

THEOLOGY IN TRANSPOSITION: A Constructive Appraisal of T. F. Torrance

Myk Habets

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When Alfred North Whitehead once quipped that Christianity is a “religion in search of a metaphysic,” he might equally have said that Christianity is a religion in search of a method. A tireless opponent of every sort of dualism, T. F. Torrance would no doubt be the first to tell us the two are inextricable: metaphysics begets method; method begets metaphysics. Such interconnections can provide richness, but they can also invoke a bit of despair—much as trying to disentangle a thread that never ends. Peering upon the vast array of contemporary and historical theologies is not quite to gaze into the abyss, but even many canny theologians have nonetheless fallen into the pit of method never to climb back out again.¹

Indeed, even the terse “a religion in search of . . .” can hardly be spoken these days without the caveat that to conceptualize Christianity as a “religion” is already to freight it with an assortment of methodological tendencies that emerged when the category was forged in the modern period.² Other factors, like the development of religion as a “worldview,”³ and even the fallout from the internal disintegration of many ambitious theological projects⁴ or exterior challenges from other disciplines,⁵ haunt and refract theological methodology like a great hall of mirrors.

1 Francesca Aran Murphy, *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2007) argues that for many, method has itself subtly replaced the actual content of theology.

2 Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2015).

3 David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann, 2002).

4 For example, Johannes Zachuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth Century: From F.C. Bauer to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). And of course the famous (and much contested) thesis of Hans Blumenberg, that secular modernity had to build itself up from the ruins theology failed to uphold. See: *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985).

5 John Allen Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism: The Great Divide in Twentieth Century Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), helpfully organizes his interlocutors around how they deal with, or circumvent, the problem of “falsification” regarding theological statements.



What we need no doubt is a giant upon whose shoulders we might stand. Luckily the 20th century was something of a theological garden, growing giants from which to choose. But this too, has difficulties. Harvesting the method of a von Balthasar, a Barth, a Pannenberg, or—in this case—a Torrance, is itself no small matter. Luckily with his volume *Theology in Transposition*, Myk Habets has done us a great favor in distilling Torrance’s clear-sighted method. There have been a number of helpful books on aspects of Torrance’s methodology lately—from Eric Flett’s excellent look into Torrance’s Trinitarian theology of culture and the concept of “social coefficients,” to Jason Radcliff’s much-needed investigation into how Torrance retrieves the Fathers of the church in comparison with other projects of *ressourcement*.⁶ But as of yet (as far as I know of) there has been no monograph devoted to the topic of Torrance’s method *per se*.

Habets has proven himself to be one of the world’s leading Torrance scholars, and this volume only reinforces that reputation. From the sprawling *oeuvre* of Torrance comes a concise and clear study that begins with a short theological biography, moving on to chapters regarding his “scientific theology,” “natural theology,” and “realist theology.” The second half of the book deals with the outworking of that methodology in practice, focusing on the mystical, integrative, and Christological elements of Torrance’s work respectively (particularly interesting, the last chapter focuses on the fascinating topic of Christ assuming a *fallen* humanity).

And that disorienting hall of mirrors we spoke of earlier? Torrance (via Habets) arranges and polishes them so that they are no longer a labyrinthine regress, but each mirror becomes rather a looking glass, one lain on top of the other as each provides its own magnification for our gaze moving upward through them, looking now to man, now to world, now to God. Or, put more properly in Torrance’s own terms:

We select a few basic concepts in our experience and apprehension of the world, try to work out their interconnections, and organize them into a coherent system of thought through which like a lens we can gain a more accurate picture of the hidden patterns and coherences embedded in the world. (Quoted in Habets, 30).

Torrance in this quote is specifically speaking about the methodology of science – but herein lay part of his brilliance as he outlines the analogies between scientific and theological method. Habets masterfully picks out that one of Torrance’s

⁶ Eric G. Flett, *Persons, Powers, and Pluralities: Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Culture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011); Jason Robert Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers: A Reformed, Evangelical, and Ecumenical Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

"few basic concepts" presents theology, like science, operating *kata physin* or "according to the nature [of its object]":

[E]pistemology is founded on or correlated with ontology. This holds throughout Torrance's method and theology. . . . Torrance holds that the distinctive nature of theology is determined by its object, which is defined as God revealed in Jesus Christ. Hence theology, and any and every other true science . . . is under an intrinsic obligation to give account of reality according to its distinct nature, that is *kata physin* . . . [Torrance] goes on to argue that 'science in every field of our human experience, is only the rigorous extension of that basic way of thinking and behaving' (46).

As such, Habets stresses for Torrance that the Nicene *homoousios* actually provides the entire structure for theology as a science: "By utilizing the doctrine of the *homoousion* and *perichoresis* we are moved (epistemologically) from the experience of God (level one) to the theological level (the economic Trinity), finally to the deep theological and scientific structures upon which the first two levels rest (ontological Trinity)" (38).

