THOMAS F. TORRANCE AND THE SEARCH FOR A VIABLE NATURAL THEOLOGY: SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Alister E. McGrath, Ph.D., D.D.
Professor of Theology, Ministry and Education
Head of the Centre for Theology, Religion, and Culture
King's College, London
Alister.McGrath@kcl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: This paper considers the importance of T. F. Torrance for a contemporary natural theology. Of especial importance here is Torrance's relocation of *theologia naturalis* within the context of *theologia revelata*, which leads to a natural theology being informed and nourished by a rich trinitarian ontology. The author explains his own development of Torrance's position, emphasising both its intellectual robustness and its theological utility.

We all have to start our theological careers somewhere. As it happens, I was something of a latecomer to the field of Christian theology, having begun my academic career at Oxford University by studying the natural sciences. I had initially no interest in things theological, taking the view that belief in God was an outmoded notion, best left to little old ladies and impressionable fools. My early atheism was as aggressive as it was intellectually ungrounded. Richard Dawkins had yet to make his name in 1971, when I began my scientific studies at Oxford. Yet as I now read Dawkins, I find my own earlier views reflected back at me, generating a sense of nostalgia and acute embarrassment in about equal measure. Did I really have such naive views about the natural sciences, and especially their relation to religion?

Doubts had earlier been sown in my rather dogmatic atheist mind by studying the history and philosophy of science during the months before going up to Oxford. Issues such as the under-determination of theory by data, radical theory change in the history of science, the difficulties in devising a "crucial experiment," and the enormously complex issues associated with determining what was the "best explanation" of a given set of observations muddied what I had taken to be the clear, still water of scientific truth. Things were rather more complicated than I had appreciated.

While studying the natural sciences at Oxford, I was forced to reconsider my rather dogmatic and unreflective atheism, and confront the

awkward fact that it was evidentially and argumentatively deficient. It was not an easy conclusion for me, but it had to be confronted in the name of intellectual integrity. By the end of my first term at Oxford, I came to the conclusion that Christianity was far more intellectually robust and spiritually relevant than I had given it credit for. So, in what I now appreciate to be a purely intellectual conversion, I changed faiths, setting my atheism to one side, and adopting Christianity in its place. And, having embraced Christianity, I began to long to explore its intellectual depths.

My natural instinct was to abandon my studies of the natural sciences, and begin the detailed study of Christian theology. However, I was dissuaded from this, and in the end completed my first degree in chemistry and went on to gain a doctorate from Oxford in molecular biophysics, working under the supervision of Professor Sir George Radda. I was awarded a European Molecular Biology Organization fellowship in 1976, which allowed me to study at the University of Utrecht. It was during this period that I began to plan a serious intellectual engagement between Christianity and the natural sciences. As I reflected on this, I came to the conclusion that this would necessitate a serious engagement with Christian theology. There was nothing, it seemed to me, to be gained from a superficial theological reflection on scientific matters. I would have to immerse myself in the Christian theological tradition, no matter how long this would take.

On my return to Oxford from Utrecht in August 1976, I began to plan how this might be realized. I had just been awarded a Senior Scholarship at Merton College, Oxford, for the period 1976-8. The scholarship in question allowed its holder to either undertake research work for an advanced degree from the University of Oxford, or to study for a second first degree, without limit of subject. I therefore asked the college authorities if it might be possible to fulfill both these possibilities, by continuing my research in molecular biophysics, while at the same time studying for the Final Honours School of Theology. In November 1976, the college agreed to this request. At this stage, I was very much an amateur in matters of theology. I suspect that my interest in theology might well have proved to be short-lived, if not stillborn, had I begun my theological studies by reading some of the works which were typical of English-language theology of this time. I continue to

wonder what might have happened to me had I been introduced to theology by reading Maurice Wiles' *What is Theology?,* a work which generally conveys the impression (despite, I am sure, the best intentions of its most worthy author) that theology is a dull and derivative discipline, dependent upon the social sciences and philosophy for its few insights, which has nothing distinctive, original, persuasive or – dare I say it? – *interesting* to say.

