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THEOLOGICAL SCIENCE

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Professor of Christian Dogmatics
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Thomas F. Torrance.

Based on the Hewett Lectures for 1959

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To
Sir Bernard Lovell
in
Friendship and Admiration

Preface

This volume represents in a considerably expanded form the Hewett Lectures on 'The Nature of Theology and Scientific Method', delivered in 1959 at Union Theological Seminary, New York, at Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Center, and at the Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts. I should like to express my deep gratitude to the Trustees of the Hewett Lectureship for inviting me to lecture at such lively centres of theological learning, and to the Presidents and Deans for making possible discussion with many alert minds on the themes of the lectures, and not least for their wonderful hospitality to my wife and family as well as myself. We shall never forget the kindness and friendship showed to us all by teachers and students alike, nor the way in which we were allowed to share their daily worship of God.

The substance of these lectures was also presented in a different form to graduate students at Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey, in the same year. When I returned from the United States I had many questions to answer and these gathered even more as I offered the lectures on several occasions to postgraduate students in Edinburgh University. Thus, as I prepared the book for the Press, I found that the material had greatly expanded, but at one point I was held up. In a rash moment in New York in discussion with Professor Robert McAfee Brown I offered to include in the published form of the lectures a chapter on hermeneutics, but when I came to write it a book, instead of a chapter, appeared. I tried once again, and another book emerged. The matter bristled with so many epistemological problems and concealed assumptions that I determined to write an independent work on the subject, and then to offer a digest of that in a single chapter to go with the Hewett Lectures. This has proved a

big undertaking, and the result will appear either in one very large volume or three smaller books. Meantime the publishers, who have been most patient with me, pressed for the original lectures, and so I set out to give them that material in a publishable form. But once again I could not shake myself free of many problems and questions and produced a much larger book than I had hoped. That is now presented in these pages, at the third time of writing, but without the chapter on hermeneutics. With this explanation I would like to offer to the Hewett Trustees and my many friends at the three Colleges my sincere regrets for the protracted delay in publication.

In discussing the meaning and place of authority in his second series of Gifford lectures delivered in St. Andrews, during the session of 1927–8, my revered teacher, A. E. Taylor, called for the locating of authority, neither in individualism nor in some institutional seat, but in a reality that is wholly given and trans-subjective, and simply and absolutely authoritative through its givenness. If knowledge is to be more than personal opinion, he argued, there must be control of our personal intellectual constructions by something which is not constructed but *received*. In our human knowledge of God this is humbly to acknowledge that what is genuinely given has unquestionable right to control our thinking and acting, just because it is so utterly given to us and not made by us. With that notion of authority clarified, Professor Taylor held that we might entertain hope for the future of theology as 'a genuine, assured, and yet progressive science of God'. (*The Faith of a Moralist*, vol. 2, p. 241.)

That is what I believe theological science to be and how I try to engage in it, but we are not concerned with that here in its positive and material content. This is a book about the philosophy of the science of God, a discipline which the theologian must undertake if he is really to do his job. What is required of us here is not a Philosophy of Religion in which religion is substituted in the place of God, but a Philosophy of Theology in which we are directly engaged with knowledge of the Reality of God and not just with religious phenomenality. Whenever religion is substituted in the place of God, the fact that in religion we are concerned with the behaviour of *religious people*, sooner or later means the substitution of humanity

in the place of religion—the point at which our 'secularizing' philosophers of religion appear to have arrived. There is undoubtedly a place for the scientific study of religious people, of religious phenomena, and of religious language, but none of these can be a substitute for the Philosophy of Theology in which we are concerned with the meta-science of our direct cognitive relation with God. Science and meta-science are required not because God is a problem but because *we* are. As Austin Farrer has said, 'the existence of perfection requires no explanation, the existence of limited being requires explanation' (*Finite and Infinite*, p. 15). It is because *our* relations with God have become problematic that we must have a scientific theology.

If I may be allowed to speak personally for a moment, I find the presence and being of God bearing upon my experience and thought so powerfully that I cannot but be convinced of His overwhelming reality and rationality. To doubt the existence of God would be an act of sheer irrationality, for it would mean that my reason had become unhinged from its bond with real being. Yet in knowing God I am deeply aware that my relation to Him has been damaged, that disorder has resulted in my mind, and that it is I who obstruct knowledge of God by getting in between Him and myself, as it were. But I am also aware that His presence presses unrelentingly upon me through the disorder of my mind, for He will not let Himself be thwarted by it, challenging and repairing it, and requiring of me on my part to yield my thoughts to His healing and controlling revelation.

