

## **RESPONSE TO ALEXANDER J. D. IRVING**

### **“Natural Theology: An Impossible Possibility?”**

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When I originally wrote my article, “Natural Theology Revisited,”<sup>1</sup> I drew a sharp contrast between Karl Barth’s interpretation of natural theology and Thomas F. Torrance’s view, which Torrance presented as his “new natural theology.” After reading Alexander J. D. Irving’s interpretation of Torrance’s natural theology, I am beginning to wonder whether I did not draw the contrast between them sharply enough! According to Irving “Theological science is . . . found to be constituted by a synthetic structure in which natural theology and revealed theology combine to the end of theological knowledge that is determined by God’s self-revelation.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, “For Torrance, theology is a synthesis of natural theology as rational structure and the material content of our knowledge of God’s self-revelation” such that “It is upon the natural co-operation of these two components that thought may be determined by reality.”<sup>3</sup>

How could one possibly reconcile this view with Barth’s insistence that “What is ‘God’ to the natural man, and what he also certainly calls his ‘God’ is a false

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<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Molnar, “Natural Theology Revisited: A Comparison of T. F. Torrance and Karl Barth,” *Zeitschrift Für Dialektische Theologie* 20/1 (2005), 53-83.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander J.D. Irving, “Natural Theology as the Intra-Structure of Theological Science: T. F. Torrance’s Proposals for Natural Theology in the Context of the Synthesis of Rational Structure and Material Content,” *Participatio, The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, vol. 7 (December 2017), 99-124, 99.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

god"?<sup>4</sup> Indeed, according to Barth, "we cannot allow that it [natural theology] says anything about God at all, or that it is one of the assertions which have to be made in the Christian doctrine of God" (CD II/1, 84). Moreover, in Barth's view, the logic of natural theology in whatever form "demands that, even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. A natural theology which does not strive to be the only master is not a natural theology" (CD II/1, 173).<sup>5</sup> The answer concerning how the definition of theological science offered above and Barth's unequivocal rejection of natural theology with the idea that natural theology ceases to be natural theology when it functions within revelation clearly has to do with how one defines natural theology.

### **Natural Theology Defined**

To my knowledge, natural theology has always been defined in one way or another as referring to "a theology based on the natural light of reason, the dictates of conscience, or purported evidences of God in the processes of nature or the events of history. Natural theology is independent of God's revelation attested in Scripture

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts., *The Doctrine of God*, Vol. II, The Doctrine of God, pt. 1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, H. Knight and J. L. M. Harie (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1964), 86, hereafter referred to in text as CD.

<sup>5</sup> In a podium discussion in Chicago in 1962 Barth responded to a Father Cooke who said that while there was an "essential difference between the knowledge of God arrived at in faith and that knowledge about God attained in natural theology (i.e., a philosophical approach to a transcendent being), is it not possible to bring these two knowledges to bear on one another and so enter into an integrated act of theologizing?" *Barth in Conversation: Volume 1, 1959-1962*, ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. The Translation Fellows of the Center for Barth Studies Princeton Theological Seminary, Karlfried Froehlich, German Editor, Darrell L. Guder, English Editor, David C. Chao, Project Manager (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 175. Barth noted Cooke's stress that there was an *essential* difference between the knowledge *of* God in faith and *about* God via natural theology, saying that was not accidental and that he loved him for that. He then said: "Yet you presuppose the identity of the Gods perceived by these two methods. My counterquestion is [this]: Are they identical?" If so, then why is there conflict between "knowledge of gods, deities . . . and so forth, and the revealed and faithful knowledge of those to whom God has spoken as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob . . . who is not the god of the philosophers?" (ibid.). Interestingly, Barth went on to say that since there is this distinction "it excludes identity" and that means that "natural theology (as it is called and as you call it) and Christian theology cannot be integrated in one system" because one cannot attempt to serve Yahweh and Baal at the same time (ibid., 176).

and God's decisive self-communication in Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup> This is certainly how Karl Barth understood it when he wrote that "Natural theology is the doctrine of a union of humanity with God existing outside God's revelation in Jesus Christ" (CD II/1, 168). It is "a theology which grounds itself on a knowability of God distinct from the grace of God, i.e., on a knowability of another God than Him knowable only in his grace" (CD II/1, 143). According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* natural theology is described as follows: "starting from movement, becoming, contingency, and the world's order and beauty, one can come to a knowledge of God as the origin and the end of the universe."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is said that "The Church teaches that the one true God, our Creator and Lord, can be known with certainty from his works, by the natural light of human reason (DS 3026)."<sup>8</sup> In their *Theological Dictionary* Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler claim that natural theology is "a term applied to metaphysical ontology insofar as the general doctrine of being necessarily includes some statement about the absolute being of God."<sup>9</sup> What all these statements have in common is that they present natural theology as an activity of human reason, untouched by explicit faith in revelation as attested by the church in its confession of the Nicene faith, that is capable of understanding God by virtue of its own power, at least as the origin and end of the universe or as absolute being, however understood.

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 459. See also James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991 Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), who writes: "Traditionally, 'natural theology' has commonly meant something like this: that 'by nature', that is just by being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least the capacity for such an awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible . . . it is this pre-existing natural knowledge of God that makes it possible for humanity to receive the additional 'special' revelation. The two fit snugly together," 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, ed. Cornelius Ernst, O.P., trans. Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 307.

### **Torrance's "New" Natural Theology**

So, the question that faces us here is this: did Torrance embrace such a knowledge of God in any sense at all, even with his "new" natural theology? If he did, then even his "new" natural theology contains a residue of this more traditional understanding which he was at pains to reject on scientific grounds, as Irving rightly contends. If he did not, then in reality, his theology is exclusively shaped by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and not at all by some naturally known God understood apart from revelation and faith. In that case, it would be confusing and indeed mistaken for him to describe human knowledge of God determined by revelation as natural theology since, even in his own understanding, theology based on revelation needs God's reconciling grace to be rightly ordered to its unique object (which of course is the triune God who meets us in his Word and Spirit).

Put another way, natural theology, even according to Torrance's own understanding of theological science, cannot properly claim to know the one true God of Christian faith because he states, "we are prevented by the whole cast of our natural mind from apprehending God without exchanging His glory for that of a creature or turning His truth into a lie."<sup>10</sup> This leads him to argue that the Gospel requires of us a "radical change even in the inner slant of our mind, and in the structural capacities of our reason."<sup>11</sup> And, importantly, in his dogmatic work, he regularly cited Athanasius' statement that "'It would be more godly and true to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name God from his works alone and call him Unoriginate'"<sup>12</sup> in order to stress that "the possibility of our knowing God is grounded in His divine freedom to cross the boundary between Himself and us and to give Himself to be known by us within the conditions of our

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 49.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996; reissued London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 117 and *The Trinitarian Faith: Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988; reissued London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 49.

frailty on earth . . . in an adaptation of humanity to God in which man is lifted up to know God above and beyond his natural powers.”<sup>13</sup>

This takes place for us in the Incarnation so that any attempt to know God that proceeds from his works alone will never acknowledge the unique deity and humanity of the Son and indeed will bypass God himself as he comes to us in the Incarnation to reconcile us to himself from the divine and human side in Christ himself. It will, in other words, engage in an unscientific theology precisely because its thinking will not be “appropriate and adequate to the nature of the object of his knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Incarnation itself, Torrance insists, “reveals that as a matter of fact man stands outside that relation with God in which true knowledge of Him is actualized, and cannot get inside it because in his very existence he is imprisoned in the closed circle of his own estrangement and self-will.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Natural Theology: Natural to its Object?**

Given these assertions, it is at the very least confusing for Torrance to claim we need a natural theology that is natural to its object (God) since according to his belief that a proper natural theology can only function within revelation this cannot happen except on the basis of our justification by grace and by faith. What he really presents us with therefore is not a natural theology at all but very definitely a theology of human nature based on grace and revelation and therefore an understanding of nature as it appears in light of our reconciliation in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> Hence,

In Him [Jesus Christ] there has already been fulfilled what we are unable to achieve, the reconciliation and adaptation and union of man with God, without which there is no true knowledge of God, so that in

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<sup>13</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> This is one reason why I agree with Colin Gunton that, while there may be parallel rationalities in the sciences of God and created realities and that “created and uncreated intelligibility” may be viewed together, it is preferable to speak in this context of a theology of nature rather than a transformed natural theology, Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 63.

