

THOMAS F. TORRANCE AND PERSONALISM:

Distinctions, Clarifications, and Paths Forward for Christian Anthropology

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Abstract: *This introductory essay intends to begin a process of distinguishing the anthropology of T. F. Torrance from historical forms and definitions of personalism. We will note Torrance's intellectual relationship with some who are referred to as personalists, especially John Macmurray and Michael Polanyi. Torrance's theological anthropology, grounded christologically, was aided by employing their scientific and philosophical insights. Their epistemological and ontological methods assisted in formulating appropriate theological commitments. Having shed light on Torrance's methodology, we are then able to see the way forward for a trinitarian, scientific, personalistic anthropology. His strategy allows for the development of anthropology deriving from the "Personalising Person," which then informs a dynamic and relational anthropology. Having established a christocentric, realist starting point, the way is open to follow the Spirit to develop a creative and robust service for the church and a revitalized form of human flourishing.*

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Introductory Parable

I came to the study of theology with an intense interest in understanding how God intends relationships to work. My question has been how to follow Torrance's intuitions to establish a proper starting point and sequencing that builds a proper theological anthropology. He consistently affirms that we must begin at the beginning with Jesus. If we start with the human, we launch a multitude of myths. If we start with the triune God, we enter God's dynamic context as the very source of personal life. This informs our tasks within the mission of God. This methodology enables us to explore the relativity of healthy relationships from within the field of God's personal life and not be seduced into the personalism that Torrance resisted. I will use a parable to distinguish the methodologies.

Imagine Thomas F. Torrance (we shall call him TF) on a quest, walking down the road to find the meaning of life in light of the God he has heard is revealed in Jesus. As he travels, he comes across a *carnival*. With a bit of indwelling of the setting, he apprehends that people come to this kind of event to find happiness for a day. They desire fulfilled human existence but are satisfied with what gratifies them in limited ways. The carnival grounds have many separated booths, meeting the perceived needs of human existence. Each booth markets to human sensibilities that spark interest for a moment. The fortune-teller discloses the future. The snake oil salesmen claim to cure ailments. The food vendors excite taste buds. The performers display an exceptional form of human morphology and capacities. Wonder abounds in the form of amusement — which means not thinking. Meaning is lost in the sensations of the moment.

TF discerns that the carnival is based on illusion and appearance. What is presented benefits the pockets of the providers. Vendors promise to meet human needs, yet they merely fulfill individuals with a temporary social and experiential enjoyment. Torrance finds this deeply troubling, lacking any power to provide long-term fulfillment for anyone. Magic, myth, and fascinating experiences are used to create a fantasy that lacks reality. Such is the way of idealists with big dreams and promises.

TF moves down the road and finds a *teaching, research hospital*.¹ Its immediate, tacit appearance is sterile and stark but scientific. He asks for a tour. This is granted. He finds himself discovering about humanity at another level. This institution is committed to human flourishing. The team of doctors and interns are specialists but have a working *interrelationship* so that they can care for the whole person. No one is a final authority; all are working together to learn and expand their knowledge. Each new patient becomes an opportunity to learn. A body of scientific understanding unifies the hospital, but intuitive attention is given to the particularity of each person. This creates frontiers for learning. While patients attempt to conceal causes for their condition with lies, the team works to discover the truth to bring healing. Their commitment is to engage reality as they find it, to explore the situational and systemic factors at play, and to develop strategies to save lives or restore health. A library of learning is consulted to investigate each current investigation. An attitude of open learning helps unravel the mysteries of undetected factors at play.

TF finds this an exciting enterprise. These doctors search for the truth of what impacts human well-being. They continually ask new questions and never claim to have all the answers. They work with reality as presented to them. The hospital works collaboratively, creating a body of insight to further skills in the broad field of health. TF leaves with a confident sense that these are his kind of people. They are not self-focused. They bring the good news of hope, employ scientific thinking to engage reality, and believe their work is about helping others. TF gladly indwells the moment.

In this short parable, we get a hint that the social sciences, which include personalism, begin in the wrong place, like a carnival. They bend to human sensibilities and desires. They blindly orient toward human longings, impairing the whole system. They are flooded with opinions and lack an appropriate conception of persons.

¹ I acknowledge that not all research hospitals have all the characteristics I describe. I portray this hospital in a manner that reflects Torrance's intuitions for the purpose of a clarifying contrast. However, the more holistic the hospital, the closer it will correspond to my depiction that represents Torrance's thinking.

Torrance's work aligns with the teaching, research hospital. His anthropology centers on Jesus to understand the reality of persons and their ultimate well-being. He builds on a tradition of restoration, applying ancient wisdom to current situations. By employing this methodology, he participates in the unifying mission of the triune God, working toward renewing human health by functioning within God's creative and restoring work through Jesus.

Torrance is passionate about the field of the personal. By aligning with the God-human Jesus, he seeks to establish what it means to aim for the revitalization of life in every dimension. Thus, Torrance's theology functions to bring renewal and restoration, facilitated by the Holy Spirit, who brings us home to the Father's embrace and the wholeness emerging as God's work of transformation. As we will see, Torrance resists forms of thought that abandon the triune God or attempt to fulfill human existence through human effort, mentally or physically. Torrance rejects treating persons merely as independent individuals, the greatest myth of the modern world.

What is the Problem?

