

**REVIEW OF**  
**PAUL D. MOLNAR,**  
***THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST IN THE THEOLOGY OF THOMAS F. TORRANCE:***  
***SOME DOGMATIC IMPLICATIONS***

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In the Preface to his most recent work Molnar states unapologetically, "Today it is generally acknowledged that Thomas F. Torrance was the most significant English-speaking theologian of the twentieth century" (vi), not least because of Torrance's insistence that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, is necessarily "both the first and the final Word in any properly theological theology" (vi). Immediately the reader is alerted to Molnar's conviction that there are theologies that are not "properly theological" but rather are improperly non-theological; i.e., that are deficient, defective, and tainted in that they have debased the gospel and reduced the Word of God to the words of those possessed of "darkened understanding" (Eph. 4:18). These lattermost theologies lack the consistent Christo-logic that Torrance, and Molnar following him, have upheld everywhere in their multi-volume outpourings. Molnar is aware that Christological must be the determinant of proper theology; the merely Christocentric is not, since liberal theology, liberation

theology, natural theology, political theology, and queer theology alike always claim, in their effort to find credibility in the church, to be Christocentric. (One need only to ponder queer theology's extolling of the non-binary Jesus.) All such problematic theologies fail to come to terms with the logic of the Hebrew Bible. That logic is exemplified definitively in the Nazarene as attested by apostles whose understanding of Him He imparted to them, and thereby to the church after them, as He met and instructed them repeatedly between His resurrection and Ascension, thereafter imparting to them the understanding of Him that He wills the church to have until history is concluded.

Not surprisingly Molnar informs us, "Strictly speaking, this [book] is a constructive work in systematic theology with its main focus on Christology" (vi). A profoundly constructive work in systematic theology, however, will unavoidably be polemical — but this not in a mood of pejorative petulance but always radiant with gospel-attuned remediation. This trajectory is apparent throughout Molnar's book as he finds himself disagreeing with 'non-theological' theologies whose first word is not Jesus Christ but rather philosophy, naturalism, sociology, or the most recent sexual agenda; theologies, therefore, whose final word is necessarily a deviation from the Lord as attested in Scripture and confessed in the church's creeds.

In light of the foregoing, readers of Molnar's earlier volumes could only expect him to uphold and render determinative throughout Torrance's ubiquitous contention that the gift of grace cannot be detached from the giver of grace. Sadly, Molnar regards as an all-too-common skew that distorts everything in its wake the erroneous notion that God the giver gives, to be sure, but does not give Himself. Instead, God is thought to give something, a thing, a benefit, an excellence, a quality, a mind-set, a principle, an energy, without giving Himself in person in the Son He bestows upon us. Even those theologians who rightly recognize that God does indeed give himself to us in his self-communication end up detaching grace from Christ the giver of grace by understanding grace as a kind of quasi-formal causality at work in us. Whenever the identity between Giver and Gift is forfeited in ways such as this, everything that theology discusses is distorted: anthropology, nature, revelation, justification, faith, the Christian life, the law of God and the knowledge of God (vii). Whenever the identity between Giver and Gift is lost, God

remains unreachably remote while grace is invariably reduced because 'thingified' even though it might still be described as the personal action of God. This theme reverberates throughout the book.

While Molnar confronts and corrects assorted 'improper' theologies, his ultimate agenda cannot be overlooked: a Roman Catholic theologian steeped in the Reformational theologies of Barth and Torrance (who alike are indebted hugely to Calvin), Molnar is transparent with respect to his hoped-for outcome; namely, if Protestant and Catholic theologies can allow Jesus Christ to be the *first* and *final* Word, then the corrective which that Word supplies on all fronts would effect an ecumenical rapprochement. For such Protestant and Catholic thinkers, now informed, formed, and normed by the truth of the Gospel (i.e., reality, the force of *aletheia* throughout Scripture) that was nothing less than Jesus Christ, Giver and Gift alike in person, coming upon and forging Himself within those thinkers would shape their theology at every point; such therefore "would be united in their acknowledgement and recognition of the truth of God's being as we actually know God face to face with Christ" (vii).

## I

Molnar's book unfolds with three lengthy chapters, the first of which is "Conflicting Visions of Grace and Nature: Appraising the Views of Thomas F. Torrance and Karl Rahner."

Rahner is frequently touted to be the pre-eminent Roman Catholic thinker of the Twentieth Century. Molnar does not shy from meeting him head-on in the interests of exposing Rahner's understanding as non-biblical, non-Christological, and nothing less than idolatrous (even as Molnar avoids this vocabulary). Prior to rebutting Rahner, Molnar begins by exposing and rejecting any notion of infused grace. Following Torrance, Molnar rejects such for several reasons: 'infused' grace suggests a mechanical injection of a substance or material; and infused 'grace' denatures grace as something less than God-in-His-mercy visiting Himself (in His Son, wherein Giver and Gift are identical) upon the spiritually inert, whose predicament before God is otherwise hopeless. Not least, 'infused grace' has traditionally been understood as an initial grace that subsequently grounds that

merit by which humans can claim subsequent grace(s). Not surprisingly, infused grace was also viewed as an 'energizing principle' that boosts human aspiration and renders it an achievement.

Pursuing his standpoint in this matter, Torrance rejects problematic notions of *theosis* as divinizing the human. Here Torrance rejects problematic readings of 2 Peter 1:4 which might suggest that we are "partakers of the divine nature" and consistently advances his view that this biblical statement refers to us as "partners of the Deity" (3). In the same way Torrance disputes the Roman Catholic notion of created grace, since a grace that is "a created medium between God and man"<sup>1</sup> depersonalizes grace and denigrates the sufficiency of the Mediator.

Still anticipating his controversy with several thinkers but especially Rahner, Torrance, says Molnar, consistently eschews any blurring of the distinction between the divine and the creaturely (following Karl Barth) that blends God and the creaturely either through a mysticism wherein divine and human are absorbed into a common being or through a pantheism that regards the divine as the essence of the creaturely.

Reflecting his insistence on the distinction between the divine and the creaturely, Molnar insists we can genuinely know God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) only by faith which for Torrance, following Calvin, means knowledge of the truth. For Torrance, however, it is the truth of *being* and not the truth we think we know indirectly from our supposed transcendental experiences that is thus known. And that being of course is the being of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit such that there can be no division between the object of faith and faith itself. Jesus Christ, who alone bears and bestows the Spirit, quickens in us the faith that seizes Him. Truth, our genuine knowledge of God, is therefore grounded in God and not in any elevated or energized or boosted or elevated aspect of the creaturely. (This lattermost point will loom large in Molnar's disagreement with Rahner.)