However, redemption was at hand. I had been an undergraduate at Wadham College, Oxford, during the years 1971-5, and remained in touch with its chaplain Tim Gorringe (now Professor of Theology at Exeter University). Gorringe was working on aspects of the theology of Karl Barth, and suggested that I could do far worse than immerse myself in the *Church Dogmatics.* By the end of the first half-volume – which had just appeared in a new English translation, replacing the unsatisfactory translation originally published in 1936 – I knew that I was going to be excited by the study of theology. Barth's vision of theology might well have been controversial, and caused eyebrows to be raised within the English theological establishment of the time. But the vision was exciting, challenging and inspirational. Above all, I found myself impressed by the intellectual coherence of Barth's vision of "theological science," and thrilled by the vision Barth offered of a sustained theological engagement with the past:

> We cannot be in the church without taking responsibility for the theology of the past as much as for the theology of the present. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher and all the rest are not dead but living. They still speak and demand a hearing as living voices, as surely as we know that they and we belong together in the church.[1]

With this in mind, I set out to ensure that I immersed myself in historical theology, as well as systematic theology, realizing that the latter could not be undertaken without the former, and that the former was incomplete without the latter. While I now have misgivings about many aspects of Barth's theology, he had a very positive impact on my estimation of, and enthusiasm for, theology as a serious intellectual discipline.

[1] Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im* 19. *Jahrhundert: Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte*. 2nd ed. (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952), 3.

In 1978, I moved from Oxford to Cambridge, and began my theological research. I had been elected to the Naden Theological Studentship at St. John's College, an endowed college research position established in the 1780s. This offered me an ideal platform from which to begin my theological research. My initial thoughts had been to study the Copernican controversy, to allow me to focus on the science and religion debate. However, my supervisor was Professor E. Gordon Rupp (1910-86), one of England's leading Luther experts at that time. He had just retired from the Dixie chair of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge, and was very happy to help me explore the intellectual complexities of the sixteenth century. He persuaded me that it would be much better if I were to familiarize myself with Luther's theology, and its broader intellectual context. After some reflection, I realized that he was right, and immersed myself in the field. This eventually led to three major historical works: *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Blackwell, 1985); *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge University Press, 1986; third edition, 2005); and *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Blackwell, 1987; second edition, 2003).

It was then that I encountered Torrance. By that stage, I was beginning to have some misgivings about Barth. Although I continued to admire his theological rigor, and especially the depth of his analyses of core theological debates, I found myself saddened by his reluctance to make connections with other disciplines – above all, with the natural sciences.[2] Where, I wondered, could I find a theologically rigorous engagement with the natural sciences upon which I could base my own thinking? By the end of 1979, I was still not sure. I had read Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, and found it unsatisfying. It was not really Pannenberg's fault; the scope of the book was much broader than the English translation of the title indicated, being about *Wissenschaft* in general, rather

[2] A point that would later be emphasized by Harold P. Nebelsick, "Karl Barth's Understanding of Science." In *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth*, edited by John Thompson (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1986),165-214.

than *Naturwissenschaft* in particular.[3] So who would help me think about these things?

Then I discovered Torrance's *Theological Science*. And I had my answer. I found in Torrance someone who was prepared to engage the natural sciences seriously, yet who insisted upon the intellectual distinctiveness and integrity of Christian theology. He offered a coherent and persuasive critique of the view that I had hitherto regarded as unassailable – namely, that there was one method, which was to be applied consistently across all disciplines. This view, characteristic of the Enlightenment, was still influential when I began to study theology in the 1970s. It was, of course, an approach urged on Karl Barth by Heinrich Scholz during 1930s.[4] Barth asserted it was incorrect; Torrance argued for its deficiency, clinching his case through an appeal to the philosophy of the natural sciences. I knew I had found an intellectual dialogue partner who merited the most detailed of examination.

