we "reject intellectual isolationism on the one hand, and intellectual accommodationism on the other."⁸

7 *The Fellowship of the Ring, Part One, The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), 348.

8 McGrath, "A Manifesto," 16.

In any event, I offer this image in this spirit, and I take this to be consonant with Torrance when he applauds the proper use of the sciences and their methods, particularly an *objectivity* that is tuned to the object of study.⁹ At the same time, I note that Torrance recognizes that theology has its own rationality and subject matter. It doesn't have to succumb to the power of the Ring in order for it to be legitimate.

Objectivity and the Givenness of the Subject

I have already begun to discuss *objectivity* in Torrance's *Theological Science*. This is correlated with another conviction: that there is no, one Science. In fact—as is generally the case in French, but not in English—we do better to refer to “the sciences” (or *les sciences*) or the “science of x,” such as physics, biology, or (to follow Torrance) theology. As Torrance comments in the third section of *Theological Science* (citing A.D. Ritchie's *Studies in the History and Methods of Sciences*), “there is no Science in the singular, for there are only sciences.”¹⁰ “There is no one scientific method that is universally applicable.”¹¹ And thus we must reject “the common error of supposing that physics is the one and only science and that all other studies just creep in as hangers-on or else are not scientific at all.”¹²

In this light, I applaud Dr. McGrath's work throughout his paper to demonstrate what this attention to the object of study means. I particularly commend his comments about Barth, restoring him as a “scientific theologian” in this sense. McGrath's reflections on Barth are directly applicable to Torrance:

I must immediately emphasise how helpful Barth is at some important points to a principled dialogue between theology and the natural sciences, mainly on account of his insistence that it is not possible to develop a universal method, capable of being applied across all disciplines; rather, it was necessary to identify the unique object of Christian theology, and respond in a manner which was consonant with its distinctive characteristics.¹³

9 This is captured beautifully in the German word that Barth employs in his discussion of theological method, *Sachlichkeit*, which bases itself on the *Sache*, “the thing” or “the matter” being observed.

10 *Theological Science*, 106.

11 *Ibid.*, 107. On a related note, on page 10 of his paper, Dr. McGrath writes, “Torrance clearly managed to absorb the fundamental principles of the scientific method” (cf. 18). I wonder if this singular is sustainable, or are we better talking about “the methods of the sciences”?

12 *Theological Science*, 107 (citing Ritchie).

13 McGrath, “A Manifesto,” 12. Cf. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1980), 89-90.

In addition, to the lack of a singular, universalizable Science and its correlate, “the Scientific Method,” I do need to circumscribe a further limitation to scientific thought, perhaps with a reminder of Bombadil and the Ring specifically on how we read Scripture. Here, I will draw on a common mentor to both Dr. McGrath and me, C. S. Lewis who is indeed “one of the most significant theological voices of the 20th century.”¹⁴ Lewis contended that we read Scripture, not by working toward a putative scientific reading of Scripture (if by “scientific” we mean something monolithic), but by reading in its own light.¹⁵ In other words, a sound biblical hermeneutic does not need a natural scientific validation. On page 18 of his paper, Dr. McGrath offers a hint in the need to engage “the place of social constructs in theology.” What to do with this latter thread in Torrance? Is an analysis of social constructs another voice in the dialogue with theology when we consider the sciences? If Torrance is laying out a “Manifesto for Intellectual Engagement,” what other engagement ought theology have?

The Lull Rubric

At this point, I would like to take a brief (but relevant) excursus by referencing a quip that one of my professors at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, the late Timothy Lull, made about Barth. (Tim, who had an eternally wry smile on his face, quipped so well.) And since Torrance is deeply influenced by Barth, it works for him too. I will call it the *Lull Rubric*. Here is what Tim told me one day:

What is the answer to every theological loci for Barth? Jesus Christ.

So let’s try it—What is *creation*? Jesus Christ. Creation is outward basis of the covenant in Jesus Christ.

What is *election*? Jesus Christ. He is both the elected and rejected One.

What is the *Word* of God? Jesus Christ . . . (etc.).

This is how the Lull Rubric works—start every answer to a theological question with “Jesus Christ” and proceed from there. It is not a bad summary of Barth nor an entirely distorting path to understand Torrance.

14 Dr. McGrath is stunningly prolific and has authored three books (by my count) to my one on the topic of Clive Staples Lewis (who is sometimes playfully referred to as “St. Clive” in my circles).

15 Lewis wrote that we would have preferred in the Bible “something we could have tabulated and memorized and relied on like the multiplication table,” but the Bible is not like that. Similarly, we don’t use the Bible “as encyclopedia or encyclical, but by steeping ourselves in its tone and temper and so learning its overall message” *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), 112.

Where does the Lull Rubric leads our understanding of *Theological Science* and particularly how theology as a science relates to the other sciences on the nature of truth?

