

IN MEMORIAM THOMAS FORSYTH TORRANCE (1913-2007)¹

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On the first Sunday in Advent, 2nd December 2007 The Very Reverend Thomas F. Torrance passed away in Edinburgh at the age of 94 years. He had been president of the Académie des Sciences Religieuses from 1972 to 1981, Professor of Christian Dogmatics in the University of Edinburgh from 1952 until his retirement in 1979, and Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1976-77.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century he was a major figure in the Reformed Church and in ecumenical theology; the patriarch of a theological dynasty (his younger brother James, his son Iain and his nephew Alan all became theological professors in Scotland); a teacher who inspired generations of students to engage in theological learning and research; and, the honoured friend of many of his colleagues and pupils.

Torrance was born in China – his parents were missionaries – on August 30, 1913. He graduated M.A. in philosophy and B.D. in divinity in Edinburgh, then undertook postgraduate studies, particularly in Basle, where he obtained his doctorate for a dissertation published some years later as *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (1948). Patristic theology, above all that of Athanasius and the Nicene Fathers, remained central for his work throughout his career, as is reflected in two later works, *The Trinitarian Faith. The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (1988) and *Divine Meaning. Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (1995).

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Equally central was the formative influence of Karl Barth (although the Basle dissertation was mentored by Oscar Cullman), whose monumental *Church Dogmatics* in the English/American edition (1956-1977) was edited by Torrance with Geoffrey Bromiley. Torrance wrote much and most appreciatively of Barth – e.g. *Karl Barth. An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (1962), and many later papers – though in one especially important respect, the matter of theology and science, he consciously sought to move beyond the boundaries at which Barth had drawn to a halt. On the more philosophical and epistemological side he was much influenced by Michael Polanyi, the author of *Personal Knowledge* (1958) and *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), and following Polanyi's death in 1976 acted as his literary executor, also editing *Belief in Science and in Christian Life. The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (1980).

Apart from his own numerous publications he was, with J.K.S. Reid, a founding editor of *The Scottish Journal of Theology* (established in 1947 and still going strong under the editorship of his son Iain, now President of Princeton Theological Seminary, and Professor Bryan Spinks of Yale). He also played a role in bringing distinguished guest lecturers to Edinburgh. Two in particular may be mentioned because of their importance for his own area of special interest: the 1969 Gunning Lectures of R. Hooykas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (1972) and the 1974-1975 and 1975-1976 Gifford Lectures of Stanley Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (1978; 1981).

Torrance's first academic appointment was as professor of theology at Auburn Seminary, New York (1938-1939). This was followed by two parish ministries in Scotland and two years as an army chaplain during the Second World War. In 1950 he was appointed to the chair of church history at Edinburgh, moving on to the chair of dogmatics in 1952. He possessed enormous (and for some of his debating partners rather too overwhelming) erudition in the field of historical theology and the history of philosophy, but there can be no doubt that his great strength and chief interest was in constructive systematic theology in the style of dogmatics pioneered by Barth. This led him to engage both in intensive critical study of his own Reformed tradition – for example, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (1959); *Kingdom*

and Church. *A Study in the Theology of the Reformation* (1956); *The School of Faith. The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (1959); or, from the busy years after his retirement, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (1988) and *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (1996); in theological ecumenical dialogue, particularly with Roman Catholic thinking before, during and after Vatican II, reflected in the two volumes of *Conflict and Agreement in the Church* (I. *Order and Disorder*, 1959; II. *The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel*, 1960) and in *Theology in Reconstruction* (1965), and with the Orthodox Churches, chiefly on the basis of a patristically informed Trinitarian hermeneutics, as in *Theology in Reconciliation. Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (1975). Our Académie was of particular value and importance to him as part of this ecumenical dimension.

Another crucial interest of Torrance undoubtedly lay in the twin fields of *theology and science* and *theology as science*. Unlike many theologians he had no fear of facing the challenge of the natural sciences to theology and no interest in the dualistic strategies which would try to defend theology from that challenge by stressing its difference (for example, as a symbolic, metaphorical language-game) from anything that could be called "hard" science. Torrance was, by contrast, fascinated by the history, logic and achievements of science (less, perhaps, by what many feel to be the ambiguities of the impact of science and technology) and traced time and again not differences but similarities between science and a hermeneutically aware theology. In both we have to deal with reality (hence Torrance's stress on objectivity and his lampooning of subjectivism, e.g. Bultmannian existentialism); with the subtle intellectual instruments developed to explore that reality (he frequently pointed out the theological pre-history of concepts that in time became scientifically fruitful); with the tracing of the "inner logic" revealing itself to sensitive enquiry; and, with the ultimately astounding fact of the affinity between the reality explored and the mind exploring.

These structural resemblances between the scientific and the theological undertaking impressed themselves early on his mind and led to a long series of notable books, for example *Theological Science* (1969); *Space, Time and Incarnation* (1969); *God and Rationality* (1971); *Space, Time and*

Resurrection (1976); *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (1980); *Juridical Law and Physical Law* (1982); *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 1985. This last was the first in a series of studies he initiated under the characteristic title, *Theology and Science at the Frontiers of Knowledge*. He also edited and republished James Clerk Maxwell's classic contribution to the development of physics between Newton and Einstein, *A Dynamical Theory of the Electromagnetic Field* (1982).

Torrance's vision was clearly and succinctly expressed at the end of his speech upon receiving the Templeton Prize in 1978. After listing recent changes in the approach of natural science – (1) the move away from abstractive observationalism; (2) the transition from an analytical science to a unitary integration of form; (3) the application of the laws of thermodynamics to open systems; (4) the change from a flat understanding of nature to one characterised by a hierarchy of levels or dimensions – he concluded:

It is more and more clear to me that, under the providence of God, owing to these changes in the very foundations of knowledge in which natural and theological science alike have been sharing, the damaging cultural splits between the sciences and the humanities and between both and theology are in process of being overcome, the destructive and divisive forces too long rampant in world-wide human life and thought are being undermined, and that a massive new synthesis will emerge in which man, humbled and awed by the mysterious intelligibility of the universe, which reaches far beyond his powers, will learn to fulfill his destined role as the servant of divine love and the priest of creation.²

It may well be doubted whether, thirty years on, that vision has yet come much closer to realization. Thinkers on his scale are rare in theology (of whatever denomination), and they are not always appreciated by those whose view is narrower or shallower or simply fuelled by other interests and concerns. Torrance was such a powerful and energetic personality and so massively convinced of his discoveries in the field of theology and science that he could, though personally gracious and frequently charming, provoke uninterest or active resistance on the part of those who felt themselves overrun by the sheer weight and impetus of his ideas and assertions or by his

² The Addresses at the Sixth Presentation of The Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion at Guildhall, London, Tuesday 21st March, 1978. Deans Grange, Co. Dublin: Lismore Press, 1978.

trenchant criticism of what he believed to be destructive approaches to theology. (I say this as a former student and junior colleague of his who did not feel provoked to such a reaction – but could observe others who did.) Within a few years of his retirement this tradition of interest and research had faded away in Torrance’s own faculty in Edinburgh, though the field of theology and science is still being energetically cultivated elsewhere. It remains, however, a fascinating challenge and it may well be that the full fruit of Torrance’s vision - and now his legacy - has yet to be seen.