Him, in His true and obedient humanity, the Truth of God has been given and received for all men.<sup>17</sup>

Of course Torrance's goal is to show that when nature is indeed perfected by grace it is not destroyed but rightly related with God,<sup>18</sup> without destroying our human powers of reasoning. Indeed, he quite properly argues that faith itself is "the orientation of the reason toward God's self-revelation, the rational response of man to the Word of God."<sup>19</sup> "Faith" he says "is the behaviour of the reason in accordance with the nature of its divine Object."<sup>20</sup> But, as soon as faith and revelation are brought into the discussion, as they must be in order to do scientific theology, then that theology ceases to be a natural theology and becomes instead a theology of revelation which includes human nature now living its reconciliation in Christ as this is actualized in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Difficulties in Torrance's "New" Natural Theology**

It was my contention in that original article and later to say simply that there were at least three difficulties present in Torrance's effort to develop what he calls his "new" natural theology: the first, as just noted, is that it is confusing because natural theology by definition is a theology that functions without necessarily relying exclusively on revelation and grace; second, natural theology, relying as it does on what can be known of God without revelation, knows nothing of the need for the radical repentance that Torrance also believes is necessary to rightly understand God and ourselves; and third, even Torrance's "new" natural theology, which is supposed to function exclusively within revelation contains residual

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<sup>17</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Torrance cites Barth in this regard who held that when natural theology "is included and brought into clear light in the theology of revelation (*theologia revelata*); in the reality of divine grace is included the truth of the divine creation. In this sense it is true that 'Grace does not destroy nature but completes it' (*Gratia non tollit naturam sed perfecit*). The meaning of the Word of God becomes manifest as it brings into full light the buried and forgotten truth of the creation," *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith, Introduction by Thomas F. Torrance (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 342.

<sup>19</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

elements of "traditional" natural theology, and this opens the door to inconsistency because he thinks that it is possible to bracket natural theology from its proper object (revelation) for purposes of clarity. This possibility follows his use of the analogy of geometry which leads him to a view of natural theology that is benign in the sense that it could be characterized as being merely incomplete without four dimensional geometry;<sup>21</sup> the implication then is that natural theology is merely incomplete without revelation and grace when in fact he also believes that our natural knowledge is not just incomplete but that it is "diseased," "twisted," and "in-

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<sup>21</sup> See Molnar "Natural Theology Revisited," 60 where I noted that Torrance thinks geometry can function independently of physics in a certain limited way and that he uses the analogy that our human understanding of God "apart from the divine side of the bi-polar relationship which knowledge of God involves" amounts to an artificial methodological separation akin to "converting four-dimensional geometry back into three-dimensional Euclidean geometry, or physical geometry back into *a priori* geometry" [*Reality and Scientific Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 59]. Torrance claims this approach can only have a "quasi-validity" because of these artificially imposed limits (*ibid.*, 60). On this basis Torrance argues that geometry when properly understood would not function independently of physics but instead would function as the "epistemological structure in the heart of physics, although considered in itself it would be *incomplete* without physics" [*Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 33 and *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 39, emphasis mine]. It is this analogy that leads to Torrance's inconsistency because on the one hand he claims (rightly) that our natural knowledge is twisted and in-turned and cannot function accurately at all without reconciliation and grace. On the other hand, with his "new" natural theology, he thinks it is incomplete without revelation and only needs to be completed beyond itself to be accurate theology. That is the inconsistency. His entire theology of nature which is built upon the doctrine of justification by grace and by faith demands that we see that we are self-willed and always use our natural reasoning in opposition to God. Furthermore, he insists that this cannot change unless and until we live as part of the new creation in and from Christ through the power of his Holy Spirit. My point then and now was and remains that a definite choice between these two opposing options is required even according to Torrance's own scientific theology and his new natural theology is an example of an approach that suggests that epistemologically that choice is not absolutely necessary because natural theology does have a "quasi-validity" in spite of our self-will and sin. I contend that it does not, and that while both Barth and Torrance clearly saw this, Barth's thinking was more consistent on this point than was Torrance's. So, by introducing his "new" natural theology, I would say that far from this providing the "necessary but insufficient infrastructure of theology" (Alexander J. D. Irving, "Does the Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit Mean the End for Natural Theology? A Response to Paul Molnar with Reference to Thomas F. Torrance's Reconstruction of Natural Theology," *Trinity Journal* [2107], 225-45, 243), Torrance has damaged his own pivotal insight that that "infrastructure" is itself damaged and cannot function rightly [\*continued next page]..

turned" and needs God's grace to be put right.<sup>22</sup> For Torrance "we cannot truly know God without being reconciled and renewed in Jesus Christ. Thus the objectivity of our theological knowledge is immutably soteriological in nature."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hence, Torrance writes: "Face to face with Christ our humanity is revealed to be diseased and in-turned, and our subjectivities to be rooted in self-will" (*Theological Science*, 310). Indeed, Torrance insists "it was our diseased *mind* that our Lord assumed for our sakes. In assuming it, however, far from sinning himself or being estranged and alienated from the Father, even when he penetrated into the fearful depths of our alienation — 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' — he converted it from the very bottom of our disobedient human being, from the roots of our estranged mental existence, into perfect oneness with the mind of God — 'Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit'" *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 441. This is why Torrance speaks of modern persons as afflicted by a deep seated mental disease which leads them into subjectivism and false objectivism as well (see Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* [Farnham: Ashgate, 2009], 191) referring to Torrance, "The Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit", *Theology in Reconstruction*, (London: SCM Press, 1965), 231. This compares exactly to Barth's view that the cross and resurrection disclose us as enemies of grace and friends only in Christ's having overcome this (CD II/1, 140-57).

<sup>23</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 41.

\* [Footnote 21 continued from previous page]: ... except through the power of the Holy Spirit. So at the crucial moment where grace would actually rule, Irving insists that "God's self-revelation must be cognized by us through the development of an appropriate rational structure through which the inherent Trinitarian structure of God's self-revelation is cognized. In this sense, it can be seen that Torrance's natural theology is about bringing human modes of thought and speech into coordination with God's self-revelation" (*ibid.*, 244). While this may sound right to the untrained ear, what is said here is problematic because even according to Torrance's own theology, the only way we can "cognize" God's self-revelation is when through grace God himself enables that; it is not by developing an appropriate rational structure. That development follows an acknowledgement of grace as grace — it cannot provide the basis for that recognition at all since God alone in his reconciling movement toward us in the Incarnation is the only basis for that. Thus, natural theology is not necessary here and in reality it must give up this self-willed attempt to be the necessary but not sufficient presupposition of theology proper. Otherwise, the door is opened for a scientific theology that is not exclusively faithful to the unique object which is the triune God himself. Irving tellingly speaks of a "collaboration of divine act and human act" in this regard while paying lip service to the idea that the human act is "subordinate to and dependent upon the divine act" (244). But, to the extent that natural theology can still function with any "quasi-validity," then according to Torrance's trinitarian theology as it is based on reconciliation as this has occurred for us in Christ, the triune God simply cannot be the exclusive starting point and criterion for theology as he contends it must be because of our sin and self-will and the need for grace.



## **Enemies of Grace by Nature**

Consequently, as Barth repeatedly asserted, and as I think Torrance would agree, we are shown to be enemies of grace by nature in light of revelation. As Barth put it, in light of our "real determination by the judgment and grace of God, the fact is that finally and in the last resort man is always to be understood as the enemy of grace" (CD II/1, 145). That of course is not the end of the story here, because Barth also claimed that our life of faith, which is enabled by the Holy Spirit since "the Holy Spirit is the temporal presence of Jesus Christ who intercedes for us eternally in full truth," refers to our "new birth from God" (CD II/1, 158). Thus,

Faith extinguishes our enmity against God by seeing that this enmity is made a lie . . . expiated and overcome by Jesus Christ . . . and destroyed. Our truth is not the being which we find in ourselves as our own. The being which we find in ourselves as our own will always be the being in enmity against God. But this very being is a lie. It is the lie which is seen to be a lie in faith. Our truth is our being in the Son of God, in whom we are not enemies but friends of God, in whom we do not hate grace but cling to grace alone, in whom therefore God is knowable to us (CD II/1, 158-9).