Scientific theology is active engagement in that cognitive relation to God in obedience to the demands of His reality and self-giving. In it we probe into the problematic condition of the human mind before God and seek to bring knowledge of Him into clear focus, so that the truth of God may shine through to it unhindered by its opacity and the human mind may acquire clear and orderly forms through which to apprehend and conceive His reality. That is to say, we seek to allow God's own eloquent self-evidence to sound through to us in His Logos so that we may know and understand Him out of His own rationality and under the determination of His divine being. In the course of this activity we begin to understand

something of how the cognitive relation of men to God can be so sharply refracted that double vision results, in which human knowers are unable to trace the thought of God back to its proper ground in His reality. Although God does not cease to disclose His power and deity to them the truth becomes stifled, for at the very roots of their knowledge, as St. Paul said, they twist it into untruth. All a man may be able to do then in his sense of the presence of God is to give it oblique, or symbolic, meaning only to discover that he has thrust himself into its content, or he may try to straighten out the connections of his thought and make them point beyond him, only to find that they break off and point into emptiness and nothing, even though he remains haunted, as it were, by the ultimate rationality of God all round him.

This is where theological science must step in to help men refer their thoughts properly beyond themselves to God. We cannot communicate God to men directly, but we can engage in normal acts of communication in which we use language with a semantic intention, not so much to express our minds as to refer other minds to something beyond ourselves. While our linguistic and conceptual forms may be communicated directly to other minds, intuitable realities are not directly communicable: we may point them out, or refer to them through accepted signs or acquired designations, in the hope that others will perceive or apprehend them also, but unless that takes place communication has not achieved its end. Communication takes place between minds that are directed to the same or similar objects and so is necessarily indirect through a triadic relationship in which one mind directs another to an object by referring to it, and in which the other mind by following through the reference to the object understands the intention of the first mind.

This presupposes the rationality of the medium and the context in which communication takes place, that is, not only an intelligible language but an intelligible subject-matter. The things about which we speak to one another must be capable of rational apprehension and of semantic designation. This is something that we assume and operate with continually in ordinary experience and in science, without attempting to explain it. If the nature of things were not somehow inherently

rational they would remain inapprehensible and opaque and indeed we ourselves would not be able to emerge into the light of rationality. It is because things are amenable to rational treatment that we can apprehend them at all; we understand them, or get light upon them, in so far as we can penetrate into their rationality and develop our grasp of it. Scientific knowledge is that in which we bring the inherent rationality of things to light and expression, as we let the realities we investigate disclose themselves to us under our questioning and we on our part submit our minds to their intrinsic connections and order. Scientific activity certainly involves a give and take between subject and object, while all knowledge is by way of being a compromise between thought and being; nevertheless it remains an awesome fact that if the nature of things were not intelligible and apprehensible, knowledge could not arise at all, far less communication. We communicate with others only when we get them to submit their thoughts to the same rationality in things that we experience. Thus communication from the very start involves an element of persuasion. So far as theological knowledge is concerned this is what we call, perhaps mistakenly, 'apologetics', but, whatever we call it, it is a necessary part of scientific activity in theological communication.

This basic persuasiveness is not one-directional, however, especially when we are engaged in a conjoint apprehension of things with other minds that communicate back to us, for in the fuller apprehension that we can have together of the same things there usually takes place a modification in our apprehension of them and of their rationality. If something is inherently rational, and not merely accidental or surd-like, then it is our fault and not that of the thing itself if we fail to understand it: we have probably overlaid it with some form of unreality by bringing to its apprehension preconceived ideas that are not appropriate or are wrongly extrapolated from another field of experience. This means that as we seek to penetrate into the rationality of something, our inquiry must also cut back into ourselves and into our presuppositions, for they must be brought into question if we are really to understand the thing concerned out of itself and in accordance with its own nature. In these circumstances persuasion or apologetics

must argue for a reconstruction in our interpretative frame of thought, in order that the alien elements may be eliminated from it and new elements assimilated more appropriate to the nature of the things we are speaking about. It is always the nature of things that must prescribe for us the specific mode of rationality that we must adopt toward them, and prescribe also the form of verification apposite to them, and therefore it is a major part of all scientific activity to reach clear convictions as to the distinctive nature of what we are seeking to know in order that we may develop and operate with the distinctive categories demanded of us.