Continuing to prepare readers for his comparison of Torrance and Rahner, Molnar discusses Torrance's criticism of Thomas Aquinas. The latter maintains that

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<sup>1</sup> Molnar (3, 39ff.), quotation from Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 140. Throughout this review, page numbers in the text refer to Molnar, *Centrality of Christ*. Molnar's citations of works under discussion may appear in footnotes.

while our intellect can apprehend the nature of God, we assent (the 'Yes!' of faith) not through our understanding of God's being but through a choice we make; i.e., an act of the will which then would make faith rest on moral grounds instead of on the very *being* of God enabling our knowledge of God in the first place. Such thinking became the basis of Kant's separation of faith from its proper object. And for Torrance both Catholics and Protestants tended to open up a gap between our understanding of God from the being of God and an attempted understanding of God based on the will and thus on moral grounds. He also notes that this was what the transcendental Thomists did and because of that they did not overcome Kant's mistake because they grounded their knowledge in transcendental experience rather than exclusively in the very being of God which encounters us in God's Word and Spirit (6ff.). This problematic approach to truth in Torrance's view suggests that we are the ones who "control and manipulate what we know" and as Kant held, we then make that the object of our thought. He also notes that in Roman Catholic thought this opened the door to a phenomenological theology which tended "to be converted into some form of theological anthropology" (7-10). Torrance thus maintains, on the contrary, the knowledge of God arises not through a choice we make, rooted in an innate human capacity, but arises rather as God Himself embraces us, enfolds us in His own life and love, therein 'forges' himself upon and within us so as to acquaint us with Himself, and thereby obviates any suggestion that a human capacity equips us to deduce or conclude or infer who God is. In other words, Torrance, following the Hebrew logic of Scripture, maintains that any deity inferred from world-occurrence or concluded from philosophical speculation is never, because qualitatively different from, the Holy One of Israel. Here, as just noted, is where Torrance rejects what he finds in much Roman Catholic thinking; namely, a phenomenological approach that begins with theological anthropology and claims to apprehend the truth of God and God's ways by beginning with aspects of the human (7). Denied here, he insists, is the uni-directionality of Giver and Gift, heaven to earth, and that revelation which acquaints us with this truth. In sum, Torrance disavows every suggestion of natural theology, however sophisticated, refined, or subtle to the extent that it separates knowledge of God from the being of God which meets us in his Word and Spirit.

According to Torrance faith — by which we are united to Christ and thereby given knowledge of God — is never the outcome, the crown, of any kind of human ascent. Following his insistence on 'uni-directionality,' Torrance insists Christ's prior decision for us alone renders possible and urgent our decision for Him (11). Since our knowledge of God is entirely a predicate of God's grace, to know God is to confess that all human aspiration, speculation, or achievement with regard to such knowledge is not merely ineffective but an affront; it is nothing less than a sinful attempt at self-justification because for Torrance since the Fall, our very free-will is our self-will and there is no way to become truly free apart from total reliance on the freedom of God's grace in Christ enabling us to rely on God alone and not at all on ourselves. Reflecting the testimony of Scripture and the conviction of the Reformers, Torrance avers that the most subtle and most intense expression of self-justification is always and everywhere religious.

One such expression is found in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, a Protestant whom Molnar discusses in this chapter on Rahner inasmuch as he supports Torrance in Torrance's assessment of Bultmann, who, like Rahner, is a fellow-subjectivist.

According to Bultmann Jesus Christ has done nothing to alter the predicament of sinners before the Holy God. For Bultmann the apostolic testimony to Christ is no more than a literary event that is the occasion of and trigger for an existential self-realization. The meaning of the kerygma has nothing to do with the apostles' declaration of the ontic and noetic significance of the transcendent God's unparalleled intervention on our behalf in the life and ministry of Christ. Instead, the meaning of the kerygma is what it prompts in us as we react to the Gospel story. Christ is the ideational stimulus to our self-realization, our acquisition of authentic selfhood. Here Molnar points out that Bultmann's loss of objectivity concerning God and God's acts attenuates what the apostles attest as God's objective activity among, upon, and within us; not surprisingly, he finds Bultmann's approach indifferent to the immanent Trinity with Bultmann's problematic remark that "we cannot speak of God as he is in himself, but only of what he is doing to us and with us" (15). By contrast [for us], Torrance rightly insisted that "if we can say

nothing about God in himself or about what he does objectively . . . can we really say anything at all of God?" (16).

In deploring Bultmann's subjectivism wherein theological statement says nothing about God *in se*, Torrance is not pretending that theological statement *is* the reality, that truth is ideational (17). At the same time, theology does reflect the logic of God's saving activity which meets us objectively in Christ himself and subjectively through the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ and thus to the Father. The revelatory (because salvific) event is fraught with noetic significance, apart from which the gospel cannot be either understood (revelation, Molnar insists, while not reducible to the conceptual always pertains to the conceptual) or communicated. In other words, any nonconceptual view of revelation means mythology because, following Anselm Torrance insisted we cannot have experience of God or knowledge of God without concepts.

At this point Molnar is ready to discuss Rahner. Rahner states, "God himself and nothing else is our eternal life, however he may be understood by us here and now."<sup>2</sup> The giveaway, Molnar notes, is "however he may be understood," an understanding that embraces any and all misunderstanding or non-understanding; for such 'understandings' have nothing at all to do with Jesus Christ if they do not begin and end with him as the One Mediator.

Humankind's common experience of mystery, Rahner asserts, is the non-thematic starting point of a saving engagement with God that will be rendered thematic or explicit by traditional categories and vocabulary. Here Rahner has confused (to say the least) the genuine mystery of the created order and human existence with the mystery of God. Because everyone has a capacity for an experience of mystery, says Rahner, everyone has "an obediential potency for revelation and a supernatural existential" (23). Molnar gives a detailed explanation of Rahner's notion of the supernatural existential to illustrate his intention to maintain God's freedom precisely in a way that fails to do so because for Rahner "God's self-communication must be present in every person as the condition which makes its personal acceptance possible" (31). Just this viewpoint allows Rahner to

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<sup>2</sup> Molnar (20), quotation from Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, p. 236.

turn to us instead of exclusively toward Christ for his understanding of grace and nature. For Rahner, then, any experience of mystery is the occasion of and pointer to our saving receptivity. Jettisoned here is Torrance's biblical/Reformational conviction that we are 'dead in trespasses and sins,' not merely weak or impaired or deficient, and that the noetic effects of the Fall are farther-reaching than the non-noetic effect Rahner endorses. And since such creaturely mysticism can be graced (where grace, for Rahner, is anything but the Gift that is nothing less than because *necessarily* the Giver himself), Jesus Christ has been rendered redundant. According to Rahner humankind's experience of life's mystery is intimacy with God-in-his-mysteriousness; self-acceptance is the same as accepting (albeit unthematically) Jesus Christ.