Torrance's approach opened doors that I had never realized existed, and gave me a whole new way of thinking about the relation of science and faith. As I continued to read and explore Torrance over the next few years, I began to appreciate more the strengths of his distinctive way of engaging the natural sciences from a theological perspective. Here was a leading interpreter of Barth who was able to make a move that Barth himself had seemed unable, or unwilling, to make. While Torrance restricted himself to the physical rather than the biological sciences, this seemed to be of minor importance to me: the general method he set out was easily capable of being extended more broadly. Torrance became the quarry from which I mined theological gold.

Now it is one thing to know people by their ideas; it is quite another to know them as individuals. Having admired Torrance for many years, and appreciated both the breadth and depth of his theological vision, I found myself increasingly interested in discovering how he came to develop these

[3] Later in his career, Pannenberg turned his attention specifically to the natural sciences: see, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

[4] For comment, see Alister E. McGrath, "Theologie als Mathesis Universalis? Heinrich Scholz, Karl Barth, und der wissenschaftliche Status der christlichen Theologie." *Theologische Zeitschrift* 62 (2007): 44-57.

ideas. What was his background? How had he come to study theology? What was the connection between his theological ideas and his personal faith? The idea of writing an intellectual biography of Torrance began to take shape in my mind. To my delight, I discovered that Torrance was open to the idea. With immense generosity, he made his own personal archive of material available to me, allowing me access to family letters, to personal notes, to unpublished typescripts of lectures (including several series given at Auburn Theological Seminary in the late 1930s), and to sermons he delivered while he served as minister in the Church of Scotland. Geoffrey Green, director of the Edinburgh publishing company T. & T. Clark, which had published many of Torrance's writings, as well as the Barth translation that Torrance had championed, was enthusiastic about publishing the work. It just remained to research it.

It was a remarkable experience, which both helped me to understand Torrance, while at the same time deepening my appreciation for him. It allowed me to study the development of Torrance's theology over an extended period of time, making use of unpublished sources, such as the texts of his lectures on Christian Dogmatics given at Auburn Theological Seminary during the academic year 1938-9.[5] One of those lecture courses concerned "science and religion" and showed in outline the basic themes which would become such a distinctive feature of his later thought. Writing this biography, which involved getting to know Torrance and visiting him at his Edinburgh home, also helped me to understand how his theology and personal life were so deeply interconnected.

So what did I find in Torrance that I so appreciated? And how did I develop this in my own work? Five themes stand out as being of especial importance:

1. Torrance's dogmatic relocation of natural theology, so that it came within the scope of Christian revelation, rather than being seen as an autonomous field of inquiry.

2. The recognition, based partly on the work of the philosopher of science Michael Polanyi, that reality consists of many levels. The theological

[5] Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 199-205.

and natural sciences exercise different methodologies, in accordance with their differing subject matters. The recognition of the stratification of reality legitimates a diversity of methodologies, precisely because methodology is ultimately and actually determined by ontology.

3. The insight that theology, like all scientific disciplines, adopts an *a posteriori*, not an *a priori*, approach to its subject. Any theory which lays down in advance how, or to what extent, God can be known predetermines that knowledge through a set of *a priori* assumptions which have been allowed to exercise a critical and controlling function in theological reflection. How God can be known constitutes a question that may only be answered in the light of the way in which God is known through revelation.

4. The basic notion that every level of reality demands to be engaged *kata physin*, according to its own distinct identity, which determines how it is to be known. Torrance's studies of the scientific method of the school of Alexandria persuaded him that the Greek fathers were perfectly aware of the general principle that knowledge depended upon the inherent structure or nature of the realities under investigation. A science can only investigate an object in accordance with its distinct nature.

5. A rigorously trinitarian theological framework, whose incarnational underpinnings ensured that talk of "God" never degenerated into abstract speculation, but was always firmly anchored in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

In the remainder of this essay, I shall explore only the first of these points, assessing its importance, and showing how I developed it in my own thinking.[6] Yet each of these five points merits detailed attention in its own right, in that they lay a robust intellectual foundation for a Christian theology that maintains its own distinct integrity, while at the same time opening the way to a rich and rewarding interdisciplinary engagement which was of especial relevance – yet not limited – to the natural sciences.