Torrance resists impersonal modes of thought that think of persons as objects. That is a natural mistake, in that the study of personal relations easily turns to humans and observes. Trying to be "scientific" this means to see humans as objects. Further, Torrance does not want to employ any sort of subjective "lapse into 'personalism.'" That would be a bizarre contra-position to objectivism, falling into subjectivism. Both operate within the same radical dualism between subject and object."² Torrance rejects the "bizarre, subjective option" as a default to individual experience. Personalism, in all its forms, exhibits this Achilles' heel. Torrance asserts that we must learn to distinguish the *real* from the *subjective* otherwise "a gross personalism easily takes over in which people obtrude themselves into the place of God, making their own relations with God constitute the actual content of

² Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 133.

theological knowledge.”³ Thus, theology morphs into an illusory form of anthropology. That is his main complaint against personalism.

Personalism is, in fact, a particular form of natural theology. This understanding builds on human observations and assessments of humans in their natural habitat then projects onto God. This is a selective endeavor based on the interests of the observer. Different personalist theorists will select different elements of human existence, particularly oriented toward the world of *thinking* (idealism) or the *material* world (physicalism, scientism, materialism). Torrance identifies both as forms of dualism that fracture our understanding of reality.

We may affirm the value of human ideals and dreams, but when those elements *replace* reality, they follow the idealism of Plato, diminishing the material and elevating abstract generalities. Personalists ardently support ideals for human existence. These ideals range from the singularity of an empowered, autonomous individual and extend to the multiplicity of utopian societies with communitarian practices. Personalism has multiple booths at the carnival.

Similarly, attending to human physical experience is valuable. But again, when the physical becomes the true actuality, we lose insight gained from the humanities. When all is reduced to physics and chemistry, Valentine’s Day loses all relational value, as does the Eucharist. Meaning becomes extinct as naturalistic science narrowly defines truth devoid of personal or divine insight.

Every form of anthropology in the modern university could be categorized as a form of personalism, some naturalistic (sciences) and some constructivist (humanities). Each engages elements of humanity, designated from the selective power of researchers who demarcate their field as physical, cultural, social, linguistic, or archeological anthropology. Each contributes knowledge but also

³ Thomas F. Torrance, “The Distinctive Character of the Reformed Tradition,” in *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society, and Family*, ed. Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Speidell (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1990), 5. See also Torrance, *Theological Science* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), xiv, “The problem of modern theology ... is when the element of personal relation to God is not controlled by critical testing on the analogy of faith, it degenerates into a gross personalism in which we obtrude ourselves in the place of God, making our relations with God the sole content of theological knowledge.”

splinters our understanding of persons. They lack a holistic vision, an agreed starting point, and an Einsteinian sense of relativity.

Both the idealist and the materialist miss the place of the Creator God, known in Jesus, as their starting point. Their misstep leads to compartmentalizing with exclusivity in their study that becomes prejudicial. The naturalist rejects the discussion of meaning. The constructionist sees all reality as a construct of the human mind. Additionally, theological anthropology is dismissed as irrelevant or lacking a proper object. God is not seen as properly part of the natural world or a reasonable idea. But there is nothing more pertinent to the study by humans than to fully understand the science of the personal, acknowledging God's involvement in the natural world and informing human rationality. According to Torrance, neither the natural sciences nor the social sciences (including personalism) have succeeded in establishing a proper unified field of the personal.

Torrance was overtly committed to the study of the personal. This is demonstrated by Gary Deddo's essay "The Importance of the Personal in the Onto-relational Theology of Thomas F. Torrance."⁴ Theological science begins with One God in three Persons, who creates and sustains his creation. Scientific theological thinking is made possible when God engages his creation as one of his creatures. Through him, God is known, as well as an understanding of his creatures. Jesus exegetes for us the original personal being of God, as well as the intention of God for his creatures. This is a proper starting point for anthropology. When missed, it leads to a carnival of attempts that entertain, amuse, idealize, or anesthetize humans. Torrance exercises a scientific, research approach to understand persons by beginning at the beginning with the personal God who creates them.

Torrance follows an Einsteinian/Polanyian scientific method. He rejects any form of scientism that excludes the personal, or is wholly naturalistic. He rejects personalism for engaging persons as a generalized class of individuals who relate, rather than attend to the particularity of persons constituted in relation. For Torrance, the object of study informs the appropriate method for study, in this case,

⁴ Gary Deddo, "The Importance of the Personal in the Onto-relational Theology of Thomas F. Torrance," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance*, ed. Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 143–60.

persons-in-relation. Persons, including God, must be studied in revelation, in relation, and response. Scientism operates in a manner akin to projection (as rejected in psychology), reading the observer's sensibilities onto the other. Scientism craftily creates a form of mythology, reflecting human interpretations of self and world into a theoretical system that is not true science and avoids proper contexts and methods for study.

Personalism caricatures persons when it reads onto human nature "what makes sense to human experience." As a stark alternative, I hope to reserve the term *personalistic*. This term will refer to an approach utilizing forms of thought that do not project but rather discover what is disclosed, utilizing scientific investigation specifically applied to persons. This occurs by appropriately engaging the unique nature of each person, including God. A personalistic mode allows learning in light of changing dynamics with persons in their contexts rather than working with established generalized truths.

Distinguishing between *scientific* and *scientism* clarifies a proper starting point and method in a manner that we may now use to distinguish *personalistic* and *personalism*. Scientific and personalistic are objectively informed by the object of study, where scientism and personalism default to subjective human agendas read onto the object.