This does not isolate theology from other disciplines. Rather because Christ is the true vision of creation, creation is "proleptically conditioned by redemption" (156). Just so, Habets turns to the fascinating discussion of how Torrance rehabilitates natural theology by situating it precisely *within* theology. Here again, those labyrinths of methodological mirrors are reordered so that "nature" is not a principle freestanding from robust theological interests, but is viewed through "sanctified spectacles" (74). "Natural theology can no longer be undertaken apart from actual knowledge of the living God," as Torrance himself puts it (quoted in Habets, 84). Torrance famously likens this methodological decision to Einstein's situation of geometry within physics, so that "No longer extrinsic, but intrinsic to actual knowledge of God [natural theology] will serve as a sort of 'theological geometry' within it, in which we are concerned to articulate the inner material logic of the knowledge of God as it is mediated within the organized field of space time." When Torrance explained this to Barth, the Swiss theologian is reported to have responded: "I must have been a blind hen not to have seen that analogy before" (84). One stands amazed at this concession by Barth, if for no other reason than the respect for sighted hens he must have!

With this discussion, Habets plunges into the debate on just what to make of Torrance's resituating of natural theology. Does it still open itself to use in "strong" apologetics (as Alister McGrath has created his own small cottage industry in arguing)? Was Torrance still Barthian, allowing no place for natural theology except on the few occasions he was inconsistent with this resolve (Paul Molnar's thesis)?

Or, should what Torrance is doing more properly be called a “theology of nature” rather than “natural theology” (here Elmer Colyer and Travis McMacken are cited, though one might add Stanley Hauerwas in *With the Grain of the Universe*);⁷ or, as Habets himself argues, is there room for a “soft apologetic” role to natural theology (86)? Whatever the conclusion, Habets himself notes that Molnar is right to point out a touch of inconsistency in Torrance: can nature only be seen within the “lens” of revealed theology? Or does nature of its own accord “silently cry out” for an explanation that must be beyond itself (91)? To this question Habets very helpfully distinguishes between a natural revelation, (which creates the possibility of scientific inquiry without serving as a foundation for faith), natural theology, which Habets notes “can be used evangelistically by Christians,” and a “Trinitarian theology of nature” which is the full-orbed vision of Torrance’s synthesis (92).

In this same vein, in one of the more fascinating sections of the book Habets recounts the arguments that went on between Torrance and the Princetonian Carl F. Henry (95-110). The basic outlines of their debate mirror that of Torrance’s placing natural theology back within revealed theology, only now it is scripture and reason that are placed within the doctrine of God’s self-revelation in redemption. Here, instead of “natural theology” remaining autonomous, Henry advocates rather for a “soft foundationalism” where the mind and rationality remain independent of the fall or redemption (106). Torrance wants to place scripture within the reality of God as witness to God: conversely, for Henry “faith is placed in scripture directly rather than that to which Scripture bears witness—God’s being and act” (112). Habets notes that Torrance—in what he also elaborates as Torrance’s “mystical” side (125-145)—is ceaselessly referring us to God’s reality *itself*, that is: “not to mistake Scripture for the truths it seeks to reveal” (112). Ultimately Habets mediates between Torrance and Henry here, saying “we must see scripture *is* divine revelation, regardless of whether one is in union with Christ” but that the *skopos* of scripture points *to* Christ (121).

When one tries to follow in the footsteps of giants, inevitably we mere mortals stand outpaced. Boot-like craters in impossible spans fill the horizon as we breathlessly huff on. It is therefore helpful at the very least to have a map showing that toward which the footfalls tend. Habets has provided us one such map for seeking a giant like Torrance through the overgrown landscapes of theology. There are still deficits in Torrance to be sure (which Habets points out). For example, as a theologian so intent to overcome all dualisms, Torrance often remains surprisingly focused on the realm of the intellect (141), while ignoring

7 Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness as Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).

the possibilities of bodily signification. One does not, of course, necessarily exclude the other. Yet, emphasizing bodily practices and representation like Sarah Coakley and others have suggested, would greatly increase the scope of Torrance's argumentation.⁸ Torrance's continual allegiance to equating "Greek philosophy" with his bogeyman of "dualism" also weakens his case, especially with the arguments of those like Pierre Hadot who represent philosophy not as world-denial but in fact as a way of life.⁹ Moreover, the force in Torrance's clarity of vision regarding the tradition can be a weakness as well as his strength. Reading the *Trinitarian Faith* is a joy, for example, but its thematic rather than historical organization stamps that joy with a question mark.¹⁰ I would have appreciated Habets addressing whether one can maintain Torrance's singular vision in the face of increasingly nuanced and self-reflective appropriations of theological tradition,¹¹ or in the face of narratives "placing" the tradition into halls of heroes and villains equal but opposite to Torrance.¹² Nevertheless, Habets' work is not just a book for Torrance aficionados. He has written an investigation that anyone interested in theological method should have on their shelves.

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8 Sarah Coakley, "Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-Meets Teresa of Avila," in Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays on the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280-312. "Only a closer attention to the subtleties of mystical discourse itself (including its apophatic maneuvers), and to its *accompanying and repetitive bodily practices* [emphasis added] can help the analytic tradition beyond its usual confines of expectation at this point." (282-283). Here also refer to the essential analysis of bodily resurrection in Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York: Columbia University, 1995); and the political and social significance of the body in Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

9 Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2014).

10 Frances Young, "From Suspicion and Sociology to Spirituality: On Method, Hermeneutics, and Appropriation With Respect to Patristic Material," in E. Livingston, ed., *Studia Patristica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 424: "it is not chronology but logic that determines the sequence [of *The Trinitarian Faith*]."

11 Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15-37. 82-97; Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers*, 139-140; 194. Of interest as well would have been a more than tangential encounter with the work of Richard Muller (e.g.) on reception of the Reformed tradition. See: *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

12 Most recently, cf. Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012).