Beginning not with a humanistic understanding of the human but with an apostolic understanding of Jesus Christ, Torrance insists, "we must allow the Person of Christ to determine for us the nature of his saving work, rather than the other way around."<sup>3</sup> It is not the noble principle of self-sacrifice exemplified in countless people; it is rather the sacrifice of the Incarnate One alone that saves. By ascribing such unthematic awareness to everyone Rahner denies the unique specificity of God's saving acts in their identity with Jesus himself, and consequently an understanding of God as *eternally* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rahner's unthematic agenda undercuts the ontic uniqueness (i.e., holiness) of God, the ontic and noetic arrears of the Fall, and the unsubstitutable act of God in Jesus Christ. In short, Molnar agrees with Torrance's assessment that Rahner's constellation fails to overcome Kant and falls into a kind of subjectivism which does not ground knowledge of God in the very being of God but rather in our anthropological (transcendental) experiences.

In the course of exposing Rahner, Molnar targets John Robinson and Paul Tillich. While both these thinkers are Protestant, Molnar discerns Rahner's reductionistic 'unthematic' knowledge of God in them. Both forfeit everything inasmuch as they think about God from a centre in the human instead of from a centre in God. Both begin with philosophical, social, psychological, and cultural understanding of the human and then project it onto God, unaware that they have

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<sup>3</sup> Molnar (24), quotation from Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 64.



re-fashioned God in humankind's image. Tillich's notion that God can be understood from our experiences of depth and our ultimate concerns is a blatant instance of such projection. Both begin with a socially determined understanding of the *human situation* (that which the social sciences, history, culture, and philosophy can legitimately describe), and elevate it as the *human condition* which for them is that basis of their view of God, Christ, and salvation. This approach fails to take account of the predicament of guilty sinners before the Holy One who tolerates nothing but acted mercifully for our salvation by giving Himself up to death for our sakes in giving Himself to us without ever giving Himself over to us and thereby collapsing Himself uselessly into us in our self-experience.

Torrance, says Molnar, speaks of the deity Robinson and Tillich advance as nothing less than an idol (26). For where grace is not properly distinguished from nature, idolatry must occur as God, now naturalized, does not transcend the world and therefore cannot judge it as the first step in His saving it. For Rahner, Robinson, and Tillich, what is proposed as a continuum between nature and grace is finally the identity of nature and grace. Molnar comments most tellingly that for Rahner and for William Dych, his major articulator, there is never declared the need for justification as the basis for true knowledge of God and God's grace. And why would there be? No one, after all, needs profoundly to be rendered 'rightly related' (the meaning of 'justification' or 'righteousness') to God by an act of God when everyone is unthematically rightly-related already in their experiences of depth and by means of their ultimate concerns. Indeed, in Rahner's thought, that very problem is evident in his view that grace can be "both utterly free and gratuitous and at the same time an intrinsic part of all human history" (31f.). Again, Jesus Christ has been rendered superfluous.

Foundational to Rahner's approach is his insistence on humankind's desire for God. (Overlooked here, of course, is Scripture's insistence that so far from desiring the One who judges us we flee God, albeit without being able to escape Him because, as Torrance insisted, our very free-will is our self-will and it is that self-will that Christ overcame in his life of perfect obedience for us.) This desire, insists Rahner, is an intrinsic aspect of our humanity, and at the same time nothing less than grace. Rahner characteristically faults those theologies that assume grace to

be "extrinsic." Here, of course, Rahner fails to see that it is not only the human as creature to whom grace is extrinsic (since the Creator as Lord is Giver and Gift) but also the human as sinner (since God is holy and sinners are not). Rahner fails to take account of the predicament of the sinner: an enemy of God, self-contradicted, possessed of an image of God that is never effaced but unrecognizably defaced, and ignorant of God. In this respect Rahner is unaware that as the human heart needs to be renewed wholly by "extrinsic" grace, so does the human mind. For the mind of the fallen creature is 'hardened,' 'veiled,' 'blinded,' and 'futile' with respect to God, grace, the gospel, and knowledge of such. Rahner is certainly aware of the problem of human sin. But, unlike Torrance, he does not understand sin exclusively from our forgiveness actualized in Christ but rather from an analysis of transcendental experience. By contrast, Torrance held that "face to face with Christ our humanity is revealed to be diseased and in-turned, and our subjectivities to be rooted in self-will. It is we who require to be adapted to Him, so that we have to renounce ourselves and take up the Cross if we are to follow Him and know the Father through Him" (53). This is a crucial and recurrent theme for Torrance because taking up our cross means abandoning every effect to live by our own resources and living by grace alone which means from Christ alone as the one who frees us to love God and thus to love our neighbors. That is why Torrance says we are truly free only when we obey Christ as the one who frees us with his costly grace so that we might not be in search of what he calls cheap grace, that is, a grace which we think we can control and attain by our various attempts to be holy and to reach God by relying on ourselves.

Reflecting all of the above Dych, a major interpreter of Rahner, maintains grace to be "an intrinsic part of all human history."<sup>4</sup> Molnar, following Torrance, recognizes this distortion to be little more than thinly disguised religious romanticism. Rahner's advancing the "supernatural existential" remedies nothing, since it merely renders finite self-transcendence idolatrously confused with the infinite transcendence of God. Not least, Rahner here is guilty of Torrance's *bête noire*, 'conditional' salvation, since we must first will one or another 'depth experience' of our creatureliness. For instance, Rahner claims that "When a person

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<sup>4</sup> Molnar (31), quotation from William V. Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 35.

in theoretical or practical knowledge or in subjective activity confronts the abyss of his existence, which alone is the ground of everything, and when this person has the courage to look into himself and to find in these depths his ultimate truth, there he can also have the experience that this abyss accepts him as his true and forgiving security" (33). This is a version of conditional salvation because here salvation depends on us looking into ourselves instead of toward Christ alone to find our ultimate truth. It is Christ who personally forgives us not an abyss that we can experience and rely on such that we can then claim self-acceptance is the same as accepting Christ.