Torrance's understanding of our knowledge of God is quite similar to this:

God's Truth is His Person turning to us and condescending to become one with us that He may turn us to God in revelation and reconciliation. God does not have to do this. He is entirely free to live His own Life apart from us, but in His freedom He chooses to turn to us and give Himself to us to be known and loved . . . It is out of pure Grace that He gives Himself to us to know and think as the Truth . . . This communicating of the Truth in Jesus is not for God's sake, but for our sake. . . Therefore in all our knowledge of the Truth we have to look beyond ourselves, to appeal to what transcends us for justification . . . the Truth reveals that we are not in the Truth and delivers us from the vicious circle of our own untruth, reconciling us to the Truth and putting us in the right with it beyond us. That is the movement of

God's Truth as Grace . . . which is the ultimate secret of the truth of our knowledge of God. It is because the Truth of God is His Grace that justification by Grace alone belongs to true knowledge of God — that is to say, the verification of theological statements is to be undertaken in terms of justification by Grace alone.<sup>24</sup>

In Torrance's view then

Theological truth . . . has its essential *form* in the Life of Jesus in which He laid hold upon our mind and will and bent them back in Himself to perfect love and confidence in the Father . . . Unless theological statements participate in that glorification of the Father in Jesus, and so take the form of humble inquiry . . . they cannot be credited or sealed with a genuine *Amen*.<sup>25</sup>

Thinking along these lines, Barth insisted that

we cannot ascribe to man as such any readiness corresponding to the readiness of God . . . If we try to presuppose any such thing we are treading on air. Man does not lend himself to the fulfilling of this presupposition. The knowability of God is not, therefore, to be made intelligible as the predicate of man as such (CD II/1, 145).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 157-8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>26</sup> In his response to Brunner, Barth wrote: "Freedom to know the true God is a miracle, a freedom of God, not one of our freedoms. Faith in the revelation of God makes this negation inevitable. To contradict it would amount to unbelief . . . How can man ever in any sense know 'of himself' what has to be known here? He may know it *himself*, yes! But 'of himself,' never!" Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth*, introduction by The Very Rev. Professor John Baillie, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002, first published in 1946), 117.

It is for this reason that Barth rejected the idea that there could be some sort of cooperation with grace from the human side,<sup>27</sup> as is certainly implied in the above statement from Irving that “natural theology and revealed theology combine to the end of theological knowledge that is determined by God’s self-revelation”. In Barth’s words:

Though God could compete and co-operate with the creature — if He did not do this he would not be its Creator — there could not be even the remotest possibility of the creature competing and co-operating with God . . . The reason is this. God is God and the creature is creature . . . there can only be God’s competition and co-operation with the creature, but not the reverse. An inversion would compromise and abrogate the very presupposition of the relationship: the character of God as God, and of the creature as creature (CD II/1, 580).

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<sup>27</sup> Referring to the coming of the kingdom of God for which we pray in the second petition of the Lord’s prayer, Barth makes two decisive remarks: 1) “As it is prayed for in the second petition, the kingdom is not a kind of continuing, prolonging, excelling, and completing of what people may, as commanded, attempt and undertake in a more or less rich understanding . . .” *CD IV/4 Lecture Fragments*, 240; 2) “The Lord does not reason or discuss or debate with either demons or the men to whose help he hastens in doing what he does here. He does not have to explain himself to them or justify himself before them. *He does not link up with their own achievements. He does not concur or collaborate with them.* He simply goes his own way, the way of his own honor and our salvation. That he should and will act thus is the promise that is given to Christians and it is as such the summons and command to call upon him and to pray ‘Thy kingdom come,’” (ibid., 235, emphasis mine). This thinking surely excludes any idea that knowledge of God’s kingdom rests upon some sort of natural co-operation between empirical and theoretical components of knowledge since the truth of our knowledge of the kingdom rests exclusively upon God’s grace and thus God’s promise and command. Thus, while Irving is correct to say that for Torrance knowledge is “devoted to and bound up with its object” (ibid., 107) and that “to know objectively is to allow the structure of the object to determine the structure of human thought” (ibid., 108), he neglects to mention that for Torrance we are incapable of knowing God as he truly is apart from God’s own atoning action in his Holy Spirit enabling this knowledge. That means of course that true knowledge of God is not the result of our human cooperation and God’s revelation, but only the result of a knowledge that takes place in obedience to Christ himself. In his discussion of “ontologic” all that is mentioned is how human logic relates to empirical reality within creation — he leaves out Torrance’s all important discussion of the logic of grace.

### **Complementarity? Natural Theology/Revealed Theology**

The real issue here concerns the question of whether or not one can maintain that there is a "complementarity between the synthesis of natural and revealed theology and the synthesis of the logic of empirical form and the logic of systematic form" without fundamentally subverting Torrance's own insistence on the priority of the "Logic of Grace" which, according to Torrance, refers to

the unconditional priority of the Truth as Grace and the irreversibility of the relationship established between the Truth and us. The Logic of Grace is the way the Truth has taken in His disclosure to us. Because He does not cease to be Grace in our knowing Him, all our thoughts and their interrelations must reflect the movement of Grace.<sup>28</sup>

Because there is what Torrance calls an "epistemological inversion of our relation to God"<sup>29</sup> he insists that there is "no formal-logical relation between the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross and the forgiveness of our sins"<sup>30</sup> even though there certainly is a relation. But that relation "is established by divine action and discerned through faith."<sup>31</sup> Thus, our knowledge of God is grounded in God's knowing us such that "our act of faith is grounded on God's decision of Grace to give Himself to us and to choose us for Himself."<sup>32</sup>

For Torrance, then, our decisions for God are rooted in "election" which for him means "the prevenient movement of God's love that is so incarnated in Jesus Christ that in Him we have both the pure act of divine Grace toward man and the

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<sup>28</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 214. This is why Torrance insists that "I cannot love God through loving my neighbour. I can love my neighbour truly and only through loving God. To love God through loving my neighbour is to assert that the Incarnation is not a reality, the reality it is, that relation to God is still a mediated one. To love God through my love to my neighbour is to move toward God. It does not know a movement of God toward man," (*The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002], 88-9).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

perfect act of man in obedient response toward God's Grace."<sup>33</sup> In other words, because Christ lived a life of perfect obedience, appropriating God's grace for our benefit by standing in for us before God the Father, he "actualised in Himself the Truth of God translating it into His human life, that we may know the Truth in and through Jesus Christ."<sup>34</sup> For this reason, Torrance can say that "Every theological doctrine must reflect in its way, directly or indirectly, the unconditional priority of the Grace of God if it is to be faithful to the Truth."<sup>35</sup> That of course must mean that in reality, in light of a proper theology of human nature, there is no "quasi-validity" to any independent natural theology, as Torrance claimed there was based on his analogy between natural theology and geometry.

The key question raised in this response to Irving's thought-provoking but problematical article then concerns whether or not Torrance's reconstructed natural theology is natural theology in the traditional sense described above at all. According to Irving, the answer seems to be no because Torrance insists that natural theology must be natural to its proper object, namely, the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. But, as noted above, if theology begins and ends with faith in Christ as God's self-revelation, then in truth it is a theology of revelation based on grace and not nature; it is a theology that is determined exclusively by the unique object of Christian faith and not by any naturally known God either as absolute being or as the origin and end of the universe or perhaps as an "imperious constraint from beyond" as Torrance himself once claimed. We will return to this in a moment.

### **Either/Or Choice**

For now, it seems clear that an either/or choice is required here. But, just as certainly, it seems from this presentation, that Torrance's "new" natural theology can still be called natural theology because it is supposed to be seen as the "infrastructure"<sup>36</sup> or as Torrance also called it, the "intrastructure" of revealed theology.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 215-16.

<sup>36</sup> Irving, *Participatio*, 105.

This means that Torrance “had in view a rational structure that had been transposed into the material content of theology.”<sup>37</sup> But, if that is true, then by his own definition, this is no longer natural theology as traditionally understood. It is a theology based upon and shaped exclusively by revelation and grace. The problem we are concerned with here then is that either a theology is based on revelation and grace or it is based on some sort of natural knowledge that is confirmed by and then clarified by revelation; in which case the exclusive criterion of truth ceases to be grace and, in some sense, becomes nature which, according to both Barth and Torrance needs to be reconciled and was indeed reconciled in Christ, but now must live from and in that “new” humanity that is ours in Christ, *before* we can think theologically.