In a carnival world of *personalism*, everyone is looking for their own sense of happiness or fulfillment, which may include other humans. In a *personalistic* world, we are searching for health, faithfulness to the truth, and responding to one another for the good of the whole.

What is Personalism?

Torrance did not give us his definition of personalism. However, he hinted at its character when he connected it to the social sciences in general. We are looking at personalism in particular but will note similar features in existentialism, humanism, phenomenology, sociology, and other human-centered explorations. These philosophies affiliate with old paradigms indebted to the "cause and effect world" before Einstein articulated relativity.

Within personalism, there is a broad spectrum, maybe better described as *personalisms*.⁵ In order to contrast with Torrance, we will highlight some common values of personalism.⁶

All forms of personalism focus on the human. This is central to personalism.⁷ Humans are the object and starting point of study. Torrance would reject this proposal. It lacks concrete engagement with real humanity as found in Jesus. Personalism generalizes human experience to the point that it defaults to abstract ideas of humanity. When it does affirm that humans are relational, it further defaults to simplifications that become abstractions that are not particular or actually scientific. Concepts like love, freedom, and justice are subjectively conceived and vague in character. This cannot inform a theological anthropology. It misses God's concrete form of humanity in Jesus.

Personalists will generally agree that human persons are distinct from other animals, to be treated with dignity beyond material or biological natures. They would not affirm that humans are merely objects or animals.⁸ They affirm Buber's I-It distinction, clarifying that a person ought not to be reduced to an It or considered as anything but a personal other, like Buber's I-Thou. For most personalists, God is not known personally in his own self-giving. God, like humans, is construed through human perceptions that miss God's unique being. Many personalists do hold to a

⁵ T. D. Williams and J. O. Bengtsson, "Personalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (revised May 11, 2018), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/personalism>. See also the helpful discussion in Juan Manuel Burgos, *An Introduction to Personalism* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2012).

⁶ Jonas Norgaard Mortensen, *The Common Good: An Introduction to Personalism* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2017), 22. Burrows suggest ten traits of personalism: 1) centrality of persons; 2) thoroughly idealistic; 3) theistic; 4) creationist; 5) freedomistic; 6) radically empirical; 7) coherence as criterion of truth; 8) synoptic-analytic method; 9) activist and dualistic epistemology; and 10) reality is through and through social and relational, 35.

⁷ Christian Smith, *What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 102.

⁸ Williams and Bengtsson, "Personalism," 11, 20.

Christian theology, but they do not start with Jesus, the focal point of the scientific theology of Torrance. They begin with a set of human ideals.⁹

Personalism focuses on human engagement with other persons. Freedom means a fulfilled form of engagement. This freedom is pursued to ensure autonomy for the self and for the community of humanity at large. All humans experience themselves, not as an object, but as a subject which, from this internal sense of self, concludes that others are available for a form of personal connection. But for Torrance, this misses the basis on which freedom and fulfillment are made possible. He believes humans default to a natural desire for freedom as a form of self-interest and expression. However, Jesus' gift of freedom begins in a restored relation with the triune God. Humans are invited to participate with God, whose love forms the basis of human freedom. Torrance questions the intentions and values of humans left to their own ends in the pursuit of "freedom." Quite contrary to the norm, Torrance's understanding of Christian freedom involves participation and faith, dying to self and living in Christ.

Human dignity is granted to all within personalism. This affirmation is a given without explanation. From this belief comes the outworking of human rights and responsibilities, especially the individual rights that characterize western thought. These ideas lack a point of reference from which to clarify the meaning of human dignity. The field is left wide open to construct its meaning in a world rife with homelessness, prejudice, and oppressive systems. While dignity grants value, it still leaves the judgment to the influencers at the top to do the granting. For Torrance, we must affirm the value and dignity of all humans created in God's image as sons and daughters.

Self-determination is a personal right and defining characteristic of persons. For many personalists, this empowerment connects to being a thinker who can act morally. It assumes empowered people will act morally if not oppressed and

⁹ This is Torrance's concern with John Zizioulas. See Jason Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Orthodox-Reformed Dialog* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 48 fn.45, also Radcliff states, "Torrance seems to think he [Zizioulas] is more of an existentializing dialectician than a theologian." Additionally, 104 fn.20, "Torrance accuses Zizioulas of an 'existentialising interpretation of the Greek Fathers.'" For Torrance, Zizioulas' relational thinking appears to be a human lens supplanting proper science.

marginalized. This furthers a vision of natural goodness in the human. Torrance assumes otherwise. Persons naturally act blindly or selfishly. Only the call to love others, from a renewed nature in Christ, can lead to a masterful sense of fulfilled personhood.

Relationality is based on a life of nurtured connection and may include independence, but also values interpersonal fulfillment. Being with others, especially friends, is a mark of the character of participation in what may be called communion.¹⁰ The social nature of humans, which undergirds the social sciences, all are intermingled with personalism and its many cousins. Communication is a key feature of the give and take of this social intercourse, especially in portraying a human ideal of love. But should each person be allowed to do what is right in their own eyes? Personalism is vulnerable to this. Torrance believes we need the reality granted in Jesus to address all these issues for real connection and fulfillment.

A Brief History of Personalism

Personalism may be seen to arise with ancient authors such as Aristotle, Athanasius, and Gregory the Great. There are clear signs of personalism in Thomas Aquinas, rooting the natural theology of *analogia entis* upon which Catholic personalists build. There is a long list of philosophers who point toward what became personalism in the 20th century as the context of Torrance's work.¹¹

While the term *person* may be traced back to Greek drama, where the actor wore a mask, an illusion of being another human, this was not to be the path for the early church. There, the one God was proposed to exist in three persons. Torrance appeals to this personal unity of God, rejecting the masks as modalism.