I return to the objectivity of knowledge. In the fourth chapter, "The Nature of Truth," Torrance poses the question, What is theological knowledge? And he answers, Jesus Christ. Or, with a bit more elaboration,

Knowledge is real only as it is in accordance with the nature of the object, but the nature of the object prescribes the mode or rationality we have to adopt towards it in our knowing, and also the nature of the demonstration appropriate to it. The object of theological knowledge is the Truth of God as it is in Jesus . . .¹⁶

Thus, there exists a striking similarity with the other sciences and yet also this difference: "justification by the Grace of God in Jesus Christ applies not only to our life and action, but to our knowledge, and is essentially relevant to epistemology."¹⁷

Later, Torrance comments on the question of how can we verify theological statements scientifically? Again the answer is Jesus Christ, or stated with more nuance, "the verification of our theological statements consists, as we saw, in their reference to Jesus Christ.. [as it] reaches us through the Church and through the witness to Him in the Scriptures in the midst of the Church."¹⁸

"The Problems of Logic" (chapter five in *Theological Science*) must feel weighty because Torrance uses the greatest amount of pages in the book for this topic (almost eighty). He asks, "How are we to relate the *logos* of man to the *Logos* of God, formal logic to the Logic of God?" His answer: "By 'the Logic of God' we can only mean Jesus Christ, for He and no other is the eternal *Logos* of God become flesh."¹⁹

My question for Dr. McGrath is not simply, "Who is Jesus Christ?" (as important as that question is). Instead, I want to pursue further, "How do we relate the specific knowledge of God that we find in Jesus Christ with the universal knowledge of God's creation through the sciences?" Secondly—and perhaps because I teach in a Department of Comparative Religion—I advocate clarity with one additional word to Torrance's title, namely *Christian Theological Science*.²⁰ It's not as elegant, but necessary. And so I arrive at a second question:

16 *Theological Science*, 198.

17 *Ibid.*, 198.

18 *Ibid.*, 199-200.

19 *Ibid.*, 205-6.

20 This comment raises several issues that I hope to address in future publications, but here are two. First of all, there is considerable question as to whether other religious

Is there anything in a pluralistic religious context that problematizes Torrance's particularly Christocentric convictions that theology is a science?

Natural Theology

This last section leads quite easily to a further implication of Torrance's thought, namely, *natural theology*.²¹ Torrance can state rather boldly, "natural theology may offer the greatest hindrance to natural science and to scientific theology alike."²² Then he notes the concept of complementarity in quantum physics. "Therefore the more exactly natural science and scientific theology are pursued, the sharper the distinction but the greater the complementarity exists between them." Thus he asserts "there is indeed a form of natural knowledge" of God, but this "cannot be worked up into a 'natural theology.'"²³ He concludes that natural theology can offer reasoning, "which will remove from sceptical minds that which obstructs direct intuitive apprehension of the living God."²⁴ In another context, he employs this lovely idiom—that natural theology ought to be "theological geometry."²⁵ Torrance means by this combination that geometry is not autonomous, but "must be pursued with indissoluble unity with physics."²⁶ So too with natural theology.

And although I am keen on this phrase "theological geometry," it raises some questions. Accordingly, I would like to ask Dr. McGrath—who has certainly done some extensive work on the topic of natural theology—What do we do with natural theology in Torrance? If we take Torrance's point seriously that theology is a special science, is there, more or less, a symmetry of theological science, on the one hand, with natural sciences, on the other? A bit more critically stated, Torrance often comments that twentieth century science was

traditions' system of teaching can be called "theology" without importing Christian notions. Secondly, however one answers the previous question, I do realize that there are some fascinating differences in how other religious traditions treat science. For example, Buddhists approach science in markedly different ways from how I do as a Christian in the Reformed tradition. See, Alan B. Wallace, ed., *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, Columbia Series in Science and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

21 I find Torrance's comments instructive in *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 75-109.

22 *Theological Science*, 102.

23 *Ibid.*, 103.

24 *Ibid.*, 104.

25 "Incarnation and Space and Time," in *Space, Time, and Incarnation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 70.

26 *Ibid.*, 69.

less dualistic and more amenable to Christian theology, but what happens if this situation changes and science returns to a dualism or heads in another direction, less amenable to Christian orthodoxy? Do we abandon our work with a Christian natural theology?

On the other hand, if theology is a science, can it revise its dogmas as the natural sciences do? For example, one could consider the Chalcedonian definition and the hypostatic union: Are these revisable scientific paradigms as the Jesus Seminar proffers? Is Chalcedon analogous to Newtonian physics in their relationship with quantum theory?

The Rationality of Theological Science

In my core definition of *Theological Science*, I offered that Torrance's view is that "*Theology is a rational human enterprise or science.*" As much as I applaud this conviction, it raises some concerns.