Molnar points out (34) that because Rahner thinks there is a knowledge of God vouchsafed to the creature as such there is a concomitant knowledge of sin — a 'knowledge' that is wholly inaccurate, Molnar insists, since the gift of salvation (grace) alone defines sin and acquaints us with the fact, nature, and extent of our sinfulness. Only the cure can define and acquaint us with our disease. In the light of Torrance, says Molnar, Rahner has everything backwards and thereby false. Only as we encounter the Word of God do we know God (grace) precisely as we have the mind of Christ in knowing God the Father and therein we know ourselves as both sinners and creatures who are indeed forgiven sinners. Because Rahner denies the creaturely to be creaturely only (instead always intrinsically graced), he misunderstands abysmally the creature, grace, and God as Creator (and therefore sole Lord), and God as sole Savior. Consistent with his notion of all sincere (supposedly) human aspiration, Rahner contends that all religion is graced, when according to Scripture religiosity (including Christian religiosity, always and everywhere sincere) is the final and subtlest stronghold of humankind's resistance to grace.

"Infused grace," a major item in Rahner's presentation, suggests a (quasi-)mechanical injection of a substance or an energy. Related to "infused grace" is "created grace," a logical contradiction from Torrance's perspective. "Created grace" for Torrance is merely a form of Arianism because it undercuts the ontological connection between grace and Christ himself as the Giver of grace and that fosters Pelagianism with its attendant notions of co-operation and co-redemption: for what else can be concluded when Rahner adduces, "God in his

most proper reality makes himself the inner-most constitutive element of man"?<sup>5</sup> Torrance held that this is not just a problem in Roman Catholic theology but in Protestantism as well with notions of cooperation with grace that result from theology lapsing into anthropology and subjectivism (41). With regard to Rahner's thinking all of this is confirmed by Stephen Duffy, whose interpretation of Rahner's theological declension continues to dismay Molnar: "Grace, therefore, is experienced, but not as grace, for it is psychologically indistinguishable from the stirring of human transcendentality."<sup>6</sup> Rahner concurs: here in the experience of hope for a definitive end and perhaps even anonymously "one has already grasped and accepted the resurrection in its real content."<sup>7</sup> This approach leads Rahner to explain that grace and revelation can be equated with such experiences of hope for a definitive end so that he can say that this grace "permeates this existence always and everywhere. This grace is revelation in the strictest sense, even if this is not envisaged as coming from 'outside'" (44). This reasoning clearly detaches grace and revelation from Christ himself and is clearly illustrative of the fact that Rahner has sought the meaning of both by looking within human experience instead of exclusively to Christ himself who is the grace of God and the only one who reveals God to us here and now. Molnar is aware that resurrection is the revelation of the sufficiency and efficacy of the Incarnate One's cross-wrought atonement and thus revelation cannot be detached from the risen Lord who is the revelation of God to us and for us. Rightly grasping the logic of Rahner's thought, Molnar concludes, "Rahner's thinking here is confirmed when he claims that self-acceptance is the same as accepting Christ" (46-47).

Whereas Rahner thinks that all human 'depth' experiences and aspirations are unthematic, non-conceptual encounters with God (whose holiness or ontological uniqueness Rahner never discusses in this context), Torrance insists, as noted above, we cannot have a knowledge of God devoid of *some* conceptual awareness.

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<sup>5</sup> Molnar (42), quotation from Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116.

<sup>6</sup> Molnar (43-44), quotation from Stephen Duffy, "Experience of Grace," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, 48.

<sup>7</sup> Molnar (44), quotation from Karl Rahner and Karl-Heinz Weger, *Our Christian Faith*, 110-111.

God has a name, the name wherewith He has named Himself. We know Him only as we are made aware of His name through His gracious action upon us and within us.

## II

In the first paragraph of his second chapter, "Appreciating How T.F. Torrance's View of Justification by Grace Alone Leads to a Proper Theology of Liberation," Molnar states (following Barth and Torrance) that a non-Christological discussion of God can only reflect both idolatry and self-justification (51). Such idolatry and self-justification disclose not merely ignorance of God but enmity with God. Self-justifying idolatry means that by reflecting on ourselves and our social situation we think we can know God, having begun with the erroneous notion that self-reflection yields self-knowledge which in turn is one with knowledge of God. (Already the reader sees that Molnar finds Rahner lurking in current liberation theologies.) All of the foregoing arises inasmuch as there is upheld a metaphysical continuity between the being of the world and the being of God. Forfeited here is the Reformers' conviction that because of sin there is in fact a discontinuity between us and God such that grace does not simply perfect nature (though for Torrance it does that, but not in any Pelagian sense that would suggest that nature is imperfect and just becomes more perfect through grace). Moreover, for the Reformers the being of creation is ontologically distinct from the being of God such that the being of God and the being of the creation are linked only by grace and not by the philosophical *principium* of Being Itself. Forfeited too is the Reformers' insistence that the noetic consequences of the Fall indicate that the truth of God, and, no less, the truth of the human, can only be known as our minds are reconciled through union with Christ. That can only take place by the power of the resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit actualizing in us the objective atonement which took place objectively in Christ the incarnate Word. Molnar does not hesitate throughout his book to endorse Torrance: "It is in the human mind that sin is entrenched."<sup>8</sup> Since the Holy Spirit is the power that Christ bears and bestows, thereby effecting in us that faith which unites us to Him and wherein our 'futile' mind is enlightened with respect to the truth concerning both God and ourselves, it is only through union with him that we are truly liberated to love God and love our neighbors. Liberation

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<sup>8</sup> Molnar (54), quotation from Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, 438.

theologies, however, characteristically confuse Holy Spirit (i.e., God) with human spirit (creatureliness). One concomitant of such confusion is the substitution of an ethical agenda ('How can we be/do good?') for an obediencial perspective ('Who is given mercifully to us *extra nos* whose legitimate claim upon our obedience is grounded in that Gift?')