One might think that the nature of person as mask was only an ancient concept, but the quest for new identities, roles, and public personas reveals this "playing a part" continues in our times. The carnival of our era is filled with the masquerades of success, power, status, or saving face in the public eye. Torrance contended for a theologically constructed understanding of the person, drawing

¹⁰ Williams and Bengtsson, "Personalism," 16, 20.

¹¹ Smith, *What is a Person?* 99–100, fn.15.

from Christology and the nature of the Trinity. A proper theological anthropology must begin with the Creator and Redeemer of human existence, made visible in Jesus Christ.

In Torrance's mind, ancient philosophers like Boethius moved the discussion on personhood in a fracturing direction. The idea that a person exists with a "rational nature of an individual substance" is clearly based on human intuitions. It defaults to rational nature, categorizes a particular substance, and individualizes in abstraction outside the network of relations. These factors are dissimilar to Torrance's theological view of the person.

The first use of the word *personalism* is attributed to Schleiermacher in 1799.¹² Careful attentiveness to his theology is instructive as a contrast with Torrance. Schleiermacher begins with the human subject, with a warm pietistic religiosity of the self, who experiences feelings of dependence on God. God is personally present as one constructed by the intuitions of the self. As James B. Torrance said, "Schleiermacher's concern is not to say nothing about God; but to say nothing about him which does not relate to us."¹³ Where Schleiermacher defaults to a kind carnival of subjective feelings in his phenomenological approach, Torrance pursued an objective basis for research. Torrance's understanding of personal being utilized a theological science appropriately attending to the self-revealing of God. Following Barth, he engaged in a personalistic study of Christ, grasped by the reality of this one who has given himself to us.

Since the Enlightenment, dehumanizing forces have been at work. This trend is manifested in revolutions, politics, industry, philosophy, and science. While claiming to fight for "humanity," they rush in individualistic directions. This results in each human looking out for their self-interest, shedding values of the past, including religion and especially Christianity. The inward turn to self-interest, and the elevation of the worth of the individual with self-determination, affirms the singular human. At the same time, it disengages us as related persons. We become isolated individuals. In this vein, Torrance resists figures such as Descartes, Kant,

¹² Williams and Bengtsson, "Personalism," 3, 20.

¹³ Bruce Ritchie, *T. F. Torrance in Recollection and Reappraisal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2021), 47.

Hegel, and others whose thinking disconnected humanity from God and one another.

Torrance investigates the loss of a true understanding of personhood, noting the fracturing assumptions that undergird personalism. He contends that all forms of dualism, atomism, and rationalistic thinking influence theories on the nature of persons, both divine and human. Torrance struggles for a corrective through theological thinking. For Torrance, all paths to human dignity and community outside Jesus are doomed to failure, and he has a circus tent full of examples.

A primary problem that led to the development of personalism was the emergence of a depersonalized society. Life in community was replaced by ideologies, economic systems, and institutions.¹⁴ Mechanisms quickly developed that disrupted personal connection and maximized systemic control. Personalists arose to fight back.

Some forms of personalism arose in the twentieth century, concerned with inter-relations and solidarity in life together. The primary advocates formed circles identified as European Personalism and American Personalism.¹⁵

The European form, led by Emmanuel Mounier, was concerned to move from the centralized self to a position of being open to the other in a relationship, fulfilled for the good of all involved. These ideas, as well as the influence of Kierkegaard, brought value to the particular person. This led others to pursue the meaning of persons and their fulfillment in relationally affirming ways. Many contended for meaningful, personal existence as a minority voice, a worthy cause to support in a world of categorizations.

¹⁴ Mortensen, , *The Common Good*, 26.

¹⁵Andrew Grosso, *Personal Being: Polanyi, Ontology, and Christian Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 6 acknowledges a "Boston personalism," a "French personalism," a "Jewish personalism," an "Anglo-American personalism," and a "Roman Catholic personalism." In addition, one could include an "Eastern Orthodox personalism" and many forms of "Theological personalisms." Rufus Burrow, *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice, 1999), 34 suggests twelve types of personalism.

American personalism found its hub at Boston University, especially represented by Borden Parker Bowne.¹⁶ This form was strongly affirmed as a “personal idealism.” Starting with the absolute value of the person, American personalists pursued the quest for a moral — and even theological life — to create a better world for the real, concrete individual. Martin Luther King, Jr., was trained in this tradition and exemplifies concern for persons in action. Torrance does not specifically confront the Boston School. Its basis appeared theological, but it was more invested in the fulfillment of the human personality with unique worth and dignity. For Torrance, it misses a valid affirmation of persons as grounded in relation to the triune God.

One could argue that all forms of the social sciences, psychology, and therapy exhibit a form of personalism. They each begin with the human, addressing their proper function and dysfunctions. They establish general norms of human thinking, feeling, and behavior, but lack a common consensus as to what constitutes a person.

The history of the study of humanity is strewn with images of mechanism (human as machine), progressing to the naturalism (human as animal), and moving toward the technological (human as computer), all trying to develop a “scientific” character. Even Murray Bowen’s family system thinking builds on an evolutionary model, developed in natural history and applied to family systems.¹⁷ For Torrance, these kinds of modern studies reflect Newtonian and Darwinian paradigms. Thus, the humanities, and personalism in particular, got caught in old dualistic, fractured patterns of thinking.