This is an extremely important and often overlooked issue. Can we view natural theology benignly simply by thinking of it as incomplete (as Torrance does) apart from revelation, so that it is completed in revelation? Or must we think of natural theology as the attempt by sinful human beings to know God without actually relying on revelation as grace from start to finish? This is made all the more difficult by the fact that natural theology, even as the “new” natural theology envisioned by Torrance might claim to be subordinate to revelation, but notwithstanding that claim, it would not in reality be truly subordinate to the revelation of God in Christ to the extent that it could still be described as natural theology.

I am arguing that natural theology is not the necessary presupposition of revealed theology; rather that presupposition is our “new” humanity that has been restored in the humanity of the incarnate Word so that the infrastructure of a theology of grace itself can only be seen and described in faith as it is tied to Christ and enabled by the miraculous action of the Holy Spirit. Undoubtedly, Torrance also affirms this when in his important book, *Space, Time and Resurrection* he rightly claims that we would have no objective knowledge of the true God without Christ’s own resurrection from the dead. Thus,

The resurrection is therefore our pledge that statements about God in

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Jesus Christ have an objective reference in God, and are not just projections out of the human heart and imagination . . . The resurrection demonstrates not only that all division has been removed in atoning reconciliation, but that atoning reconciliation has achieved its end in the new creation in which God and man are brought into such communion with one another that the relations of man with God in being and knowing are healed and fully established.<sup>38</sup>

When, with Irving, one depicts scientific theology as cooperating with revelation and thus suggesting that natural and revealed theology *together* make up what Torrance called theological science then the heart of theology as a creaturely act within the *new* creation is compromised.

It is Torrance's somewhat inconsistent answer to these questions that has led some who embrace his "new" natural theology to think that "the human mind possesses the capacity to recognize this work of creation as such [which all would of course agree with], and to draw at least some reliable conclusions concerning the nature and character of God from the created order [which Barth firmly and consistently rejects and Torrance firmly rejects, except on occasion, when relating theological and natural science to each other]."<sup>39</sup> In his consideration of "natural revelation" Barth freely admitted that God had made himself objectively known in creation, but because of sin and self-will human beings could not actually understand that natural revelation except through Christ and the Spirit. This view by Barth may have been what Torrance was after with his "new" natural theology;

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998; reissued London: T&T Clark, 2018), 72-3.

<sup>39</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Volume I Nature*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 299. Also, McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology: The 2009 Gifford Lectures*, (Louisville, KY: The Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) where instead of realizing that when Colin Gunton said everything looks different in light of the Trinity he meant to offer a proper theology of nature, McGrath mistakenly assumes he was supporting his (McGrath's) view of natural theology. Thus, McGrath concludes, with Moltmann, that "we must learn to think of the 'world of nature as bearing the prints of the Triune God,'" 70. Of course if this is in any sense true, then we can look to nature as well as to revelation to understand the mystery of the Trinity. And that is exactly what both Barth and Torrance vigorously rejected!

but again for both theologians the fact is that even this “natural revelation” is not natural theology in any recognizably traditional sense.

### **Alister McGrath**

Consider also the following statement from Alister McGrath, who claims to be developing his thought on the basis of Torrance’s “new” natural theology within the ambit of revelation:

There is an essential harmony between the Christian vision of the world, and what may actually be known of it. In developing this point, we would argue that Christian theology provides an ontological foundation which confirms and consolidates otherwise fleeting, fragmentary glimpses of a greater reality, gained from the exploration of nature without an attending theoretical framework. A traditional natural theology can be thought of as drawing aside a veil briefly, partially, and tantalizingly, eliciting an awareness of potential insight, and creating a longing to be able to grasp and possess whatever is being intimated. What is transient and fragmentary is clarified and consolidated from within the standpoint of the Christian tradition, which is able to affirm whatever can be known in this tantalizing manner, while clarifying it and placing it upon a firmer foundation in the divine *logos*.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 248. Strangely, while this position clearly depicts Christian theology as affirming what can be known of God through natural theology in the traditional sense, and carrying it forward, in another context, McGrath recognizes that this approach could be questioned in light of a proper trinitarian theology. See *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 63. Yet, even that does not stop McGrath from proposing a “Trinitarian natural theology” in which he claims to be following Barth and says “Revelation is thus not limited to the divine self-disclosure, but to the matrix of actions and frameworks which enable this self-disclosure to be recognized as such and appropriated as revelation” (ibid., 72). Accordingly, this “matrix” includes “social embodiments . . . such as worship, the recital of creeds, and the public reading of Scripture — and the influence of God” (ibid., 72). For Barth the only one who could enable God’s self-disclosure to be recognized is God himself and not any framework. Thinking this way, however, McGrath claims that nature can indeed “render the character of God to a limited extent” and claims, following Gerard Manley Hopkins, that created entities have the “capacity to signify their creator” and [\*\*continued next page] ...



There can be no doubt that Irving's inadequate reading of my analysis and critique of Torrance's "new" natural theology will further the confusion embodied in Alister McGrath's problematic construction of his own natural theology. Here it should be noted that McGrath's thinking goes beyond anything that Torrance himself would countenance with his apologetic intent to appeal to those with or without faith in the Christian God. He argues that the apologetic value of a "legitimate natural theology" will allow us to see that "the Christian evangelist will have a number of 'points of contact' for the gospel within the created order."<sup>41</sup> This assertion is directly antithetical to the view of Torrance and Barth that there is in reality only one point of contact for the Gospel and that is Jesus Christ himself. That is why Torrance insisted that "The Humanity of Christ is thus crucially significant for the saving knowledge of God by man . . . It is the human form and reality of Jesus of Nazareth which is the necessary 'point of contact' or *Anknüpfungspunkt* for our Salvation . . . the bridge between God and man, and man and God."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Volume I Nature*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 299.

<sup>42</sup> Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, 136-7.

\*\*[Footnote 40 continued from previous page]: ... from this he embraces Emil Brunner's idea that "God has bestowed upon his works 'a permanent capacity for revelation . . .' which can be discerned through human contemplation of the 'traces of his own nature which [God] has expressed and made known in them'" (ibid., 74). All of this is what Barth explicitly rejected in rejecting natural theology. But it is this kind of problematic thinking that ensues when one supposes that Torrance's "new" natural theology authorizes this type of understanding of revelation. This is why Torrance's "new" natural theology is so problematic: it leads those who think he was embracing a "benign" natural theology to ignore at least half of his theology which, with Barth, forcefully asserted that the only way to truly know God is through God himself and not through reflection on nature. It leads McGrath to state that his more modest and realistic natural theology is "based on the idea of a resonance or 'empirical fit' between the Christian worldview and what is actually observed. The Christian faith, grounded ultimately in divine self-revelation, illuminates and interprets the natural world; the 'Book of Scripture' enables a closer and more fruitful reading of the 'Book of Nature'" (ibid., 218). Here it is worth noting that for Barth the creation of world-views is just another indication of what happens when our actual reconciliation in Christ himself is ignored or marginalized. Creating world-views represents an active human attempt to come to terms with revelation and reconciliation by incorporating God's act of grace into a view of reality which then becomes the criterion for the grace itself. A world-view Barth says "is the glorious possibility of evading" the offensive nature of revelation as grace. He says "so long as man, viewing the world, is observer, constructor and manager, he is safe, or at any rate thinks he is safe from this offence [namely, that we can only say yes to ourselves but only] as "an answer to the Yes said to him" (CD IV/3, 257).