[6] For the form of critical realism that I developed as a way of expressing Torrance's insight, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: 2 - Reality* (London: Continuum, 2002), 195-244. For an extended appropriation of Torrance's notion of theology as an a posteriori discipline which responds to reality *kata physin*, see 246-97.

The real problem faced by anyone concerned with the interplay of the natural sciences and Christian theology can be summarized like this. Is not the scientific engagement with nature diametrically opposed to the theological need to engage with God's self-revelation? To take this a little further, is not the theological equivalent of an engagement with nature little more than an invitation to reduce revelation to nature, and theology to anthropology? From a Barthian perspective, these are very serious matters. Torrance, as one of the leading British interpreters of Barth, was acutely aware of the force of these considerations. Barth held that the claim to a natural knowledge of God was a central aspect of the sinful human tendency towards self-affirmation in the face of God.[7] If God could be known through nature, Barth argued, then his self-revelation could be disregarded and marginalized. "Natural theology, as such, arises out of man's natural existence and is part of the whole movement in which he develops his own autonomy and seeks a naturalistic explanation for himself within the universe."[8] To concede the legitimacy of natural theology would thus be to compromise the entire principle of the priority and necessity of God's self-revelation. Yet some account of the manner in which Christian theology engages with the natural order is clearly essential if a meaningful dialogue with the natural sciences is to progress. So how can these apparently incompatible objectives be held together?

One of Torrance's most significant theological achievements concerns his careful relocation of the place of natural theology within the Reformed tradition in general and the Barthian heritage in particular. His understanding of the purpose and place of natural theology has not merely been of major importance in encouraging and fostering the dialogue between Christian theology and the natural sciences; it has also encouraged a new engagement with the doctrine of creation and its implications for this dialogue. One of Torrance's most significant achievements is his redevelopment or redirection of the Barthian critique of natural theology in such a manner that its

[7] See the landmark study: Thomas F. Torrance, "The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth," *Religious Studies* 6 (1970): 121-35.
[8] Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 141-3.

fundamental principle was retained, while its applicability and utility was enhanced.

So how did Torrance achieve this? In part, Torrance's approach reflects and develops hints within Barth's later writings that certain forms of natural theology were not beyond redemption. Thus in later sections of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth appears to understand the relation of knowledge of God in creation and knowledge of God through revelation in a way that seems close to that associated with John Calvin, who was able to integrate a natural theology into his overall scheme of the knowledge of God the creator and redeemer.[9] For example, consider the following statement:

> It is given quite irrespective of whether the man whom it addresses in its self-witness knows or does not know, confesses or denies, that it owes this speech no less than its persistence to the faithfulness of the Creator . . . However corrupt man may be, they illumine him, and even in the depths of his corruption he does not cease to see and understand them . . . they are not extinguished by this light, nor are their force and significance destroyed . . . As the divine work of reconciliation does not negate the divine work of creation, nor deprive it of meaning, so it does not take from its lights and language, nor tear asunder the original connection between creaturely *esse* and creaturely *nosse*. [10]

Similarly, in the lecture fragments of the *Church Dogmatics*, published posthumously, Barth sets out reasons for supposing that something of God can be known from creation, so that God "is objectively a very well known and not an unknown God." Nevertheless, he stresses that these impressions should not be "systematised in the form of a natural theology."[11] Yet Torrance believed that Barth's legitimate concerns could be safeguarded, while developing a revised and more positive approach to natural theology.

Torrance stresses that Barth does not reject natural theology on the grounds of rational skepticism or some form of *via negationis* that denies a positive knowledge of God. The issue concerns the human desire to conduct

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[9] See, for example, Michael L. Czapkay Sudduth, "The Prospects for 'Mediate' Natural Theology in John Calvin," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 53-68. For the anthropological aspects of Calvin's natural theology, see Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the *Sensus Divinitatis* and the Noetic Effects of Sin," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 87-107.

[10] Karl Barth, *CD* IV/3.1: 139.