In this involvement with epistemological and methodological questions theological science is inevitably committed to dialogue with the other sciences and with philosophy, as well as with ordinary experience, for they too are engaged in disciplined activity to clarify the referential relations of human thought and speech and are continually at work refining and enlarging their range to take in hitherto unknown realities. They are all engaged in an unrelenting struggle to separate out from their entanglement in our experience and knowledge the elements that are ultimately and irreducibly given from the elements that are elaborated and constructed in our acts of consciousness, although without the latter we can never reach apprehension of the former, for we never apprehend anything without engaging at once in forming judgements and developing interpretations about it. But this is an unceasing task, for we can never reach completely clear and unambiguous apprehension of the real, both because it always outruns our experience of it and because we can never finally overcome our own artificiality—the least we can do is to devote all our powers to the refining and elaborating of methods that will take us as far as possible in this direction, methods that will carry in themselves self-correcting devices so that we may always be directed away from ourselves to the compulsive force of objective connections in the real world. In this theological science and the other sciences make use of the same basic tool, the human reason operating with the given, so that the theologian and the scientist are at work not only in the same room, so to speak, but often at the same bench, yet in such a way that each acknowledges the distinctive nature of the other's

subject-matter and resists any *Gleichschaltung* of their categories and methods. Yet because each uses the same gift of reason and each seeks to establish the same kind of relation with the real in his own field, they cannot but interact with one another and learn from one another, if only in learning how to be religiously faithful to the nature of the reality into which they inquire and so to be real in their thinking.

As I see it, this is the great story of modern thought, whether it be in theology, science, or philosophy: the struggle for fidelity, for appropriate methods and apposite modes of speech, and therefore for the proper adaptation of the human subject to the object of his knowledge, whether it be God or the world of nature or man; but it is also the story of the struggles of man with himself, for somehow the more he comes to know, the more masterful he tries to be and the more he imposes himself upon reality, the more he gets in the way of his own progress. It is here that positive theology should have so much to offer, for it is concerned with right relations between man and God, with the healing and repairing of the human subject through humility before God, with the control of his convictions by what is ultimately given and real, with emancipation from arbitrary individualism, and thus with genuine objectivity in which man learns to love God and his neighbour, not for his own sake, but for their sakes.

In order to set the stage for the succeeding discussion, let me characterize briefly the basic and common problems of modern theology and science, as I see them. Modern theology in its distinctive form began with John Calvin's *Institute of the Christian Religion*, for in it there emerged three primary features of modern scientific thinking. (i) Calvin reversed the medieval order of scientific questions, *quid sit, an sit,* and *quale sit,* making the question *Qualis est?* primary in theological activity. But in making this question the first one, he altered its nature for it became a genuine interrogation without being governed by preceding abstractions and so the new kind of question that we have had to learn in the advance to new knowledge. Thus instead of starting with abstract questions as to essence and possibility, he started with the question as to actuality, 'What is the nature of this thing that we have here?' which in theological knowledge becomes the question as to who God is and as

to what He reveals of Himself. It is only on that ground that we may go on to ask the other questions, which also become changed when put in this order, for then they are questions probing into the reality of our knowledge and testing its foundation. (ii) Calvin insisted that theology starts with the situation in which knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves are already found together in a profound mutuality. We are unable to speak of knowledge of God cut off from the fact that He has addressed us and we have come to know Him, so that our knowledge of God must include the proper place given by God to the human subject. This means that scientific theology beginning with actuality cannot abstract itself from the subject-object relation, for it is there that it is locked in profound relations between the human subject and the divine Subject as its proper Object. Hence the immense stress that has been given in modern theology to personal relation with God. (iii) Within these actual relations our knowledge of God must be put to the test if we are to distinguish knowledge of God from knowledge of ourselves, especially in view of the fact that differences arise among us that are not overcome merely by appeal to the Holy Scriptures. The principle that Calvin brought into play here was what he called the *analogia fidei*, that is a movement of thought in which we test the fidelity of our knowledge by tracing our thought back to its ground in the reality known, in which we refer everything to God and not to ourselves. In this way we let the Truth of God retain its own authority and majesty, and allow ourselves to be questioned before it so that we may be delivered from distorting the truth through our untested preconceptions, for that is the root cause of error and division. In other words, this is the principle of objectivity and unification with which we operate in the scientific mode of inquiry.