Modern schools of thought dealing with persons lack clarity to determine a proper object of study, an appropriate, stratified method, a contingent history, and a holistic, scientific approach to form rational communities of inquirers.

¹⁶ Williams and Bengtsson, “Personalism,” 8, 20.

¹⁷ Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory* (New York, NY: Norton, 1988).

How Does T. F. Torrance Correct the Problem?

Torrance and a Christocentric Anthropology of Persons

Science pursues reality as given. Reality discloses its nature to honest inquirers. For Torrance, this requires beginning with the personal reality of the triune God as Creator.

The Being or “I am” (οὐσία or Ἐγὼ εἰμι) of the Lord God *is* the ultimate divine Source of all his personal and personalising activity through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit, God himself acting personally in the Lord Jesus and God himself acting personally in the Lord the Spirit.¹⁸

Reality, as the givenness of God and his creation, is divinely ordered and includes human persons. The personal God providentially orders everything. Thus, a true science of persons must begin with the triune God. In the Bible, God is revealed as the original “I” who addresses humanity as “thou.” For Torrance, this relation of Creator to the created provides the context for meaningful study of human persons. When the Creator took on creaturely form, God privileged us to know him as a personal God, revealing who he is that we might know who we are.

Torrance builds his theological anthropology on the person of Jesus Christ. He is the one, true, unfallen human who is firstly God, and in the incarnation, becomes human. Torrance does not begin with any self-understanding of humans, or an ideal vision of humans and humanity. For Torrance, a proper personalistic understanding must begin with the being of the One God in three persons and the nature of their relation with their creature.

Jesus as the Personalizing Person

Jesus is the human revelation of the personal, triune God. He comes to restore what was lost — personal relatedness. Jesus himself is the one who defines the

¹⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 121.

human as person, and this excludes any starting point in personalism.¹⁹ He comes as the humanizing human, restoring our true humanity as children of God. He is also the personalizing person who reconstitutes us from our alienation into an intimacy that restores what was lost.²⁰

Jesus is uniquely a human person, as well as one of the three persons of the Trinity. He brings the personal life of God to us and brings us to share in the personal life of God. We become new creations in restored relation to him. Since personal relationships establish who we are, he is the one who can and has established a relationship of knowing and being known. This restores our true identity, knowing ourselves as beloved children of God. In this way, Jesus is the personalizing person.²¹ Without him, we are less than what human persons were created to be. In relation with him, we are his new creations. Personalism starts with humans in their distinctness, not their relatedness, and thus deals with fragmented specimens of humanity living in a diminished state. Some forms of personalism hold a theory of God, but do not work from this specific, scientific starting point.

The Spirit is active in the dynamic of becoming personal, human beings:

Through the Freedom of his Spirit the Triune Creator is present to us in such an immanent way as to realise in our human existence the creative, reconciling and personalising power of the Word and Son of God incarnate in Christ Jesus the Light of the world, so that in our creaturely rationality enlightened by him we may *reflect by grace* but in an appropriately differentiated way, something of the uncreated

¹⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith* (London: James Clark, 1959), xxxii. "It is Christ clothed with His Gospel who is the Truth, for this is unique Truth in which Christ's Person and His Message are inseparably one. It is this double character of Christian Truth which distinguishes it from all other truth. It is a Person, but in that it is also a message it is sharply distinguished from all personalism."

²⁰ Torrance, *Christian Doctrine*, 88, "God interacts personally and intelligibly with us and communicates himself to us in such a personalising way or person-constituting way that he establishes relations of intimate reciprocity between us and himself, within which our knowing of God becomes interlocked with God's knowing of himself."

²¹ Torrance, *Christian Doctrine*, 161.

Rationality of God.²²

The Spirit actualizes the mission of God into our particular lives, awakening us to *whose* we are, as we cry out, “Abba.”

The Spirit facilitates our lives in connection:

The personalising, incorporating activity of the Spirit creates, not only reciprocity between Christ and ourselves, but a community of reciprocity among ourselves, which through the Spirit is rooted in and reflects the trinitarian relations in God himself. It is thus that the Church comes into being and is constantly maintained in its union with Christ as his Body.²³

Thus, the personalizing person of Jesus is mediated to us by the personalizing of the Spirit who incorporates us into the personalizing life of the Church. We are not subsumed into the body of Christ; we are adopted members of the whole, valued for our particularity in the web of relations. Contrast this with the individuality of personalism. It becomes deflated, absent of the Holy Spirit who breathes life into the whole body and sustains each related part, and focuses on the spirit of the human in idealized forms. For Torrance, we exist as personalized persons, rooted in and sustained by the personalizing God, who has established the personal relatedness of our humanity.

What Does Onto-relational Mean for Theological Anthropology?

We cannot use the term *person* as though it had any general content that could refer to God and humans alike. Humans have bodies as persons. The Father and Spirit do not. Person, when referring to God, must be used distinctly and inclusively of the Father, Son, and Spirit. These three exist in a bond of interrelatedness; each

²² Torrance, *Christian Doctrine*, 220.

²³ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, Second Edition (London: T&T Clark: 2016), 250–251.

cannot exist without the other in a mutually indwelling manner.²⁴ They are not separate beings who come together as one. They have their very being, their ontology, in their essential relatedness.