[11] Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/ 4 Lecture Fragments* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 120-2.

theology on anthropocentric foundations. Torrance affirms that one of Barth's most fundamental objections to natural theology concerns the innate human tendency to develop and assert its own autonomy.[12] Barth is not denying the possibility or even the actuality of natural theology. His point is that natural theology "is undermined, relativized and set aside by the actual knowledge of God mediated through Christ." For Torrance, Barth neither denies the existence of a natural knowledge of God, nor does he mount a metaphysical critique of its foundations. Rather, "what Barth objects to in natural theology is not its rational structure as such, but its *independent* character, i.e. the autonomous rational structure which it develops on the ground of "nature alone" in abstraction from the active self-disclosure of the living God."

As such, natural theology thus has a proper and significant place *within the context of revealed theology*. That is to say, Barth's objection to natural theology lies in a perceived danger – that such a natural theology will be seen as an independent and equally valid route to knowledge of God, which may be had under conditions of our choosing. Yet this danger is averted if natural theology is itself seen as a subordinate aspect of revealed theology, legitimated by that revealed theology rather than by natural presuppositions or insights. To put it another way, the authorization for natural theology lies not in its own intrinsic structures, but in divine revelation itself, which both legitimates it and defines its scope.[13] One could thus argue that Torrance offers a new lease of intellectual life to natural theology through its subtle redefinition.

Barth can say that *theologia naturalis* is included and brought to light within *theologia revelata*, for in the reality of divine grace there is included the truth of the divine creation. In this sense Barth can interpret, and claim as true, the dictum of St. Thomas that grace does not destroy nature but perfects and fulfils it, and can go on to argue that the meaning of God's revelation becomes manifest to us as it brings into full light the buried and forgotten truth of the creation. In other words, while knowledge of God is grounded in his own intelligible revelation to us, it requires for its actualization an appropriate rational structure in our cognizing of it, but that

[12] Torrance, "Problem of Natural Theology," 125.
[13] Torrance, "Problem of Natural Theology," 128-9.

rational structure does not arise unless we allow our minds to fall under the compulsion of God's being who he really is in the act of his self-revelation and grace, and as such cannot be derived from an analysis of our autonomous subjectivity.

I found Torrance's reconceptualization of natural theology to be both persuasive and helpful. His analysis of the situation was of major importance in my argument, initially set out in the first volume of my *Scientific Theology* trilogy, that a renewed natural theology could play an epistemically decisive role in the dialogue between science and religion, as well as allowing a Christian theology to offer a credible account of the existence of alternative tradition-mediated rationalities.[14] A trinitarian construal of natural theology offers an interpretative grid by which other traditions may be addressed on the common issues of existence, enabling the greater coherence and attractiveness of the Christian vision to be affirmed. So great was Torrance's influence upon me at this critical point that I dedicated the volume to him.

Realizing the key role that a renewed natural theology might play in enabling Christian theology to reconnect with broader scientific and cultural discourse and debate, I resolved to take these issues further. An opportunity arose in the form of an invitation to deliver the 2008 Riddell Lectures at the University of Newcastle, focusing on the interface of religion and culture. Knowing that C. S. Lewis had delivered these lectures in February 1942 (they were later published as *The Abolition of* Man), I was delighted to accept the invitation, and focus on natural theology as a means by which Christian theology could undertake a principled engagement with contemporary culture. The published version of these lectures – *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (2008) – sets out an approach to natural theology which extends Torrance's foundational vision. I argue that a Trinitarian vision of God – such as that set out in Torrance's great work *The Christian Doctrine of God*[15] – offers an enriched and fulfilling engagement with the natural world, transcending the limits of merely making sense of things. The

[14] Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Nature*, Vol. 1 (London: Continuum, 2001), 241-305, focuses particularly on Alasdair MacIntyre's analysis of tradition-mediated and –constituted rationality.

[15] Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).

Christian tradition offers a rich conceptual resource for beholding, understanding, and appreciating nature, providing an intellectual framework that affirms and legitimates a heightened attentiveness to the world around us.