Modernity bristles at justification by grace alone because modernity's self-justification amounts to a religious (but not Christian) legitimization of its moral agenda. Such an agenda with its inherent self-confidence approves everything about these agendas, both ideationally and morally, while at the same time remaining ignorant of a gospel-ordained cruciform discipleship in an obedient following of Jesus Christ in person. That discipleship described in Matthew 16:24-26, to which Torrance frequently refers, indicates that it is only in obedience to Christ that we truly abandon our self-reliance which is the essence of sinful behavior.

Even when assorted liberation theologies may not reference Rahner explicitly, they are nonetheless one with him ideationally, for at bottom they maintain that experience of self is simultaneously both experience of God and experience of the neighbor (and the neighbor's victimization). Molnar obviates such manifold error by returning to Torrance's emphasis on the vicarious humanity of Christ, wherein *the* faithful covenant-keeper with whom the Father is pleased gathers up even the sin-riddled obedience of Christians and renders it acceptable to the Father even as the same vicarious humanity renders necessary our own discipleship. It is in that discipleship that true liberation occurs in such a way that we are free for God and thus free to love our neighbors and fight against oppression. For much liberation theology it is presumed that our freedom comes from our fight against oppression and the knowledge of God that we construct from that fight.

In discussing liberation theologies Molnar insists, as he did in his earlier *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God*, that God is gender-less. While God has named Himself to us as Father, Son, and Spirit (and we are not at liberty to jettison this name), 'Father' has nothing to do with our experiences of fatherhood whether good or bad, and nothing to do with a supposed projection of them upon 'God.' Here Molnar contradicts such feminist theologians as Elizabeth Johnson.

Molnar rightly observes that all feminist theologies which attempt to rename God project gender onto God. Patriarchy and other expressions of males' abuse of women is not overcome by substituting female projection of names for God for male names, but rather by faith in Jesus Christ in which heart and mind are transformed and thereby enabled to see patriarchalism for the sin it is since liberation in the first instance refers to Christ's liberating us from sin as self-will.

Johnson's related notion that our multiform experience rather than the apostles' attestation of Jesus Christ acquaints us with the truth of God and the truth of ourselves; her insistence here that our experience of "fathomless mystery" is "the condition of acting in characteristic human ways" (84) is one more instance of non-Christian mythology borrowed from Rahner. To no one's surprise, Johnson holds conversion to be not a radical, 'about-face' re-orientation to Jesus Christ and through Christ to the Father but rather women's tapping into the power of themselves wherein they are "inherently in touch with God as holy mystery."<sup>9</sup> Laconically Molnar concludes his opinion of Johnson and renders his verdict concerning her approach to conversion: "Jesus Christ is not even mentioned" (84). In his kind restraint Molnar refrained from exposing Johnson's illogic in her pronouncing God to be "infinite love" (87). If Johnson insists on "naming God with female metaphors... incomprehensible source, sustaining power, and goal of the world, holy Wisdom...," how does she know that God is love at all, never mind infinite love? Only in light of the atonement wherein the Holy One went to hell and back for us do we know God to be infinite love.

Overlooked in all of Johnson's preoccupation with self-referencing is the fact that in experiencing ourselves we experience ourselves as sinners, even as we remain ignorant of our depravity. For this reason, theological articulation in her approach is merely the inflation of our sin-warped (mis)understanding and disobedience, bolstered by our self-confident self-justification. Molnar's final word here is memorable: "Even more importantly the idea that Johnson was basing her views on revelation by claiming knowledge of Spirit-Sophia, Christ-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia as knowledge of the Trinity is beyond ludicrous" (91). It is ludicrous not only because these names for God were in line with the Gnostic heresy but

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<sup>9</sup> The quoted phrase is from Molnar (84), as he is discussing Johnson, *She Who Is*, 65.

because they repeat a basic Arian argument by interpreting Jesus not as the incarnation of God but of God's wisdom (89).

Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (*Dogmatics after Babel: Beyond the Theologies of Word and Culture*) concerns Molnar next, for Rodríguez maintains that we can recognize the Holy Spirit in the Spirit's *extra ecclesial* work by exploring liberating activities amidst the concentrations of human oppression and injustice. Lost here, of course, Molnar reminds us, is the Nicene conviction that the Spirit is *homoousios* with the Son and the Father (93). Proffered instead is Rodríguez' scheme that we can assess which human actions are in fact liberating and which not and predicate the former of the Spirit. Presupposed here, needless to say, is the able historian's sober comment that much presumed liberation turns out to be one bondage succeeding another.

When Rodríguez states he will begin his theology "with pneumatology rather than with Christology,"<sup>10</sup> he cannot by that fact be faulted. Karl Barth, after all, at the end of his career admitted the legitimacy of a "theology of the third person," as long as the Spirit was indeed the power whereby Christ effectuates himself in the church. Lacking this orientation, however, Rodríguez, like Johnson, persistently confuses Holy Spirit and human spirit and separates the Spirit from the Word. Sanctification is then reduced to human achievement rather than Christ's 'benefit' (Calvin) rendering us new creatures in Him. Now human struggles for liberation (a vehicle for and attestation of our sanctification) are nothing less than "historical experiences of God."<sup>11</sup> One such liberating movement is Black Lives Matter: a development admittedly "confession-less"<sup>12</sup> with respect to the catholic substance of the faith but not for this reason, along with similar movements, any less genuinely new *loci theologici*. Here, Rodríguez announces, we may encounter and understand "the work of the Spirit in history."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 142.

<sup>11</sup> Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 169.

<sup>12</sup> Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 172.

<sup>13</sup> Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 172.



Molnar, to no one's surprise at this point in his book, assesses the Black Lives Matter movement, noting that naïve, uncritical persons might find themselves drawn into a movement more concerned with fomenting chaos and hatred of police than in caring for African-Americans. Judiciously Molnar points out that while Rodríguez views Black Lives Matter as standing in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., Rodríguez fails to see that King never endorsed the BLM agenda.

Rodríguez' theological aberration is exemplified in his notion of "history as sacrament."<sup>14</sup> Here he maintains that the work of the Holy Spirit can be read off the face of history, "in the religious and cultural 'other.'"<sup>15</sup> Despite his protestation that not any and all that is cultural is revelatory, Rodríguez' divorce of the Spirit from the Son renders him unable to provide the necessary criterion. In claiming to be able to discern those aspects of history and culture that are vehicles or expressions of the Spirit's liberating activity, his self-advertised naiveness is lamentable.