McGrath also believes that all acts of understanding are based upon some pre-understanding. Thus he claims that "Nature has to be seen in a certain way before it has revelatory potential" and this "depends upon the assumptions which the observer brings to the act of observation." Therefore "the act of the interpreter is based upon a *Vorverständnis*, a 'pre-understanding' which is brought to this act by the observer on account of his or her standing within a tradition of discourse."<sup>43</sup> While certain interpretative frameworks do not allow "any significant connection between the world as we observe it and the nature of God," McGrath alleges that a connection can be asserted only if three conditions are met. First, "The created order is held to be the work of the Christian God, not any other entity"; second "The act of creation was not determined or significantly influenced by the quality of the material which was ordered through this act"; and third "That the human mind possess the capacity to recognize this work of creation as such, and to draw at least some reliable conclusions concerning the nature and character of God from the created order."<sup>44</sup> He then claims that these three insights were "secured through the Christian revelation."<sup>45</sup>

But that is exactly the problem. Neither Torrance nor Barth are willing to admit that any pre-understanding that we bring to the encounter with God in Christ can be allowed any determinative function here at all since it is only God who can heal our minds such that they may know the truth. When that happens, they claim, it is the result of God's forgiving grace actualized through the Holy Spirit in us enabling our freedom and is not at all the result of any capacity of ours to draw conclusions about God from the world. Here is where McGrath has introduced a version of traditional natural theology that is clearly at variance with the thinking of both Barth and Torrance. McGrath mistakenly believes that it "is wrong to treat natural theology and revealed theology as being opposed to each other, *provided* that nature is construed in a trinitarian manner as the creation of the self-revealing God."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 298.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

But according to both Barth and Torrance we know from God's self-revelation, as seen above, that we are enemies of grace, that our minds are diseased and twisted apart from Christ the reconciler. And human nature is what it is as fallen and as justified by grace alone whether we construe it in a trinitarian or some other manner. In other words our construal of nature does not make our vision of nature true to what it actually is. That our vision is true depends entirely upon the nature of creation as created by God and as fallen, justified and sanctified by God in Christ and through his Spirit. McGrath thinks "Natural theology cannot become a *totally* autonomous discipline, independent of revelation, in that it depends for its credibility upon the revealed insight that God is creator of the natural order."<sup>47</sup> But Barth and Torrance based their entire theologies on the fact that natural theology has *no* autonomy at all because, as Barth bluntly put it: "If we look past Jesus Christ, if we speak of anyone else but Him, if our praise of man is not at once praise of Jesus Christ, the romance and the illusions begin again" (CD II/1, 149). Then

we fall back again into the aspect under which it is impossible to see, or with a good conscience to speak about, the man who is ready for God in life and truth . . . in the doctrine of the knowledge and knowability of God, we have always to take in blind seriousness the basic Pauline perception of Colossians 3:3 which is that of all Scripture — that our life is our life hid with Christ in God. With Christ: never at all apart from Him, never at all independently of Him, never at all in and for itself. Man exists in Jesus Christ and in Him alone; as he also finds God in Christ and in Him alone. The being and nature of man in and for themselves as independent bearers of an independent predicate, have, by the revelation of Jesus Christ, become an abstraction which is destined only to disappear (CD II/1, 149).

There is not one word here of what Barth says that Torrance would disagree with and thus he himself would respond to McGrath's affirmation that "there is an intrinsic capacity within the created order to disclose God" rather negatively. McGrath claims that this capacity within the created order is somehow grounded in

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., emphasis mine.

the covenant and thus is not an assertion of an *analogia entis*. He even cites Torrance's view that creation

cannot be interpreted or understood out of itself, as if it had an inherent likeness or being to the Truth, but only in light of the history of the covenant of grace . . . Reformed theology certainly holds that God reveals himself in creation, but not by some so-called 'light of nature', and it certainly holds that God's revelation makes use of and is mediated through a creaturely objectivity, but it does not hold that an examination of this creaturely objectivity of itself can yield knowledge of God.<sup>48</sup>

And yet his basic thesis for his new natural theology that supposedly functions exclusively within revelation hinges on his assertion that "That the human mind possess the capacity to recognize this work of creation as such, and to draw at least some reliable conclusions concerning the nature and character of God from the created order."<sup>49</sup>

To put this matter rather uncompromisingly, the issue that I am raising here concerns the consistency of Torrance's own belief that God himself is the only one who can make us aware of who he truly is; and this happens only as God himself through his Holy Spirit and thus through union with Christ and on the basis of reconciliation itself enables our proper knowledge of who he is and who we are in Christ. Can traditional natural theology actually draw aside the veil and elicit an awareness of the triune God, as McGrath thinks? Can revealed theology be correctly grasped if it is conceptualized as simply clarifying some sort of fragmentary knowledge of God which McGrath thinks is available to us in our natural theology and then placing it on a firmer foundation as McGrath believes?

Barth's answer to these questions was an unequivocal no because he very consistently maintained that all of our knowledge of God was enabled by the grace of God in its identity with God's act of revelation and reconciliation in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Torrance clearly followed Barth in this since both argued

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<sup>48</sup> Torrance, *The School of Faith*, cited in McGrath, *ibid.*, 297.

<sup>49</sup> McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 299.

that true knowledge of God could only occur on the basis of our justification and sanctification by grace and through faith. Those who embrace Torrance's "new" natural theology also espouse the seemingly innocuous statement that this natural theology must function within revelation. But perhaps this is not so innocuous after all. For even on Torrance's own reckoning, there is no way from human logic to the logic of grace (which is never mentioned by Irving but which is decisive in Torrance's book *Theological Science* in a way which places his theological perspective much closer to Barth's at that point, as indicated above). According to Torrance, our minds need to be reconciled through the action of the Holy Spirit (which is also not featured in Irving's article) *before* we can truly know God from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves. He spells this out in his *Theological Science* and in *God and Rationality*. The question that Barth raised is whether natural theology in *any form* (new or old) really can allow revelation to be its *exclusive* source for understanding who God is. We have just seen that McGrath's thinking also demonstrates that a choice is required here. Therefore, I would say things are not as clear as Irving makes them out to be.

### **Artificially Separating Revealed and Natural Theology**

While Irving mistakenly claims that I have misinterpreted Torrance for bracketing his "new" natural theology from revelation for purposes of clarification, the fact is that I have understood exactly what he was attempting to do; he was attempting to hold that the "logic of empirical form has a nascent coherence owing to its determination by the material context of reality," as Irving puts it, so that "natural theology 'still retains the imprint of its empirical origins and foundations.'" Thus, natural theology's propositions can be properly evaluated "by artificially separating revealed and natural theology."<sup>50</sup> We are thus told that this artificial and temporary separation will allow us to "test its coherency and verify the connection between natural theology and revelation."<sup>51</sup>

Yet, according to Torrance's own theology as it is shaped by revelation, he claims, together with Barth, that no analogies or concepts are true in themselves and that

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<sup>50</sup> Irving, *Participatio*, 106-107.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

theological propositions simply cannot be verified except through revelation and grace, as discussed above. In Torrance's words:

justification by putting us in the right with the Truth of God calls in question all that claims to be knowledge of the truth on our part and calls into question our theological statements in so far as they claim to have truth in themselves, and directs them away from themselves to Christ as the one Truth of God . . . in so doing justification establishes us in certainty [by grounding all our knowledge and action upon] the divine Reality in Christ.<sup>52</sup>

This is why he insists that Jesus is an "ultimate." This means that who he is and the truth that he reveals cannot be verified on any other ground than that which he himself provides. But that ground, in Torrance's view, is the revelation of God attested in Scripture and given in the deposit of faith. It is not to be found in natural theology at all. Here then once again is the real problem that is never adequately addressed by Irving: how can natural theology possibly be considered as a cooperative feature of our knowledge of revelation without actually reversing what Barth and Torrance considered to be an irreversible relationship, that is, the relationship between nature and grace as discussed above?

An example of the difficulty being discussed here can be seen in the following statements once made by Torrance:

Justification by the grace of Christ alone, does not mean that there is no natural knowledge — what natural man is there who does not know something of God even if he holds it down in unrighteousness or turns the truth into a lie? But it does mean that the whole of that natural knowledge is called into question by Christ who when he comes to us says: 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.' The whole man with his natural knowledge is therefore questioned down to the root of his being, for man is summoned to look away from all that he is and knows or thinks he

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<sup>52</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 201. In fact Torrance insists that "our ideas and conceptions and analogies and words are twisted in untruth and are resistant to the Truth," *ibid.*, 49.

knows to Christ who is the Way the Truth and the Life; no one goes to the Father but by him.<sup>53</sup>

Two comments are in order. First, Torrance is certainly claiming some sort of natural knowledge of God here in the traditional sense while also acknowledging that as

