

**Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology: Consonance between Theology and Science*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001, Chapter 1: “Man, the Priest of Creation,” pp1-14. Originally University Press of Virginia/Chrisitan Journals of Belfast, 1980.
Pagination is the same across all editions.**

Reading guide, September 2023

Rev Dr Myk Habets

Introductory Comments

From the Preface to the new edition (2001) and the Preface to the original edition (1980), we know the contents of this book were originally lectures delivered on several occasions to different audiences. The lectures that make up this book were delivered first at Princeton Theological Seminary as part of the Summer Institute in July 1977, they were then developed and presented as the James W. Richard Lectures at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, and parts of Chapter One includes Torrance’s address given at the sixth presentation of the Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion in Guildhall, London, 11 Mark 1978.

Context

To provide some general context, Torrance’s publications of the 1940s-50s were largely focused on the Reformation and the ecumenical movement. The 1950s-60s saw his work consumed with the translation and dissemination of Barth’s theology (amongst other things). The 1970s saw work coming out on creation, science more generally, and theological hermeneutics. Einstein makes an appearance now, taking his place alongside Athanasius in Torrance’s thought. *Theological Science* came out in 1969. *God and Rationality* in 1971. The 1980s saw concentrated work on Science-engaged theology. *Ground and Grammar*, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, and Editor and Contributor: *Belief in Science and in Christian Life* all in 1980, and *Divine and Contingent Order* in 1981. *The Mediation of Christ* came out in 1983, *Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* came out in 1984, and *The Christian Frame of Mind* in 1985. In 1969 he became a member, and from 1972 to 1981 president, of the *Académie Internationale des Sciences Religieuses*, and in 1976 he became a member of the *Académie Internationale de Philosophie des Sciences*.

Torrance also received an honorary doctorate in science in 1983. A humorous and witty summary of Torrance’s status in the world of science is given by Professor S.D. Smith, then Dean of the Faculty of Science at Heriot-Watt University, upon the conferment of an honorary Doctor of Science when he quipped:

I am required to show, sir, why we in this university and in particular in this Faculty, should add confusion to this obviously already well-known situation. It would seem to be because he has dared to tread in the ground between theology and science and been awarded the Templeton Prize to boot.¹ . . . To the physicist, however, there is no mystery. A Moderator is a lump of graphite or a tank of heavy water found in a nuclear reactor capable of removing excess energy from over-energetic neutrons. We seek, therefore, analogies between a neutron (a sub-atomic particle) and a minister of the Church of Scotland to understand the properties of a Moderator.² . . . I have, sir, therefore, identified our particle. He is simply a stone. In fact, better expressed in the German language—‘ein Stein’—the Einstein of theological science: much for the mystic,

¹ The Thomas F. Torrance Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, Box 15, “Program and laureation address from the conferment of the Honorary Doctor of Science to Thomas F. Torrance, Heriot-Watt University. November 12, 1983,” 1.

² Ibid., 2.

abundantly for practical theology. So, as with Einstein in physics, for our graduand's contribution to the understanding of the relationship between science and theology, I ask you, Chancellor, by the authority of the Senate, to confer on Thomas Forsyth Torrance the degree of Doctor of Science.³

Torrance notes in the original Preface that "a fuller title for these lectures more explicitly related to what they are intended to be about, would be: 'The Ground and Grammar of a Realist Theology in the Perspective of a Unitary Understanding of the Creation'" (p.ix).

Key Observations

1. Torrance's worldview is very much dominated by humanity being essential to creation and being its crown or centrepiece. This is at odds with how much of the theological and scientific community sees humanity today in the Anthropocene. Today, humans are seen as the problem and need to get out of the way (i.e. cease to exist!) if the earth is to have any chance of survival.
2. Torrance here affirms the goodness and value of creation against much of the theological tradition that denigrated it (think here the legacy of forms of Platonic thought on Christianity). Torrance offers a strong affirmation of the mundane.
3. Torrance had a familiarity with contemporary scientific thinkers and ideas, well beyond that of the average academic in a non-scientific field. Who today has similar knowledge and is incorporating scientific insights into their theological work like this? Not even the science-engaged work of Templeton scholars are doing anything like this. Or are they?
4. Torrance continues a theme here that will be a hallmark of his theology – that theology is a science and the two are not opposed to each other.
5. A unitary vs dualist outlook is a key feature of all Torrance's work and it is on full display here.
6. The scientific method of *kata physin* is powerfully on display throughout the chapter and, again, will reappear throughout the rest of Torrance's publications.
7. The stratification of knowledge is introduced, and once again, this theme will loom large in work to come.

The Theme: Priest of Creation

The following comes from my work: Myk Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 45-47.

By means of the image 'priest of creation', Torrance brings together his cosmology and anthropology. Humanity is the 'crown of creation',⁴ even the purpose for the creation of the world. As 'priest of creation', humanity has the function and privilege to assist the creation as a whole to realise and evidence its rational order and beauty and thus to express God. According to Torrance, 'through human cultivation and development nature should bring forth forms of order and beauty of which it would not be capable otherwise.'⁵ It is necessary to creation that humanity realise its priestly vocation, in order to bring forth the requisite praise that God deserves. This is why humanity becomes 'an essential member of the creation'.⁶ Men and women are the 'stewards' or 'keepers' of the Garden/creation, and by tending the earth are meant to bring praise to the Creator.