In the same chapter Molnar engages Hanna Reichel, a faculty member at Princeton Theological Seminary, in her dialogue with Marcella-Althaus Reid. Reid (PhD, University of St. Andrew's, Scotland) is a major interpreter of liberation, feminist, and queer theologies. At her death in 2009, at age 56, she was professor of Contextual Theology, New College, University of Edinburgh. At that time she was also the Director of the International Association for Queer Theology, and Director of the Queer Theology Project at the University of Edinburgh. She is best-known for her 2002 *Indecent Theology*. Therein she argued a traditional (for her this amounts to a patriarchal) view of sex supports atrocities everywhere. By contrast, a theology that is considered 'indecent' will no longer venerate and mythologize, for instance, the Virgin Mary. Such mythologizing merely denies the suffering of impoverished Latin American women and hides such suffering in a patriarchally-constructed Christ. An 'indecent' Christ is needed as well, since a gender-specific Christ left-handedly fails to recognize persons with diverse sexual orientations. For this reason, there is needed a Jesus with erased genitalia; Jesus enfleshed to be sure, but not genitally specific. (Barth, Torrance, and Molnar, it should be noted would interject at this point, "Is such a 'person' human at all?") For Reid, a properly

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<sup>14</sup> Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 176.

<sup>15</sup> Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 176.

inclusive Incarnation must set forth a bi-sexual Christ. While liberation theologies traditionally have addressed socio-economic disparities (wherein inequities are nothing less than iniquities), they have not addressed questions of gender and sexuality, questions that are related to the conquest of the Americas and subsequent colonizations.

Reichel insists that Althaus-Reid and Barth are compatible. Molnar disagrees. The two women, he insists, never approach Barth's affirmation of God's primary objectivity, the Immanent Trinity. While Reichel never hesitates to speak of 'God,' her understanding of the Holy One of Israel is not Barth's at all. For Barth, truth (reality) is grace, and reality can be apprehended only as grace.<sup>16</sup> Grace and truth cannot be accessed through posited experiences of "queer holiness."

Undeterred, Althaus-Reid contends, "Queerness is something that belongs to God, and... people are divinely Queer by grace."<sup>17</sup> According to Molnar 'queer holiness' and 'queer grace' are inventions that reflect a non-biblical understanding; grace as the content of 'queer experience' is categorically removed from grace as the Triune Giver's (self-)Gift in Jesus Christ (106).

Beyond whatever perspective we bring to the Bible, says Molnar, once we are within the orbit of the biblical witness our perspective is transfigured so as to reflect the logic and the categories of Scripture: sin, law, holiness, grace, etc. Failing here, Reichel's claim that she avoids self-justification is null and void: her elevation of her experience as the criterion of theological understanding is a blatant instance of self-justification. Disdaining conversion as a repentant turning to Jesus Christ, Reichel speaks imprecisely of an epistemic conversion to "an Other" with its attendant "real possibility of a different world."<sup>18</sup>

Predictably Reichel upholds the mind-set of mentors Johnson and Rahner before her of an identification of love of neighbor and love of God with the remark that these "are inextricably intertwined to the point of being co-constitutive, and their ethical intertwining is preceded by their ontological one" (110). Molnar

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<sup>16</sup> Molnar (104), reference to Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Molnar (105), quotation from Hanna Reichel, *After Method*, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Molnar (109), quotation from Reichel, *After Method*, 68.

clearly contrasts Torrance's view of grace, which is directly opposed to any idea that love of God and neighbor is or could be co-constitutive, since any such idea obliterates the fact that grace is God's free unconditional love of us in Christ. It is, as Barth said of revelation in Christ, the condition which conditions all things without itself being conditioned! (Overlooked here, Molnar could have argued, is whether her multisexual agenda is sinful according to Scripture, and therefore whether the neighbor is ever loved where sin is endorsed. At this point Christology is not merely confused with anthropology; Christology is confused with sin.)

James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (2020), is the last liberation theologian Molnar confronts. In Cone's work the criterion for understanding Jesus is not poverty or social disadvantage or 'queerness'; it is a "black perspective" which leads him to conclude that "truth for the black thinker arises from a passionate encounter with black reality" (114). Claiming affinity with Paul Tillich, Cone avers reality to be that which is the object of our ultimate passion with the result that he thinks "truth is not objective" since it is a "personal experience of the ultimate in the midst of degradation" (114). Despite this undisguised subjectivism in Cone which occurs because instead of allowing Jesus Christ to be the objective truth as the one who frees us for love of God and neighbor, he unhesitatingly speaks of his perspective as truth. His understanding of truth moves him to declaim, "whites... are rendered incapable of making valid judgments on the character of sin."<sup>19</sup> Blacks are (alone) able to make valid judgments. Plainly, then, for Cone theological validity is grounded in sociology and reducible to it. Unwaveringly he intones, "If Jesus is white and not black, he is an oppressor, and we must kill him."<sup>20</sup> Recognizing the phenomenon of a 'Christ' made in our image elsewhere in the history of the church, Molnar sensitively brings forward Torrance's lament that the church, denying the Jewish particularity of Jesus, has regularly depicted him as gentile, conveniently forgetting his self-identification with Israel.<sup>21</sup> For this reason the church has abstracted Jesus from his fulfillment of Israel's God-ordained mission, distorting Jesus by co-opting him for a

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<sup>19</sup> Molnar (114-115), quotation from James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 113.

<sup>20</sup> Molnar (115), quotation from Cone, 117.

<sup>21</sup> Molnar (116), reference to Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 105-106.

mission other than Israel's. (Here Molnar could have added that the only physical description we have of Jesus is that he was circumcised; in other words, he was — and is — a son of Israel, apart from which he is nothing to any of us today.)

Lacking the indissoluble unity of Jesus and the Older Testament, Cone's 'Jesus' is one more wax figure to be bent programmatically. In light of such a deficit Cone's comment, "God is present in all dimensions of liberation"<sup>22</sup> is unsubstantial and provides no key to which human agendas and agencies are liberating and which not.

Undiscouraged, however, Cone maintains that "the soteriological value of Jesus' person must finally determine our Christology."<sup>23</sup> Alas, he fails to see that in the history of the church and its theology, wherever soteriology is the basis of Christology (i.e., what Christ is declared to do determines who he is), wanton subjectivism arises with a religious legitimization that fuels an ideological program. Once again, a sociological substratum, from one perspective only, is rendered the criterion of Jesus' work, his person, the church's mission, and all too sadly, the tool for labelling 'non-Christian' if not perverse all who do not share the perspective born of a warped soteriology. Molnar admits that there are some expressions of human oppression that any sane person finds deplorable. Yet it remains possible to recognize and oppose such without any acquaintance with the church's risen Lord. Here Cone has unambiguously departed from the trajectory of the New Testament.