The problem of modern theology, however, is that the second feature has got out of hand, for when the element of personal relation to God is not controlled by critical testing on the analogy of faith it degenerates into a gross personalism in which we obtrude ourselves into the place of God, making our relations with God the sole content of theological knowledge. That is the problem that faces us everywhere today in the so-called 'new theology' in which statements about God

are reducted to anthropological statements. Whenever we try to transcend a subject-object relation or replace it by a 'pure' subject-subject relation, we are unable to distinguish God from ourselves, and lapse into irrationality, and then into the bitter futility of God-is-dead-ness.

The problem of modern science is not unlike that of theology. Modern science began with the emergence of the empirical approach in which we start with interrogation of actuality and operate through observation and experiment. That is to say, Calvin's first and third principles were brought into play, with appropriate change and modification in view of the determinate nature of the subject-matter, and in this movement modern science developed immense stress upon objectivity in every field of investigation, with the most startling results. But since the rise of quantum theory and the deepening exploration of nuclear activity, that is in the whole realm of microphysics, natural science has been forced to take the human subject into theoretical account in the development of its explanations. Since the interaction between the scientific observer and his object plays a necessary part in his knowledge, can we ever get beyond the observer to know things as they really are in themselves, independently of our observation? Is there not an impassable barrier between the subject and the object because the human subject keeps on getting in his own way, thus eclipsing the object from his proper view, as it were? Hence it is argued that we must leave the old conception of objectivity behind in the realm of classical physics, for objectivity of that kind is not attainable. Yet this itself seems to involve strangely the extrapolation from classical physics into modern physics of a feature that ought not to be there, namely, that scientific theories have a one-to-one correspondence with the realities they describe and are models in the sense of being theoretical transcripts of reality. This is certainly not the case, for they are actually models of a different kind through which we allow the realities to disclose themselves to us from beyond our theoretic constructions and through which we apprehend those realities in their distinction from and indeed in their critique of our models. That is to say, instead of regarding the interaction between subject and object as positing a barrier to knowledge it ought to be regarded as the active

means of communication between subject and object in which the subject directs his questions as a cognitive instrument to the object in order to reach deeper knowledge of it and in which the demand for the reforming of his question or remoulding of his instrument means that he is thrust deeper and deeper into objectivity.

This is the struggle that is now going on in the epistemology of modern science, and it is strangely parallel to the struggle going on in theological science. Thus within physics, at the very moment, in the attempts to deal with the logical structure of quantum theory, hidden idealist (Cartesian and Kantian) presuppositions are being forced out into the open, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that these untested elements in our thought are seriously obstructing the advance and unification of scientific theory. On the other hand logical and mathematical forms of thought are now being developed in various countries to enable us to penetrate behind the subjective variables introduced by the observer. The measuring operations that gave rise to so much difficulty in the so-called Copenhagen Theory are now being treated as active links in the continuing relation between subject and object, so that in this way a critical and a realist epistemology becomes possible in which 'physical statements' are not ousted at decisive points for 'ideal statements'. It is one thing to say that since the act of observing interferes with a situation in nature that it is a necessary condition and element in our knowledge of it, but another thing to say that it is only a necessary step on our way toward knowledge of it, for then the constructions or theories we elaborate are employed as operational questions in a mode of inquiry that is progressively more profoundly objective.

But here also in modern science undue emphasis upon the place of the human subject leads quickly into an irrational situation, in which it is claimed that man himself imposes patterns of his own upon nature through his inventions. Not only is man unable to distinguish a given reality from his own constructions, but even to think of trying to do so, it is argued, is to fall from the pure ideal of science as complete technological control of nature. But all this can mean in the end of the day is that in his scientific activity man is only meeting himself, fulfilling himself, and that there is no meaning in anything

except that which he puts into it out of himself. And so the real outcome of this line of thought is meaninglessness and futility, everywhere apparent in the social life of our 'scientific' civilization.