As humans, we naturally observe our bodies and think we are separable. However, we too exist as *persons* in our relatedness. Both God and derivatively humans, exist through being in relation. Torrance refers to this as *onto-relational being*. Referring to humans as God's creatures, we may speak of a similarity by analogy — remembering that divine being precedes and creates the human form. We cannot know the personal nature of God by looking at any human creature.²⁵

Trinitarian, Scientific, Personalistic Anthropology

To form an anthropology, one must begin with God and eventually think about humanity. Personalists sample from human existence. For Torrance, an adequate anthropology must begin with the only perfect human, Jesus Christ. In exploring who Jesus is, we acknowledge the personal context that establishes his identity. He is the Son of the Father, as revealed within the trinitarian life. There is nothing beyond or behind this context. We must think in a *trinitarian* manner for our primary interpretive context.

Thinking *scientifically*, we turn to discover reality in correspondence to God's personal being within a divine and contingent order. Scientifically means that the nature of the object of our investigation must be known in a manner appropriate for our object of interest. Thus, we must develop our thoughts attending to what is revealed by the personal God in order to understand the nature of personal existence.

The Christian understanding of the person in relation to the personalising activity of the Holy Trinity is then developed, and an account is offered of its relevance for the openness of our thought to

²⁴ This refers to the important concept of *perichoresis*, depicting the unity and particularity within God's personal being. *Christian Doctrine*, 102. The term appears 43 times in this book as a reflection of its value in conceptualizing personal relatedness or onto-relational being as it originates in God.

²⁵ Torrance, *Christian Doctrine*, 160.

the inherent intelligibility of the universe and for a transcending of the critical splits within the personal and social existence of modern life.²⁶

We must employ an open exploratory model to investigate the particulars of divine and human existence, understood in a holistic manner. We must utilize methodology appropriate to persons in their onto-relations. In being scientific, we must engage those to be known in a self-disclosing manner, and not allow our projections to inform our conclusions from *a priori* experiences and ideas, as is natural to personalism. We must be unfailingly scientific in discovering the nature of the personal.

To say Torrance is *personalistic* affirms that, within his scientific approach, he is openly informed by the other *as a person* and not as an object. Accordingly, *personalistic* as I am using it is narrowed to a specific, concrete, personal other. He begins with the most original and concrete other in Jesus.

Torrance is personalistic in the same way that he is scientific; he uses the tools of the trade, but allows the object of investigation (the triune God and his creature) to be known objectively. In that his object is personal, self-revealing, and speaks, he is personalistic in a Christian sense. With Torrance, the Church is invited to apprehend God through Jesus as a scientific community of mutually involved persons. When preparing to form a theological *anthropology*, our minds must be formatted by this self-revealing God. We come to know the true image of what a human is created to be, employing a trinitarian, scientific, personalistic anthropology beginning with Jesus as the revelation of the Trinity and humanity as God's beloved creatures.

How does Torrance Utilize Selected Personalists?

Torrance engaged several thinkers in his work to clarify the field of the personal. These contributed key components to help him develop personalistic thought, not collapsing into complete personalism. We will note two, Michael Polanyi on epistemology and John Macmurray on ontology.

²⁶ Torrance, *Reality*, xv–xvi.

Polanyi

Michael Polanyi is referred to as a personalist²⁷ but has a questionable ontology of the person.²⁸ For Torrance, his contribution was in a personal epistemology, advocating that all knowledge is personal; it is the knowledge of persons. Scientific knowledge cannot be impersonally objective. A scientist intuitively indwells reality to discover the known as a knower. One is attentive and open to discover what is there and ought not to limit knowledge within the matrix of what is already known.

This scientist is positioned to begin *as* a human, but not necessarily for study *of* the human. For Torrance, Polanyi opened the visionary model of indwelling or investigating. Torrance recognized that personal knowledge could engage the personal God given in Jesus without collapsing into human generalizations or conclusions. Polanyi opened the door to stand before the eternal God but did not provide the tools to hear God's voice. But Torrance, as a theological scientist, could now stand with rational convictions regarding the field of the personal as properly included in reality. It is not required to default to the material, objective world in an impersonal manner, as had been the tradition of science.

Torrance used Michael Polanyi's scientific method because Polanyi overcame narrow, impersonal science and made room for persons to investigate as persons. Hence *Personal Knowledge* is about *how humans know* the world they indwell.²⁹ "The reality of human personhood was for Polanyi not only the motif by which he organized his understanding of knowledge, but also the means by which he began his inquiry into questions of language and reality."³⁰

Torrance adopted Polanyi's recognition of the role of the person in the knowing process into theological science. But when inquiring into personal reality, Torrance departed from Polanyi. Torrance appreciated and applied much of the epistemology of Polanyi, but he did not follow him into his ontology of the personal,

²⁷ Smith, *What is a Person?* 99.

²⁸ Grosso, *Personal Being*, 94–95.

²⁹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

³⁰ Grosso, *Personal Being*, 29.

which Torrance assessed as beginning with human experience.³¹ Torrance begins with God. Polanyi's pursuit continued as a study of the natural world, and he did not develop an ontology of personhood. Polanyi envisioned communities of "conviviality," acknowledging the importance of humans in a web of relationships.³² However, for Polanyi, persons remained "responsible centers of commitment joined together in patterns of mutual influence."³³ Polanyi's concluding statement to *Personal Knowledge* gives more than hints:

We may envisage then a cosmic field which called forth all these centres by offering them a short-lived, limited, hazardous opportunity for making some progress of their own toward an unthinkable consummation. And that is also, I believe, how a Christian is placed when worshipping God.³⁴

Torrance found in Polanyi a scientist who developed and employed tools to be scientific and personally engaged with the whole of reality without dualistic lenses. Polanyi could stand before God, but not take us to know God. Fortunately, Polanyi did not default to all the problems of personalism. Analogically, in our parable, he was a member of the research faculty in personal scientific epistemology. He opened the doors to research in a manner appropriate to the study of persons as a personal enquirer.