The most significant theological elements of this vision for a renewed natural theology are the following:

1. The concept of nature is recognized to be conceptually indeterminate.[16] It is an interpreted, not an autonomous, entity. This opens the way to "seeing" nature in a specifically Christian manner. This involves rejecting the Enlightenment idea of nature as an objective entity, capable of acting as a universal ground of judgment. Instead of holding that nature forces its own interpretation upon us, we are free to choose the manner in which we see nature, forcing us to identify the best way of beholding the natural world.

2. Natural theology is understood to be the action of "seeing" nature from a specifically Christian perspective.[17] This involves rejecting the Enlightenment's version of natural theology as a generic attempt to demonstrate the existence and attributes of a putative God from an appeal to the natural world.[18] Instead, nature is viewed from the perspective of the Christian tradition, with its distinct notions of God, nature, and human agency.

3. The specifically cognitive aspects of natural theology are affirmed, in that it clearly has to do with making sense of our experience of nature. Yet this is not to be understood as an attempt to deduce the existence of God from observing nature, but of the capacity of the Christian faith to make sense of what is observed. Natural theology emphasizes the resonance between the intellectual framework offered by the Christian faith and observation, and does not set out to prove any core element of that faith from an appeal to nature.[19]

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[16] Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 7-10, 147-56.
[17] McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 1-7, 12-14, 171-216.
[18] McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 141-7, 165-70.
[19] McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 15-18, 232-60.

4. In that natural theology involves "seeing" nature, the empirical question of how human perception takes place is identified as having considerable theological significance. Natural theology therefore demands an informed understanding of the psychology of human perception, especially its recognition that perception involves thinking about, affective responding to, and enactive interaction with the world.[20] Once more, it requires moving on from the Enlightenment's inadequate and misleading understanding of how the process of perceiving nature takes place.[21]

5. The realization that the process of human perception involves thinking about, affective responding to, and enactive interaction with the world leads to the rejection of purely cognitive approaches to natural theology. The Enlightenment regarded natural theology fundamentally as a sense-making exercise. In place of this inadequate account of perception, I argue that the so-called "Platonic triad" of truth, beauty and goodness offers a helpful heuristic framework for natural theology.[22] This takes account of the rational, aesthetic and moral dimensions of the human engagement with nature.

6. Natural theology is therefore to be recognized as representing an important point of contact between the Christian church and secular culture, including the natural sciences, law, the arts, and literature. It can play an important apologetic role, not least in providing a navigable channel from human interest in the beauty of nature or the notion of the "transcendent" to the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."[23]

This approach holds that natural theology is the process of engagement with nature that has its origins from within the Christian tradition, and which is guided and nourished by a Trinitarian vision of God. This allows nature to be "seen" as God's creation, which resonates with how empirical reality is observed. The Christian tradition holds that nature possesses a derivative capacity to disclose something of God's wisdom, without undermining or displacing divine revelation itself. It both legitimates

[20] McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 80-110.
[21] McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 156-8.
[22] For the general principle, see McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 221-31. For a more detailed discussion of truth and natural theology, see pp. 232-60; for beauty, see pp. 261-90; for goodness, see pp. 291-312.
[23] McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 23-40, 255-60, 282-90.

and encourages such an engagement in the first place, and in the second offers an intellectual framework through which what is observed may be understood and appreciated.

Furthermore, the Christian vision of God is such that the possible existence of this God cannot be treated as if it were a purely speculative hypothesis. Rather, natural theology emerges, authorized and resourced, from within the matrix of the ideas and habits of the Christian tradition. Thus the discerning reader of Thomas Aquinas notes that his articulation of a natural theology rests on his belief that there exists a propensity for knowledge of God within human nature, as we would expect if we were indeed the creatures of God, created antecedently ignorant of our true origin and end, but with the appetite and capacity to know and to advance in knowledge to the source and goal of all things.[24] Aquinas's rationale for natural theology is thus grounded and nourished by his vision of the human desire for knowledge, which leads to reflection on the human situation and its implications.