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<sup>53</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 163. Torrance explains this in a similar way in *Theological Science* when he explains that justification by grace “is not a factual denial of natural goodness” or “a metaphysical denial of natural theology,” but rather it sets a person “upon a wholly new basis in Grace” (102-3). It is thus a “methodological, not a metaphysical, rejection of ‘natural theology’” (103). Natural theology, Torrance thus claims is excluded by “scientific theology as a sort of ‘foreign body’ (however useful within its own limits, e.g. in helping to remove the grounds of rational doubt)” (103). He explains this further by saying that “‘natural theology’ is a sort of mixture pursued by men of faith reasoning within the natural realm, *remoto Christo*, as it were. It is not something that can stand on its own feet, purely as *natural* theology erected on natural grounds, but is, taken at its best, a form of rational argumentation on natural grounds in which a believer attempts to elaborate chains of reasoning which will remove from skeptical minds that which obstructs direct intuitive apprehension of the living God” (104). The problem I am identifying in Torrance’s thought, however, concerns the fact that he thinks natural theology can be of any use at all in removing obstructions to knowledge of God “by men of faith,” since according to his own scientific theology only God himself in his grace and mercy can, as we acknowledge the Father, through union with his Son and by his Spirit, remove grounds for rational doubt and obstacles to knowing him. Inasmuch as natural theology, according to Torrance, “seeks to move toward God” and thus comes “into conflict with natural science and with pure theology” my question is: how can such a theology (natural theology) possibly remove rational doubt about God since on the one hand, within this understanding, it cannot really know the God known by pure theology at all. On the other hand, any understanding of God by persons of faith, in order to be true knowledge of God, would have to take place by grace and through revelation, according to Torrance’s own stated theological position. Thus, it simply could not result in knowledge of the true God without one taking up one’s cross and turning to Christ who is the way, the truth and the life. Karl Barth’s understanding of “natural revelation” as depicted by George Hunsinger comes close to what Torrance is saying here. But by designating this “natural revelation” the confusion that follows from designating it “natural theology” is avoided. And the point is made clear. For Barth, “natural revelation was not absolutely ruled out, but it was reinterpreted from a center in Christ” (*Evangelical, Catholic and Reformed: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015], 99). Importantly, however, for Barth “God could not be known, even through natural revelation, without God’s bringing the human subject into living union with himself (II/1, 105)” (ibid., 99). That bringing into living union is what is marginalized by all world-views.

sinners we cut ourselves off from the Truth.<sup>54</sup> Could this perhaps explain why he can also say that created intelligibility points beyond itself “with a mute cry for sufficient reason”<sup>55</sup> so that “the fact that the universe is intrinsically rational means that it is capable of or open to, rational explanation — from beyond itself”?<sup>56</sup> While this may be so, one wonders how the universe can offer a mute cry as nature since, as Torrance insists, nature in itself is dumb and needs us as priests of creation to bring to light its intelligibility.<sup>57</sup> In any case Torrance reasons that since the universe is intrinsically rational and open to explanation from beyond, therefore this

*suggests, or directs us to, a transcendent ground of rationality as its explanation. It is the objective depth of comprehensibility in the universe that projects our thought beyond it in this way . . . To be inherently reasonable the universe requires a sufficient reason for being what it is as an intelligible whole.*<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> McGrath himself side-steps this issue claiming that the “extent to which the human mind and will have been affected by sin is contested within the Christian tradition” (*Scientific Theology*, 292). But he argues that “there is widespread agreement that the human situation is characterized by some such diminution in the human epistemic capacity to discern, and subsequently to respond appropriately to, God” (ibid., 293). Barth and Torrance are both claiming that, in light of revelation, we know that our ability to know God in truth apart from Christ is not just diminished but is impossible. Of course he speaks of atonement in *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, but for him that means a transformed vision in which we see things differently (39, 218) while for Torrance and Barth it means recognizing our utter dependence on the living Christ to empower us to know the Father through the power of his Holy Spirit.

<sup>55</sup> This statement of course conflicts with Torrance’s own remark that creation as such is dumb and needs us as priests of creation to bring to light its intelligibility. See Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 1997), 41 and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 26f. See also Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1980), 5-6.

<sup>56</sup> Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 52.

<sup>57</sup> See Molnar, *ZDTh*, 55, n. 11. Torrance writes: “Nature after all is dumb; she cannot talk back to us. Hence we must not only frame the questions we put to nature but also put into the mouth of nature the answers she is to give back to us” (*God and Rationality*, 41).

<sup>58</sup> Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 53.



### **An Imperious Constraint from Beyond/An Active Agency**

Therefore, in the process of reasoning, Torrance claims that “we are aware of coming under an imperious constraint from beyond”<sup>59</sup> with the result that this “would seem to *suggest* that there is an *active agency* other than the inherent intelligibility and harmony of the universe, unifying and structuring it, and providing it with its ground of being.”<sup>60</sup>

However, the critical question raised by Torrance’s own understanding that theology can only be done within revelation and by the power of grace itself leads me to wonder exactly how he can transfer that power to the objective depth of comprehensibility in the universe that is supposed to be able to project our thought beyond it so as to suggest an active agency or an imperious constraint from beyond. More importantly, however, the ideas of an active agency or imperious constraint from beyond can only lead us to a god of our own making and have no power to lead us to the true God.

Here another problem surfaces. Whereas Barth rightly insisted that we either know God in his entirety as Father, Son and Holy Spirit or not at all,<sup>61</sup> this thinking implies that some knowledge of that one true God is attained as the intelligibility of the universe drives our thought toward these twin ideas. This is confirmed by Torrance’s question: “Does it [an independent natural theology] not really miss the mark, by abstracting his [God’s] existence from his act, and so by considering one

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 54 and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 26.

<sup>60</sup> Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 56.

<sup>61</sup> Thus, “God is who He is, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer, supreme, the one true Lord; and He is known in his entirety or He is not known at all. There is no existence of God behind or beyond this entirety of His being . . . there can be no knowledge of God in time or even in eternity which will lead us beyond this entirety of His being . . . God exists in this entirety of His being and therefore not in any kind of parts” (CD II/1, 51-2).

aspect of his being apart from other aspects?"<sup>62</sup> When and if through faith we actually acknowledge the truth of God's grace as described by Torrance himself then we may interpret the intelligibility of the universe as pointing to the true God. But an active agency or imperious constraint from beyond cannot really be identified with God as Christians know God through his Word and Spirit. That would mean that one could only think truly about God in faith, by grace and through revelation, even on Torrance's own understanding. One would then be engaging in a theology of revelation and not a natural theology; and that theology of revelation might include what George Hunsinger described as "natural revelation" as it was made intelligible through revelation alone in its identity with Christ himself.<sup>63</sup>

Unfortunately, none of these important issues are addressed by Irving in his article because he did not seem to appreciate the full difficulty that I raised in my original article discussing Torrance's new natural theology in 2005.

This leads to my second point, namely, that it is imperative that this reasoning be seen for what it is because there can be no doubt that here Torrance's thinking is opposed not only to Barth's view as explicated above, but to his own view that human knowledge needs to be reconciled by the actualization of

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 151. This problematic assertion is heightened when Torrance claims that there is an "ultimate openness of being and its semantic reference" *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 47 and that "we find our human being opened up and disclosed to us as there strikes at us through the blank face of the universe a mysterious intelligibility which takes us under its command in such a way that we feel we have to do with an undeniable and irreducibly transcendent reality which becomes intensely meaningful as the inward enlightenment of our own beings," *ibid.*, 58. This is a far cry from Torrance's often repeated insistence that we have no true knowledge of God except as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and it is in conflict with his own assertion that "since there is no likeness between the eternal being of God and the being of created reality, God may be known only out of himself," *The Trinitarian Faith*, 52. Hence, "when we approach God as Father through the Son, our knowledge of the Father in the Son is grounded in the very being of God and is determined by what he essentially is in his own nature," *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>63</sup> See n. 53 above.

atonement in our minds before we can truly know God.<sup>64</sup> This is the case because, for Torrance, God can only be known by God, that is, from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves.<sup>65</sup> In other words, as Torrance applies the doctrine of justification to human knowledge of God, he really does believe and consistently holds to the fact that the whole person is questioned down to the root of his or her being in that we, as sinners who are justified by grace and thus by Christ alone, are summoned to look away from ourselves and only to Christ. Indeed, he insists in other contexts that this ability to follow Christ itself is enabled only by the Holy Spirit actualizing the atonement in us and thus uniting us with Christ so that we may actually share in the Son's unique knowledge of the Father (Matt. 11:27).<sup>66</sup>

None of these problems are addressed by Irving and in fact we are only led into further confusion with the idea that as theologians we can and should find a place for natural theology as it functions within revelation. The only problem is that natural theology really does cease to be natural theology when our thinking is actually determined by who God has revealed himself to be in his Word and Spirit. That, I have argued, is precisely why one never sees a word about this "new" natural theology when one reads Torrance's books on the Trinity or when one reads about the fact that grace cannot be separated from the Giver of grace. That is

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<sup>64</sup> A very clear and decisive example of this can be seen in Torrance's book on Atonement. He insisted to his students that the Gospel must have its way with them so that "you will find the very shape and structure of your mind beginning to change." This will involve "a radical repentant rethinking of everything before the face of Jesus Christ" so that repentant thinking means taking up one's cross and following Christ with the result that "you cannot separate evangelical theology from that profound experience of the radical changing and transforming of your mind that comes through dying and rising with Christ" (*Atonement*, 433). From this Torrance instructively concludes that "divine revelation conflicts sharply with the structure of our natural reason, with the secular patterns of thought that have already become established in our minds through the twist of our ingrained mental alienation from God. We cannot become true theologians without the agonising experience of profound change in the mental structure of our innermost being" (433). See also Molnar, "The importance of the doctrine of justification in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance and of Karl Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70 (2): 198–226 (2017).