³¹ Torrance, *Reality*, 133–134. "All this does not of course imply some sort of lapse into 'personalism,' for that would be little more than a bizarre contra-position to objectivism, operating within the same radical dualism between subject and object. At this point I am unwilling to follow Michael Polanyi, at least in certain peripheral passages of his works, in taking over as much as he does from existentialist and phenomenological thinkers, for they are still tied up with the radical disjunctions which we have had to reject in pure science, and which Christian theology rejects in its doctrines of creation and incarnation."

³² Grosso, *Personal Being*, 34.

³³ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁴ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 405.

Macmurray

John Macmurray was a personalist but with distinctive features. He is the exemplar for a hopeful contemporary personalism.³⁵ Macmurray worked from God to the human, instructed by Jesus Christ as the clue to history.³⁶ He worked from the whole to parts in a manner that overcame dualisms.³⁷ He proposed the form of the personal as a field, much like Einstein's theory, and explored the dynamics of personal development within it.³⁸ He rejected the idealism of Descartes and Kant, the romanticism of Rousseau, the theories of Freud, the will to power of Nietzsche, and the naturalistic explanations of Darwin. He set out to disillusion humanity from these destructive, human-centered, dualistic, egocentric ways of thinking.³⁹

T. F. Torrance said of him, "One other great thinker in our time can be compared to him in this respect [the integration of the natural and social sciences], Michael Polanyi."⁴⁰ Macmurray made great contributions to Torrance's personalistic thought on the ontology of the person and the field of the personal.⁴¹ By beginning with humans as agents acting in the world who then reflect, he established a holistic sense of reality. This informs a reflective knowledge as we engage reality and think with reference to it. Thus begins a personal mode of being, nurtured in our existence from the time we are born. We exist and grow as persons in relation. We flourish when engaged in friendship and fail when fear creates resistance in our relationships. Macmurray formed a relational ontology of personal being. This

³⁵ J. H. Walgrave, "Incarnation and Atonement," in *The Incarnation*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981), 155 fn.14. "The best philosophical elaboration of that kind of personalism (an ambiguous word) has however been given by John Macmurray in his Gifford Lectures, *The Form of the Personal*, 2 vols., London, 1957 and 1961." This echoes in Torrance's Honor's List letter, where he speaks of Macmurray's "great Gifford Lectures." John Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography* (Edinburgh: Floris, 2002), 423

³⁶ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History* (New York: Harper, 1939).

³⁷ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber, 1995).

³⁸ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber, 1995).

³⁹ John Macmurray, *The Search for Reality in Religion* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965)

⁴⁰ Costello, *John Macmurray*, 423.

⁴¹ Marty Folsom, "John Macmurray's influence on Thomas F. Torrance," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71 (2018): 339–58.

affects every aspect of human acting, thinking, relating and all forms of human society. In our parable, Macmurray was a member of the research faculty, working on the ontology of the personal.

Paths for Realigning Theological Thinking for Therapeutic Ends

Torrance builds his theology on the interrelations within God's being. This aspect of God's life is called *perichoresis*, a term used to reveal God's eternal, internal relations, or God's onto-relations. Torrance expands this concept, saying,

While these onto-relations apply to our understanding of the Triunity of God in a unique and transcendent way, they also apply in quite another way on the creaturely level to the interrelations of human persons whom God has created for communion with himself, and which in their created way reflect the uncreated relations within himself.⁴²

For Torrance, Jesus Christ singularly informs theological anthropology. He is not merely a perfect example; he sets the paradigm of thinking about humans being fulfilled in relation to the triune God and other humans. Jesus still lives in these relationships. Jesus' incarnation, atonement, resurrection, ascension, and all his ways of relating to God and humanity provide the context within which we may discuss both human failures and fulfillment. Jesus provides the ground of our grammar, informing our research and teaching. He embodies how humans are to function within God's purposes. For human freedom and flourishing to occur, we cannot merely observe Jesus; we must participate in his life. Personalists miss this point. The impact includes misunderstandings of who we are, how we are to exist, and the aim of human life.

Those personalists who are idealists make Jesus a *theorist* for human fulfillment. Jesus is seen as the original designer with the *idea* of human wholeness. This Jesus remains distant, relating to us through ideas. We are left to interpret what his intentions may be. This kind of personalist will see the theories of Jesus through a human perception of human needs. Consequently, "Jesus' theory" will

⁴² Torrance, "Distinctive Character," 9.

arise from human sensibilities, not Jesus. These show up in the theories of communism, socialism, individualism, spirituality, and other systems of human ideals. Jesus is personally absent, located somewhere else in a theoretically distant, divine place. From this view, what does the human think they need? Better thinking, reprogramming for a better theory to make their life work. At the carnival, there are many booths to promote these grand *ideas*.