Molnar finds shocking the outcome of Cone's approach: "Looting, burning, or the destruction of white property... can only be decided [i.e., as legitimate because God-ordained] by the oppressed themselves who are seeking to develop their images of the black Christ."<sup>24</sup> Molnar concludes that these remarks should stand as a warning "that the true reconciliation of all humanity can never be achieved by what we do based on the development of our own images of Christ" since such a move "places the power of God in our sinful hands, and that can only lead to more and more conflict between blacks and whites" (124). He concludes that when Christ

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<sup>22</sup> Molnar (117), quotation from Cone, 124.

<sup>23</sup> Molnar (117), quotation from Cone, 126.

<sup>24</sup> Molnar (124), quotation from Cone, 130.

is recognized as the Reconciler and Redeemer then no one could argue that “some people would be justified in destroying the property of others depending upon how they decide to employ their images of Christ” (124).

### III

Molnar’s final chapter, “A Fine Point in Christology: Discovering Why It Is Important Not to Read the Missions of the Economic Trinity Back into the Immanent Trinity,” pursues the most recent (and no less startling) theological development in Bruce L. McCormack’s *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon*. McCormack claims to have identified a problem with Chalcedonian Christology and proffers a solution. Molnar, however, insists there is no problem, and McCormack’s ‘remedy’ is fraught with theological error, not least a denial of God’s free decision to act savingly on our behalf, therewith a denial of grace, and finally the collapse of the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity.

Here Molnar upholds the crucial congruence between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. The immanent Trinity is God’s ‘heart,’ who God is in Himself. The economic Trinity, God’s ‘face’ in his revelatory/reconciling work among, upon, and within us. Face and heart must be one or God Himself can never be known or trusted, since the ‘face’ God displays in Jesus of Nazareth might turn out to be a false face. Sinners need to know that what God does for their sake reflects who He is and only who He is; God *is* what God *does*, and God *does* what (who) God *is*. Thus, following Barth, Molnar insists that “we cannot say anything higher or better of the ‘inwardness of God’ [the immanent Trinity] than that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and therefore that He is love in Himself without and before loving us, and without being forced to love us. And we can say this only in the light of the ‘outwardness’ of God to us [the economic Trinity], the occurrence of revelation” (81, 135). There is no discrepancy here; more to the point, there is no possibility of any discrepancy: Face and heart are necessarily congruent. God’s action embodies God’s nature; and only God’s nature is exemplified in God’s acts. In light of the problem Molnar identifies in McCormack’s proposal, Molnar does not hesitate to declare McCormack a “deviant voice” both in the Reformed tradition (especially with respect to Barth and Torrance) and more widely in the church catholic (127).

Molnar begins his critique by quoting McCormack: "What are the ontological conditions in God of the possibility that Jesus of Nazareth should rightly have been worshipped as God?"<sup>25</sup> Positing that the Son's humiliation (grace for us) is already (i.e., pre-temporally) in the Son's generation by the Father is the first step McCormack has taken in the aforementioned collapse. Thus, he claims that the Father generated the Son for the purpose of incarnation "by making incarnation, suffering, and death to be the purpose for which the Father eternally generates the Son" and this assertion follows from his "understanding that the mission of the Son is contained in his eternal generation."<sup>26</sup> From these assertions it follows that "the 'hypostasis' of the Logos has an essential determination for incarnation in Jesus; it is directed towards him and has never been divine alone."<sup>27</sup> Hence, God the Son's nature is "teleologically ordered" and "he was eternally generated for his mission in time and beyond it."<sup>28</sup> And "the self-constitution of God as triune (the eternal processions) is an act teleologically ordered to incarnation and outpouring (the temporal missions)."<sup>29</sup> Expanding this thesis, McCormack contends that unless his 'correction' is adopted, the traditional notion of divine impassibility leaves us with the notion of God as "'pure being,' 'being itself,' or 'the Absolute'"<sup>30</sup> — a metaphysical conception that blatantly contradicts the church's traditional understanding of God as eternally Father, Son, and Spirit.

Parallel to McCormack's earlier assertion that election is the ground of God's triunity, he now states that his new, corrective ontology (the eternal being of God) requires that Jesus' human history *constitutes* Jesus' being as the second Person of the Trinity. This, because "his mission is built into his eternal generation. As *eternally generated*, he already has a relation to Jesus of Nazareth" (181).

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<sup>25</sup> Molnar (128), quotation from Bruce McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> McCormack, 279.

<sup>27</sup> Molnar (158), quotation from McCormack, 139.

<sup>28</sup> Molnar (181), quotation from McCormack, 293.

<sup>29</sup> McCormack, 286.

<sup>30</sup> Molnar (130), quotation from McCormack, 4.

Here Molnar notes that both Barth and Torrance reject such a notion, replete as it is with both Ebionite and Docetic heresies. Undeterred, however, McCormack proceeds with two subsequent claims: (i) "the eternal Son has an *essential* relation to the personal life of Jesus" [i.e., God is not eternal Father, Son, and Spirit apart from the Incarnation in time], and (ii) "the nature of that relation is best understood in terms of 'ontological receptivity.'"<sup>31</sup>

Molnar notes that with this move McCormack has read the missions of the Trinity back into the processions. This move, Molnar cautions, is huge: does God act savingly as a free exercise of his merciful grace, or is the salvation of the world a necessary aspect of the eternal being of God? If the latter, then creation (it is the created order that is to be saved) is necessary as surely as God's being is necessary: God would not be God without the creation (135). McCormack's proposed 'ontological receptivity' allows the Jesus of history to be the eternal Son of the (so-called) immanent Trinity. And when McCormack equates the Logos *incarnandus* with the Logos *asarkos*, the conflation of immanent and economic Trinities is evident once more.