<sup>65</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 52 and *Theological Science*, 29.

<sup>66</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 58-9. See also Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 77–8 and Torrance, "The One Baptism," *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 101-102. See also Molnar, *Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*, 305ff.

because, in his dogmatics proper, Torrance's thinking is generally quite consistently a theology grounded in grace and understood in faith on the basis of revelation alone just because he really applies the *sola gratia* to the whole realm of human knowledge, as Karl Barth himself did. I say generally because whenever Torrance uses the analogy from geometry as described above this thinking does not remain consistent with his avowal of a theology of *sola gratia*.

So in his book, *Space, Time and Incarnation* he says that "four-dimensional geometries . . . involve a profound correlation between abstract conceptual systems and physical processes" and that this "has considerable epistemological implications for theological as well as natural science, if only because it yields the organic concept of space-time as a continuous diversified but unitary field of dynamic structures, in which the theologian as well as the natural scientist is at work." This, Torrance says "gets rid of the old dualisms between material existence and absolute space and time, or between nature and supernature." Therefore, "it is no longer possible to operate scientifically with a separation between natural theology and revealed theology any more than between geometry and physics" because geometry must be pursued "in indissoluble unity with physics" and not independent of it in a way that is detached from knowledge of "physical processes." It is then seen as "its inner rational structure and as an essential part of empirical and theoretical interpretation of nature."<sup>67</sup>

This leads him to conclude that natural theology, like geometry, must be "undertaken in an integrated unity with positive theology in which it plays an indispensable part in our inquiry and understanding of God. In this fusion 'natural' theology will suffer a dimensional change and will be made natural to the proper subject-matter of theology."<sup>68</sup> Notice what has happened here. Gone is any mention of the fact that we are enemies of grace, that our reason is twisted and distorted and that we need reconciliation and repentant thinking brought about by the Holy Spirit changing the structure of our natural thought. I suggest that the reason for this is that Torrance's analogy from geometry, which he took from Einstein,<sup>69</sup> led

<sup>67</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 69.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>69</sup> See Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, 91ff.

him to conclude that natural theology, like geometry could be bracketed from revelation and, like geometry bracketed from physics, it could still make sense but it would be incomplete and need completion beyond itself. However, elsewhere in his thinking, as it is shaped by the grace of revelation, Torrance insists that we need a complete metanoia and total change in that we must take up our cross and follow Christ if we are going to think rightly as theologians. The analogy from geometry you might say leads to a bloodless death to self and an all too smooth transition to a theology of revelation. This is the "continuity" between nature and grace that both Barth and Torrance opposed on scriptural grounds.

Now, one could dismiss this discussion with the idea that these are rather abstruse ideas being debated by Torrance scholars with little practical relevance for theologians today. That would be a serious mistake because unfortunately whenever it is thought that there must be mutual cooperation between natural theology and a theology based exclusively on revelation, then serious problems arise. We have already noted that in Barth's view such thinking blurs the distinction between creator and creature and we have seen that Alister McGrath has been led beyond anything that Torrance would countenance with his portrayal of a supposed trinitarian natural theology. Let me give one further example.

### **Ray S. Anderson**

Let us consider how Ray Anderson employs Torrance's "new" natural theology. He attempts to construct a "new" natural theology as a basis for moral theology following Torrance's approach and he deliberately endeavors to harmonize Barth and Brunner in the process. Hence,

We have attempted to bring the concerns of Brunner for a viable *theologia naturalis* into closer proximity to Barth's concern for the 'single task of theology.' We have sought to establish a new direction for natural theology within Barth's trajectory of evangelical theology through closer attention to the structure of Barth's theological anthropology. The natural goodness of humanity continues to be a

matter of divine determination, despite the effects of the fall.<sup>70</sup>

In this context Anderson uses this natural goodness as a common ground for discussing Christian ethics: "One could paraphrase Barth by saying that all persons can be presumed to have moral openness, but not moral readiness. This would seem to allow for a natural theology which takes into account a common ground for moral responsibility which finds its criteria in the natural goodness of humanity."<sup>71</sup> However, this is exactly the thinking that Barth rejected in rejecting natural theology:

Calvin did not, any more than St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, draw . . . the systematic conclusion that a 'natural' knowledge of the law of God is to be ascribed to us and that this knowledge has to be put to a positive use in theology *either* antecedently *or* subsequently ('in faith'). On the contrary, he plainly denied that knowledge of the ethical good is gained by means of an ability (*facultas*) of man.<sup>72</sup>

For Barth of course this was the case because

The doctrine of the point of contact and the whole of Brunner's teaching on nature and grace . . . has to be most categorically opposed on the score that it is incompatible with the third article of the

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<sup>70</sup> "Barth and New Direction for Natural Theology," in *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth May 10, 1886*, ed. John Thompson (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 241-66, 261.

<sup>71</sup> Anderson, "Barth and New Direction," 260f. It should be noted that Barth explicitly rejects any such approach when he insists that "Grace which has from the start to share its power with a force of nature is no longer grace, i.e., it cannot be recognised as what the grace of God is in the consideration and conception of that divine act, as what it is in Jesus Christ" (CD II/2, 531). Barth says "It is because the grace of God, as it is defined in relation to Jesus Christ and therefore to that divine act [God's love of us in Christ], is His free gift to man, because revelation includes the creation of the God-knowing subject, because the love of God and that love alone accomplishes and is the co-ordination of man with God, that we have to deny to man the aptitude to co-operate with grace, revelation and God" (CD II/2, 531-2). For Barth "it is quite impossible to see how" if one co-ordinates moral philosophy and moral theology "based on the basic view of the harmony which is achieved in the concept of being between nature and super-nature, reason and revelation, man and God . . . grace can really emerge as grace" and God's command as his command (CD II/2, 530).

<sup>72</sup> Barth, *Natural Theology*, 108.

creed. The Holy Ghost, who proceeds from the Father and the Son and is therefore revealed and believed to be God, does not stand in need of any point of contact but that which he himself creates. Only retrospectively is it possible to reflect on the way in which he 'makes contact' with man, and this retrospect will ever be a retrospect upon a *miracle*.<sup>73</sup>

This is why Barth also insisted that any point of contact within us, such as the continuing existence of our good nature, in spite of the fall

could never signify conformity to God, a point of contact for the Word of God. In this sense, as a possibility which is proper to man *qua* creature, the image of God is not just, as it is said, destroyed apart from a few relics; it is totally annihilated. What remains of the image of God even in sinful man is *recta natura*, to which as such a *rectitudo* cannot be ascribed even *potentialiter*. No matter how it may be with his humanity and personality, man has completely lost the capacity for God (CD I/1, 238).

Barth also believed that one could not speak both theologically and philosophically about this point of contact but only theologically because it can be discussed only in faith and thus through the grace of revelation (CD I/1, 239). Barth insisted that theological ethics must be "on its guard against a retrospective reinterpretation of the fall, as though the presumption of man in wishing to know of himself what is good and evil were only a natural inclination to do the will of God" (CD II/2, 523). For this reason Barth would never allow our ethical responsibility to be dictated by criteria found in the "natural goodness of humanity." The divine command, in Barth's understanding, comes to us from God himself in our encounter with Jesus Christ: "Ethics as the doctrine of God's command, and therefore as the doctrine of the sanctification given to man by God, is grounded in the knowledge of Jesus

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 121. Importantly, at appropriate points in his reflections, Torrance also thought, with Barth, that *how* our knowledge came about was a miracle which could not be explained from the human side but only acknowledged as an act of the Holy Spirit and then understood: "As knowledge of God actually arises, however, we know that we cannot attribute it to ourselves and know that we can only say something of how it arises by referring beyond ourselves to God's acts upon us . . ." *God and Rationality*, 166.