What does Torrance's definition of theology force theology to be? In other words, I certainly agree theology is rational, but can it include story, community, and ritual? Or perhaps better put, can Christian life and practice include these elements and shouldn't theology serve the entirety of Christian life and practice? Admittedly, the burden of *Theological Science* (and related books and lectures) is to engage with the natural sciences and their methods; nonetheless Torrance seems particularly resistant to mysticism (as did his mentor, Barth) and thus myth.²⁷ In the great tradition of "mere Christianity" (to cite C. S. Lewis), this constitutes a blind spot. Torrance, in my view, has allowed Rudolf Bultmann to define *myth* and therefore to set it in absolute contrast to history and rationality.²⁸ Here I will draw on my own undergraduate studies in Classics, on what I have learned from Lewis about both Christian life and the nature of myth,²⁹ from N. T. Wright's magisterial work on story in his *New Testament and the People of God*,³⁰ and in my work as a pastor, where the congregation naturally leaned toward

27 See *Theological Science*, 187-90.

28 Cf. his discussion of the "transition from *mythos* to *logos*" in the work of Athanasius in *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 117-18. See also Bultmann, "Kerygma and Myth," in Hans Werner Busch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 10-11.

29 Since this was an area of academic specialization for Lewis, he wrote extensively on myth. E.g., "Myth in general is not merely misunderstood history... nor diabolical illusion... not priestly lying... but at its best, a real unfocused gleam of divine truth on human imagination" (*Miracles* [New York: Macmillan, 1960], 138).

30 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 69-74.

stories, anecdotes, and illustrations, and struggled with discursive, cognitive theological exposition. I am not at all confident that Bultmann understood myth accurately, on the one hand, and that we can remove myth or story from faith.

And so I continue to additional questions: "How then can theology engage both the rationality of science and the nonrational elements of narrative or story (to use a less controversial term than 'myth')?" And if we are to engage contemporary science, I have learned from Robert McCauley's book *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*,³¹ that religious practice is defined by community and especially by narrative. Thus it is "cognitively natural" in this sense, while science and theology are less cognitively natural and thus they take real brainwork. That is not to say that theology, because it is hard work should be discarded—many of us would be out of jobs!—but that this hard work must be complemented by more cognitively natural, easier work such as story, narrative, or myth (I believe those terms can be employed more or less interchangeably in this context.)

How might Torrance, or Dr. McGrath, or both, respond to this concern that Torrance's definition of theology is too restrictive in the history of Christian faith and practice and, more importantly, to an integration with contemporary cognitive science?

The Future of a "Manifesto for Intellectual Engagement"

Dr. McGrath has entitled his paper "A Manifesto for Intellectual Engagement." I would like to suggest with him that one follows thinkers as a "no passive recipient,"³² but instead learns from them, critiques them, and seeks to develop and even to improve their thought. As Barth once quipped, "If there are Barthians, I am not one of them."³³

In that spirit, and keeping in mind that *Theological Science* is on the way to being fifty years old and that manifestos generally look ahead, what might it be like to follow Torrance's lead in *this* century, especially on the relation between theology and the sciences? I can suggest one direction. My work in the past two decades has been on emerging adults' engagement with faith and science. When about thirty to thirty-four percent of those in the United States between eighteen and thirty do not affiliate with the church and one of the top six reasons given

31 Robert McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

32 As McGrath writes of Torrance and the Reformed tradition, "Manifesto for Intellectual Engagement," 3.

33 Cited in Harold Nebelsick, "Karl Barth's Understanding of Science," in John Thompson, ed., *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth, May 10, 1886*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1986), 201.

is that the church is “antiscience,”³⁴ I take this to be an issue of the viability of the Gospel. It represents a problem about which Torrance can offer leadership, if nothing else, since he was a minister of the Gospel who engaged the sciences.

What indeed are the implications for the future of a theological science? How has science changed since 1969? What are new directions for Torrance’s enterprise in the twenty-first century? I end my questions here, although naturally I have many more that I would like to pose to Torrance since he is a generous and generative Christian thinker.³⁵

Meeting Thomas Torrance

Through *Theological Science*, Torrance makes a remarkably consistent point: *Theology, as a science, like all other sciences, pays particular attention—and creates its methods—in light of its object, namely, Jesus Christ.* (Let us never forget the Lull Rubric.) In this light, I close with one final reflection on Torrance.

The one and only time I heard Torrance live was at a meeting of the Theological Students Fellowship at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1991. It has been published in *Preaching Jesus Christ Today* and entitled “Incarnation and Atonement in the Light of Modern Scientific Rejection of Dualism.”³⁶ I remember most his opening remarks—which did not make their way into the text of the book—in them he said something akin to, “I am, and have always been, simply a preacher of the Gospel.” In some very unusual, important, and remarkable ways that is what he is in *Theological Science* as well.

And perhaps that is also the greatest compliment I can give Thomas Torrance as a theologian.

In sum, I thank you for this opportunity to consider his work and to respond to Dr. McGrath. I look forward to our conversation about this remarkable theological mind.

34 Pew Research Center, “Nones’ on the Rise,” October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/> and David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 131ff.

35 For example, how would the concept of theology as a science sound to the best critiques of modern atheists? I think, for example, of Christopher Hitchens’s abhorrence at the interaction of religion and science because Christianity has “no evidence.” (“That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.”) If one contrasts that contention with Torrance’s confidence that they can and are both sciences, does Torrance have a reasonable rejoinder? Put another way, taking the revelation of Jesus Christ’s divinity as a given is quite a high bar, and must that conviction be also proven instead of accepted as quasi-axiomatic?

36 Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, 41-71.