³ The Thomas F. Torrance Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, Box 15, "Program and lauration address from the conferment of the Honorary Doctor of Science to Thomas F. Torrance, Heriot-Watt University. November 12, 1983," 3.

⁴ To use Calvin's words, as Torrance himself does, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, p. 1; and *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, p. 23.

⁵ Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order*, p. 130.

⁶ Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, pp. 25, 26. This same theme is presented by his brother James B. Torrance in *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), pp. 13-15.

One specific way in which humanity exercises this priestly function is through natural science. It is through the natural sciences that the order and the beauty of creation can sing forth the praise of the Creator. At one point Torrance declares that: 'man the scientist is nature's midwife'.⁷ With this priestly function scientific inquiry becomes a deeply religious duty in humanity's relation to God. Torrance even declares that 'science itself is part of man's religious duty, for it is part of his faithful response to the Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos'.⁸

In an essay on humanity in an intelligible cosmos, Kaiser notes that, 'If I read him correctly, Torrance is suggesting that humanity plays a role in the universe analogous to that of light, only on a different level.' He continues:

Light orders the cosmos in the special sense that the invariance of its speed is the basis of the equations governing space, time, and motion that Einstein discovered in 1905. In this special sense, Torrance argues, physical light is a created reflection of the uncreated Light of God. In a similar way, humanity is created in the image of God and plays a unique role in the universe, ordering it epistemically with pure science.⁹

The association or identification of the role of humanity with the role of light is highly significant in a discussion of *theosis*. One of the ten cognates for *theosis* used by Gregory Palamas is light. Williams explains that for Palamas, 'light stands on the border of our hierarchy of images between the lesser and the greater and reflects this status by partaking of the characteristics of both groups. He identifies light with God, and deification's source, as the agent of human sanctification, and as deification itself (αὐτοθεωσις).'¹⁰ We shall examine Torrance's use of light as a cognate of *theosis* further in the next chapter.

Torrance's view of humanity as the priest of creation bears a striking similarity to the Eastern Orthodox teaching that understands the human creature as creation's master (*archon*).¹¹ For instance, Staniloae prefers to describe men and women as creation's master, its created co-creator, co-worker, or continuator.¹² On some occasions Staniloae uses the same expression as Torrance when he considers the world as God's gift to humanity in order that humanity may gift it back to God. In this way, argues Staniloae, the sacrifice offered to God by men and women is a Eucharist, making every person a 'priest of God for the world'.¹³ From this relationship of Creator to creature human beings derive their significance and responsibility in the formation of the world towards its final consummation.¹⁴

⁷ Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 26.

⁸ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, pp. 179-180. It should be noted that theological inquiry is one of the sciences; hence his own theology is a self-styled 'scientific theology.'

⁹ Kaiser, 'Humanity in an Intelligible Cosmos,' p. 252.

¹⁰ Williams, *The Ground of Union*, p. 114.

¹¹ See for example John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975); Elizabeth Briere, 'Creation, Incarnation and Transfiguration: Material Creation and our Understanding of It,' *Sobornost* 11 (1989): pp. 31-40; Myroslaw Tataryn, 'The Eastern Tradition and the Cosmos,' *Sobornost* 11 (1989): pp. 41-52; and Staniloae, *The Experience of God*: vol. 2.

¹² Staniloae, *The Experience of God*: vol. 2. pp. 21-112.

¹³ Dumitru Staniloae, 'The World as Gift and Sacrament of God's Love,' *Sobornost* 9 (1969): pp. 662-673, and *Teologia Dogmatica Ortodoxa*, 1. p. 389.

¹⁴ John D. Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology,' *King's Theological Review* 12 (1989): pp. 1-5, 41-51, 13 (1990), pp. 1-5, also takes up Torrance's phrase 'man the priest of creation' but develops it in a much broader sense than Torrance's restriction to science. See Gunton's defence of Torrance over Zizioulas at this point in Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), pp. 119-122, and the critical interaction of Spjuth, *Creation, Contingency and Divine Presence*, pp. 181-183.

While Torrance's image of humanity acting as 'priests of creation' is compelling, it is not without its problems.¹⁵ By tying it so closely to natural science Torrance fails to engage adequately in the wider realm and riches of what this priestly ministry may entail. In addition, Spjuth notes that if taken to its logical end this separation between the realm of grace and the realm of nature within Torrance's theology could end up affirming the very dualism that Torrance wishes to expunge from all theology. If humanity is the priest of creation only through the field of natural science then there runs the risk of the realm of human activities becoming an autonomous reality.¹⁶ As Chapter Four will highlight, Torrance does consider other ways in which humanity fulfils this priestly duty. However, he reserves the language of 'priests of creation' almost exclusively for human scientific activity and this has occasioned much misunderstanding.

¹⁵ Acknowledging the limitations of Torrance's application of anthropology to human vocation, Flett considers the cultural or concrete social implications of Torrance's theological anthropology in Flett, 'Priests of Creation, Mediators of Order,' pp. 161-183, especially pp. 179-183.

¹⁶ Spjuth, *Creation, Contingency and Divine Presence*, p. 183. Cf. pp. 161-165.