Thus it is apparent that theological and natural science share the same basic problem: how to refer our thoughts and statements genuinely beyond ourselves, how to reach knowledge of reality in which we do not intrude ourselves distortingly into the picture, and yet how to retain the full and integral place of the human subject in it all. When this is discerned the dialogue between theology and science takes a different turn, for then they are seen to be allies in a common front where each faces the same insidious enemy, namely, man himself assuming the role of the Creator, acknowledging nothing except what he has made and declining to allow any of his constructions to be controlled by unconstructed reality beyond. Man and nature are here organically related and 'God' is swallowed up between them. As Georgio de Santillana has said, 'The real conflict over these recent years of ours is not between "science and religion"; it is between romantic naturalism and a philosophy of order and design.' (*The Origins of Scientific Thought*, p. 301.) Yet romantic naturalism arises just as easily in 'religion' as in natural science. Hence I would add, that as long as we think of the dialogue as between *science* and *religion* we shall not escape from romantic naturalism—in any case that seems to me to be implied in just this contraposition. Rather must we be concerned with the dialogue between *science* and *theology*, and between the philosophy of natural science and the philosophy of theological science in the common struggle for scientific method on their proper ground and their own distinctive fields.

It is not the intention of this book to engage in that dialogue, although it is naturally unavoidable, any more than it is the intention of the discussion to engage in apologetics, although that too cannot but arise. Rather it is my intention to clarify the processes of scientific activity in theology, to throw human thinking of God back upon Him as its direct and proper Object, and thus to serve the self-scrutiny of theology as a pure science. At the same time it is the aim of the argument to draw out the implications for the human subject of the fact that he is addressed

by God and summoned to faithful and disciplined exercise of his reason in response to God's Word, and therefore to call a halt to the romantic irrationality and bloated subjectivity with which so much present-day theology is saturated. This is then an essay in philosophical theology calling for objectivity and rationality within the positive and constructive task of theological science.

This volume is dedicated to Bernard Lovell, as he was then, who put to me the initial questions as to scientific method in theology which led me to examine more carefully the nature of theology as a science, and to select this theme for the Hewett Lectures.

I am most grateful to the Rev. Dr. Cameron Dinwoodie, of Langholm, for his careful revision of the proofs and preparation of the index. Mr. Andrew Louth and Mr. Iain R. Torrance, my son, both of Edinburgh University, have also read the proofs and helped to purge them of not a few errors. I am much indebted to all three of them.

It remains for me to express my cordial gratitude to the Oxford University Press, especially to Mr. Geoffrey N. S. Hunt and his colleagues, for much kindness and consideration, and to thank those who have helped me so nobly and ably with the typing, Miss E. R. Leslie and Miss Joan Morris of New College.

The University of Edinburgh T. F. T.
The Feast of St. Athanasius, 1967

Contents

I

The Knowledge of God

(1) SOME INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

'It is part of our situation that we are inevitably and inseparably *inside* the knowledge relation, from the start to the end, and so cannot step outside of ourselves to an indifferent standpoint from which to view and adjust the relations of thought and being. Thought and being are together from the beginning. All discrimination of the contribution of the one side of the relation to the other is an analysis of a concrete togetherness of thought and being in a particular department of existence. Since, moreover, all possible Objects of thought come before the mind in a relation of Subject and Object—the wildest chimeras, the grossest illusions, as well as the soberest "matters of fact"—any discussion of the contribution of Subject to Object, of Object to Subject, of the proportions of subjectivity to objectivity in a particular topic, must have in view some particular sphere of actual concrete existence in which the Subject is more than the logical presupposition of knowledge in general, and the Object is viewed in relation to some actual concrete interest or pre-occupation on the part of the Subject.'

These sentences are taken from James Brown's fine study of the place of the Subject-Object relation in theological thinking of the last hundred years.[1] They are set down here not only because of their healthy rejection of dualism coupled with a refusal to admit that there is anything inherently wrong with the form of knowledge in the Subject-Object relation, but because in them Dr. Brown is concerned to maintain a principle that is still only imperfectly realized in many branches of knowledge, namely, that genuine critical questions as to the *possibility* of knowledge cannot be raised *in abstracto* but only *in concreto*, not *a priori* but only *a posteriori*.

[1] *Subject and Object in Modern Theology* (Croall Lectures for 1953), p. 170 f.