Other more pragmatic personalists make Jesus into a *therapist*. Jesus is one who models and provides practical tools in managing our physical existence. Love and forgiveness become *techniques* we can use to meet human needs and transform human dysfunction. When things get really bad, Jesus is called in to provide practical advice to fix an observable problem. Once again, humans have set the agenda for the problematic issues. The personalist, in this case, is one who sees persons through a lens of cause and effect, part of a machine that needs fixing. Healing persons is achieved through learning skills to equip each person to do their part. Jesus coaches each person with their part, hoping that will heal the whole. Jesus becomes a temporary participant in the relationship. He fixes breakdowns, and then he leaves until the next visit. People look forward to the carnival each year to visit his booth to learn new *techniques*.

Finally, a trinitarian, scientific personalistic theologian brings the possibility that Jesus, with the Father and Spirit, joins us to our true *family*. This is *God's family*, and we need to grow in our relationship with this personal God and one another. They have been present and active all along. In our research, we find that Jesus is a daily companion, sharing life with the Father and Spirit, into which we are invited.

It is likely that we will discover we have had a trinity deficit disorder.⁴³ We have been doing life at a distance from the Trinity or with fragmented relationships. Walking with Jesus in the Spirit, we find this central relation to the Trinity impacts our loving and cooperating. A proper orientation and participation facilitates loving, active ways of being together as the family of the Father.

⁴³ Marty Folsom, *Face to Face: Volume 3: Sharing God's Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016), 228–234.

As a family, we are friends. We do not expect anything other than what we mutually promise in love, even as we are being loved. When we fail, we ask forgiveness and seek restoration as we are being restored. Seeing each other as beloved persons, we live each day in ways appropriate to our daily settings. Participation is personalistic. We daily return to the ground and grammar of personal being. This is Jesus, who personalizes us by being personally part of our daily lives. Life together becomes a discovery process as we share in mutual conversation, activities, and serving each other. This is a life of research and teaching conducted within the personal presence of Jesus' mediating work.⁴⁴ Our wholeness is directly related to participation in the *family of God*.

Conclusion

Thomas F. Torrance is a trinitarian, scientific, personalistic, theologian. He points the way toward a deeper understanding of persons, a theological anthropology. His work informs theological research to facilitate the restoration of persons without the pitfalls of personalism. He provides an anthropology grounded in Jesus, creating the context for a research hospital committed to the restoration of humans as the outworking of this trinitarian, scientific, personalistic theology. "Therapeutic" work cannot begin with specific or generalized humanity but must carefully function within the paracletic ministry of Jesus and the Spirit to redeem and restore relations, not engaging the individual as in a psychological model.

With the Trinity as our family of origin, from which all human relating is derived, we have a possible context for a *trinitarian family systems therapy*. That pursuit might work out the function and dysfunction of humans in relation to God and other humans.⁴⁵ This must be based on God's intentions and not on human ideals or pragmatics.

Acknowledging the Trinity's faithful, covenanted way of life with humanity, we have a basis for exploring healthy attachment with God. In seeking God's

⁴⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992).

⁴⁵ Folsom, *Face to Face: Volume 3*, see discussion in Chapter 9, "Puzzle Pieces: Trinitarian Theology and Family Systems Therapy," 307–64.

reconciliation, we follow how God has overcome our alienated life in the flesh. This acting in faith seeks an understanding through a theological *attachment therapy*. We learn to pay attention to our detachment from God and each other. Then, following Torrance's scientific thought with caution, we may consider therapeutic concepts. These must exhibit a mentality that serves God and all those God loves, in modes that resonate with God's heart for healing humanity.

Having established the faithfulness of God in creating and sustaining our humanity, we are able to assess what happens when humans miss the call to honest participation in God's communion. These take the form of many *addictions*, the idols we create when missing God's will for a shared life. The divine, relational cure requires dying to self and living in Christ. Human resistance reveals our human, dysfunctional diseases. We may now understand addictions as symptoms of the loss of a true connection with God and other human beings.⁴⁶ Renewal comes as we are restored in relation to the one who created us, not through programs designed to deal with symptoms. The goal is to no longer follow the lies, the self-medication, or the idols that falsely replace fidelity in response to the love of God at work in our lives. Anthropology is not a study of static humanity; it includes the renewal of our humanity according to the image of the one who made us (Colossians 3:10). The renewal of the mind, the restoration of the heart, and the call to love our neighbor are all valid therapeutic pursuits within this goal of aligning with and participating in God's mission in the world.

Torrance creates a theological paradigm that, when properly maintained, provides the basis for a research hospital. He does not abandon humans to every carnival or carnal mode of self-care.

The problems within personalism are not to be denied. However, the contributions of the social sciences may need to be recontextualized within the context of this personalistic research paradigm, as Torrance believed was possible. This begins by dealing with the infectious nature of wrongly established thinking about God and the human. We need critical realism to return to reality. This begins by acknowledging that God exists in a relationship and does everything for the

⁴⁶ Marty Folsom, *Face to Face: Volume 1 Missing Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), chapters 6–7.

purpose of the relationship. The theologian and the Church may both contribute to the healing of humanity as we follow Jesus in his mission, restoring relations as the Spirit works through us.

Thomas F. Torrance had every reason to be concerned about the abuses and wrong thinking of personalism, just as he resisted dualistic problems in science. It is time for a revolution in the social and theological sciences. Torrance pointed the way forward, even as he warned of the past. The future is full of possibilities. Jesus goes before us and with us. By his Spirit, Jesus fulfills in us what is in the heart of his Father, extending the Kingdom of God for human flourishing in sharing God's life.