Christ. It can be attained and developed only as the knowledge of Jesus Christ" (CD II/2, 777). Thus,

It [our sanctification in the form of the divine command that meets us in Christ] does not exist as one of the facts which we seek and can discover because it is we who are searched and discovered in our existence by it. It cannot be grounded because it is itself the basis which is our starting-point for all our demonstrations . . . It speaks always as the voice from above. That is why we wait in vain for it to speak in any voice from below . . . It is the voice of the Good Shepherd which speaks to us in this unique way . . . Jesus Christ is the completed fact of our sanctification, the fulfilled and realised purpose of God in God's judgment, just as He is also its presupposition and its execution (CD II/2, 777).

Importantly, T. F. Torrance also opposed the idea that Christian ethics could find its criteria in any sort of moral responsibility found in the moral law or our natural human goodness. In fact he argued that all of that was called into question by God's judgment and grace in Jesus Christ in a manner similar to Barth. Torrance argued that "From the point of view of ethics we see that human moral awareness tends to sever its connection with God . . . to establish itself on an autonomous or semi-autonomous basis."<sup>74</sup> Thus, in ethics people "relate themselves to God, consciously or subconsciously through duty to their neighbour — that is, they relate themselves to God indirectly through the medium of the universal [the idea of the moral law] . . . and do not relate themselves to God in particular."<sup>75</sup> But Torrance maintains that when this behavior is understood from the vantage point of faith, what we see here is that sin "is seizing the ethical imperative of God, making it an independent authority which is identified with human higher nature, so escaping God and deifying humanity — 'you will be like God!'"<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 112.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-113.



Sin, Torrance holds uses the law of God by falling back on observance of the law (perhaps the moral law) and thus yields formal obedience to the law without actually committing us to responsible action under God. It is in this situation that Jesus himself fulfilled the law for us and justified us, thus setting us "free not only from the bondage of external law but from [our] own self-imprisonment in the condemnation of [our] own conscience . . . he made our judgement of ourselves acquiesce in God's complete judgement."<sup>77</sup> Consequently, Torrance says the "act of grace in justification which breaks through to us apart from law is spoken of as 'revelation.'<sup>78</sup> It is the "revealing of a righteousness that could not be known otherwise. It is revelation that is grounded upon its own act as a breakthrough in sheer grace."<sup>79</sup> Indeed, and most importantly, this "new righteousness that forgives and justifies the sinner could not be inferred logically from the abstract order of law or ethics. From that point of view forgiveness is impossible — it is legally speaking immoral or amoral. And if it is a fact, it is a stupendous miracle."<sup>80</sup> This is what led Torrance to speak of what Kierkegaard called a "'teleological suspension' of ethics. Because it entails this suspension, justification or forgiveness is not something that is demonstrable from any ground in the moral order as such. It only can be acknowledged and believed as a real event that has in the amazing grace of God actually overtaken us."<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that Irving's argument that Torrance's "reconstructed natural theology as the rational structure of theological cognition, which is determined by God's self-revelation"<sup>82</sup> is thoroughly unconvincing first because Torrance himself insists, as we have seen, that "divine revelation conflicts sharply

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Irving, "The Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit," 225.

with the structure of our natural reason."<sup>83</sup> Second, when our rational structure does operate within faith and revelation by grace, it is what it is as part of the "new" creation as reconciled in the person and work of the one Mediator. Thus it is no longer natural theology in any sense since it is a theology shaped from beginning to end by grace alone and thus in faith alone. Even to say, as Torrance does, that it is natural to its object when that object is the God who justifies the ungodly, conflicts with Torrance's frequent insistence on the priority of grace. Nature is true to what it is as part of God's "new" creation only by grace and as Barth frequently insisted not at all by nature after the fall. So, when Irving writes that "Torrance's reconstruction of natural theology, therefore, takes its place within his understanding that God's self-revelation is a 'self-contained' *novum*,"<sup>84</sup> that remark opens the door to utter confusion. Why?

Because Torrance's own understanding of revelation to which Irving here refers is taken from CD I/1 and is defined by Torrance as follows: "it has its reality and truth wholly and in every respect within itself and so can be known only through itself and out of itself."<sup>85</sup> If revelation is a self-contained *novum*, then in Torrance's own understanding that rules out any natural knowledge of God just because he also claims there is no analogy in human experience on the basis of which we can know the truth since that comes to us only from the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit as a miracle. So, "when we encounter God in Jesus Christ, the truth comes to us in its own authority and self-sufficiency. It comes into our experience and into the midst of our knowledge as a *novum*, a new reality which we

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<sup>83</sup> See n. 64 above.

<sup>84</sup> Irving, "The Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit," 225.

<sup>85</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, citing CD I/1, 306.

cannot assimilate to what we already know.”<sup>86</sup> Indeed, in a manner reminiscent of Barth, Torrance insists that “we cannot deduce the fact of Christ from our knowledge of other facts” and it “is a new and unique fact without analogy anywhere in human experience or knowledge.”<sup>87</sup>

If that is in any sense true, then Torrance’s claim that the knowledge of God given in his self-revelation “is a mystery so utterly strange and so radically different that it cannot be apprehended and substantiated except out of itself”<sup>88</sup> rules out the idea advanced by McGrath and Irving that natural theology provides us with some reliable knowledge of God that then links up with God’s revelation to constitute theological science. It rules it out just because, as Torrance himself argues, “In point of fact it actually conflicts sharply with generally accepted beliefs and established ideas in human culture and initiates a seismic reconstruction not only of religious and intellectual belief but of the very foundations of human life and knowledge.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 1. This thinking of course rules out any attempt to fit what we know from revelation into a Christian world-view and then claim that such a view can be equated with the life of faith since the life of faith requires utter dependence on Christ from beginning to end. Thus Barth said “in faith we abandon . . . our standing upon ourselves (including all moral and religious, even Christian standing), . . . for the real standing in which we no longer stand on ourselves [including our faith as such] . . . but . . . on the ground of the truth of God . . . We have to believe; not to believe in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ” (CD II/1, 159). Torrance similarly claimed that our very act of faith was seen to rest “upon Christ and his faith, not upon my faith or my need for this or that answer, and hence the assurance was unshakable, because it was grounded in the solid faithfulness of Christ,” “Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life,” in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), 160. Contrast these views of faith with McGrath’s: “Faith is about the transformation of the human mind to see things in a certain manner, involving the acquisition of certain habits of thinking and perception,” *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 39. While Torrance and Barth insisted that faith meant having the mind of Christ and thus obedience to Christ alone in all things, here we are thrown back on our transformed views of reality and not exclusively upon Christ. That remains the inherent problem in the natural theology offered by both McGrath and Irving.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 19.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

In light of Barth's understanding of sin as an impossible possibility, I think it is appropriate to conclude this discussion by saying, using Barth's terminology, that natural theology is and remains an impossible possibility<sup>90</sup> employed by those who are either unwilling or unable to allow their thinking to be exclusively and completely reconstructed in subordination to God's grace and revelation and in faith. It is employed by those who do not allow Jesus Christ himself to be the first and final Word in our knowledge of God and in our ethical behavior. That is the choice required here. In light of this, I still think, with Elmer Colyer, that Torrance may well have regretted calling what really amounts to a theology of human nature functioning within revelation, a new natural theology, and probably should have called it a theology of nature.<sup>91</sup> Even that, however, cannot resolve all the difficulties, as seen above, since there is definitely a residue of the old natural theology which Torrance himself theoretically rejected at work in his thought that comes to expression in his analogy drawn from geometry. That analogy prohibits him from consistently noticing that in light of revelation we are all sinners who stand in utter need of grace in its identity with the Giver of grace in order to speak truly of God and of ourselves.

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<sup>90</sup> It is impossible because the creature can never really be the Creator. But it is possible because "a creature freed from the possibility of falling away would not really be living as a creature. It could only be a second God," (CD II/1, 503). Sin, Barth says, places us in opposition to God and to our own existence. This is why Barth held that "In face of the cross of Christ it is monstrous to describe the uniqueness of God as an object of 'natural' knowledge. In face of the cross of Christ we are bound to say that knowledge of the one and only God is gained only by the begetting of men anew by the Holy Spirit, an act which is always unmerited and incomprehensible, and consists in man's no longer living unto himself, but in the Word of God and in the knowledge of God which comes by faith in that Word" (CD II/1, 453).

<sup>91</sup> Elmer M. Colyer, *How To Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 192.