Engaging with the natural world from a trinitarian perspective encourages an expectation that nature can, in certain ways and to a certain extent, echo its origins and goal. From a trinitarian perspective, it is not simply nature itself that is fine-tuned; the believer's perception of nature can also be said to be fine-tuned, in that the Christian tradition mandates a certain attentiveness to nature and a heightened anticipation of disclosure, which permits its noise to be heard as a tune.[25]

The grand themes of the Christian faith provide an interpretative framework by which nature may be seen, allowing it to be viewed and read in profound and significant ways. Christian theology is the elixir, the philosopher's stone,[26] which turns the mundane into the epiphanic, the world of nature into the realm of God's creation. Like a lens bringing a vast

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[24] See the analysis in Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters* (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2001).
[25] Michael Polanyi, "Science and Reality," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 18 (1967): 177-96, especially 190-1.
[26] For historical contextualization of the idea of the gospel as the "philosopher's stone" that transmutes life, see Stanton J. Linden, *Darke hierogliphicks: alchemy in English literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 154-92.

landscape into sharp focus, or a map helping us grasp the features of the terrain around us, Christian doctrine offers a new way of understanding, imagining and behaving. It invites us to see the natural order, and ourselves within it, in a special way – a way that might be hinted at, but cannot be confirmed by, the natural order itself. Nature is "seen" as God's creation; the "book of nature" is read as God's story – and ours. It is as if a veil has been lifted, or a bright sun has illuminated a mental landscape. And above all, it allows us to avoid the fatal fundamental error that is so often the foundation or consequence of a natural theology – namely, that divine revelation is essentially reduced to an awareness of an order already present in creation.[27]

This account of natural theology goes beyond Torrance's, particularly in its emphasis on the importance of beauty and goodness in a full account of natural theology.[28] Yet its foundations lie firmly in his approach, which I found to offer a robust and fruitful way of reconceptualizing the purpose and place of natural theology. This brief account of my own reflections on natural theology can thus be seen as a case study in the relevance and fecundity of Torrance's theological vision.

I, like many others, found Torrance's theological vision to possess an internal coherence and a capacity to engage the world of science and culture which far exceeded those of its rivals. It was a foundation on which I could build. I began my theological career entranced by the power of Karl Barth's theological vision; I now find its potential still further enhanced by one of Barth's leading interpreters, given a fresh capacity to engage with the questions raised by the natural sciences.

Yet I have spoken of Torrance primarily as if he were an academic theologian of distinction and utility. He is both these things, but he is more. So let me end on a slightly different note, to bring out this point. In 2009, I shall travel to Scotland to deliver the Gifford Lectures at the ancient

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[27] For an excellent study of this danger, with special reference to recent Jewish writings on natural theology, see David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially 142-8.

[28] Torrance integrates beauty into his account of theology elsewhere: see, for example, Thomas F. Torrance, "The Transfinite Significance of Beauty in Science and Theology." In *L'art, la science et la métaphysique: Études offertes à André Mercier*, edited by Luz García Alonso, Evanghelos Moutsopoulos and Gerhard Seel (Berne: Peter Lang, 1993), 393-418.

University of Aberdeen. My topic will be natural theology, and my mentor will be Torrance.[29] While there, I hope to find some time to visit Beechgrove Parish Church, where Torrance served as minister from 1947-50, just before accepting the call to New College, Edinburgh, as Professor of Church History. Why? Partly to remind myself that Torrance was, for many years, a pastor and preacher – someone who sought to marry theology and ministry, dogmatics and proclamation. The fame of the theologian means that Torrance the pastor and preacher is too often forgotten. My hunch, however, is that his early parish ministry was the crucible within which much of his theology was forged, and its reliability and applicability tested.

At a time when theology often seemed to have a tenuous link with the life of the church, Torrance affirmed their organic unity, both in theory and in practice. I cannot help but feel that he offers guidance and inspiration to others, such as myself, who struggle to relate theology and ministry. Can one be an intellectually fulfilled theologian, and at the same time serve the churches and the Christian community? Torrance could and did, and offers us a theological vision to enable us to do the same.

[29] These will be published as Alister E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).