In a major departure from Barth, McCormack sets aside the patristic insistence on both *enhypostasis* and *anhypostasis*. The latter means that Jesus' human nature has no (*an*) existence independent of the Word who became Incarnate, even as the Word became Incarnate in one (*en*) individual only, Jesus of Nazareth. Christ's flesh exists only in the Word Incarnate, which is nothing less than God Himself reconciling a wayward world and therein revealing Himself as its gracious Savior. McCormack argues that without an 'ontological receptivity,' Barth's Christology is tainted with Apollinarianism (the notion that the Incarnation is a divine mind in a human body, and therefore, absent a human mind, the Incarnate One is not human at all). McCormack thinks to avoid such he needs to claim that, in some sense, the Word was generated from the Father as a "divine-human relation" (149) and indeed that in some sense the human history of Jesus *constitutes* the being of the second person of the Trinity (168-169, 176); and these ideas suggest that the Word was flesh prior to the Incarnation. Here both McCormack's accusation

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<sup>31</sup> Molnar (131), quotation from McCormack, 7.

of Barth and McCormack's tendered correction, Molnar declaims, is wide of the mark, his 'ontological receptivity' negating the immanent Trinity (138).

McCormack thinks that Chalcedonian Christology supports an impassibility in God that renders God incapable of suffering. But Molnar notes that Torrance, on the other hand, maintains a proper impassibility that supports and includes a salvific passibility; Christ's cruciform life illustrates that God is capable of genuine suffering (passible) without such suffering 'bending' God away from His nature or deflecting Him from His purpose (impassible) of overcoming sin, suffering, evil and death for us. A purely passible deity, after all, could only change into non-God, a manifest absurdity; a purely impassible deity, on the other hand, could never have 'tasted death' for our sakes.

Rejecting McCormack's theological deviation, Molnar unhesitatingly admits that the Incarnation (and with it the creation) is a genuine *novum* in God's own life, even as the Son's relation to the Father is eternal (140). This *novum* (mission) entails God's passibility, even as God's eternal nature remains unalterable or impassible (procession). The problem that McCormack attempts to solve by his theological novelty is no problem at all; his supposed solution, however, is.

As mentioned earlier, McCormack faults Barth for maintaining the *enhyphostasis/anhypostasis* distinction "in its traditional form."<sup>32</sup> This traditional distinction, McCormack insists, is both unneeded and deleterious since Jesus' human existence constitutes him the eternal Son of the Father.<sup>33</sup> Right to the end of his monograph McCormack sounds the same note: "it is, in fact, the eternal Logos who is the one true God-human both in eternity and in time"<sup>34</sup> — lest God not be fully God eternally nor fully love eternally, McCormack reminds us. By contrast, Molnar points out that if the humanity of the Son is eternally preexistent, and if the Son is generated by the Father for the purpose of incarnation as McCormack argues by having read the missions back into the processions, then the Son is no longer truly human, and the action of God upon a fallen creation is no longer grace. The

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<sup>32</sup> Molnar (155), quotation from McCormack, 118.

<sup>33</sup> Molnar (156), discussing McCormack, 119.

<sup>34</sup> Molnar (158), quotation from McCormack, 261.



result, concludes Molnar, is that McCormack has compromised both the deity and the humanity of the Son (162).

Molnar's final discussion of *en-/anhypostasis* ringingly endorses Torrance's interpretation. Torrance insists both are needed. The Word became Incarnate in history by assuming our sinful humanity into union with his divine being in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth without ceasing to be God and thus without himself sinning. As the one mediator Jesus was the historical agent of our salvation and not merely an instrument of revelation or reconciliation.<sup>35</sup> From the divine and human side Jesus reconciled us to God personally such that reconciliation was no mere legal transaction but an act of God *as man* for us. In his life of perfect obedience Jesus himself is our reconciliation. In short, the Incarnation means that the earthly ministry of Jesus was redemptive from the outset — not in such a way as to render the cross superfluous, but always and everywhere in anticipation of that cross whose reality rendered the earthly ministry saving. Jesus Christ, who can legitimately say, "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:45), mercifully identifies Himself with sinners as he is "reckoned with transgressors" (Luke 22:37).

The logic of the foregoing means that the entire earthly ministry of Jesus is sin-bearing. Since Jesus is God-Incarnate, His humanity is not merely instrumental, not merely a tool wielded by the Father. Neither is the cross merely forensic. Rather, the cross, together with the ministry of Jesus, is God-in-His-grace (the Giver in the Gift) restoring fallen humanity as *the* faithful human covenant-partner, as the Gift, in his vicarious humanity, assimilates to Himself our covenant-breaking humanity, thereby renewing it. Now identified with Jesus Christ, we are those granted access to the Father and resplendent before Him.

Although McCormack claims not to make the Incarnation essential to the Son as Son, Molnar insists McCormack indubitably has done just this; i.e., he rejects the Logos *asarkos* as understood by the church catholic in his tireless reiterations that the eternal Son is 'preexistent' as 'composite.' Excluded here is any notion that God has freely decided to act savingly on our behalf; grace is not gracious at all but is merely a necessary development resulting from the Son's "ontological receptivity."

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<sup>35</sup> Molnar (173), with reference to Torrance, *Incarnation*, 232.

Any such ontological necessity denies the freedom of God's grace with the claim that "the *true* Logos *asarkos* was never without a determination for incarnation" because "he was already, as generated by the Father, a 'composite' entity in anticipation of the incarnation to come" (177). Moreover, since for McCormack "The eternal act in which God gives to himself his own being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the eternal act in which God chooses to be God in the covenant of grace is *one and the same act*" (182) he is unable to agree with Torrance, following Athanasius, that both creation and incarnation are *new* acts, new even for God. Strictly speaking, in McCormack's thinking, there is no longer a genuine Giver; and neither is there a genuine Gift. What the church fathers cherished regarding the immanent Trinity — the God who is eternally Father, Son, and Spirit, and who needs nothing and no-one to be and remain who He is — this God has in His incomprehensible mercy and love given Himself up to suffering, degradation and death for disobedient, defiant, perverse, ungrateful sinners. The wonder and glory of the grace disclosed in the economy of our salvation is finally dismissed in McCormack's pronouncement, "the preexistent Logos *as such* is a pure postulate, a human invention, alleged to be complete in itself without regard for its activity *ad extra*... an 'idol' by any other name."<sup>36</sup>

Molnar is unashamed to be identified with his Lord, with the free and gracious act of God in the accomplishment of our salvation, and with the truth that the heart of God (immanent Trinity), never collapsed into the face of God, not only does not differ from that face (economic Trinity) but cannot. Taking his stand here he will gladly bear the reproach of 'idolatry', with his belief in and espousal of the Logos *asarkos*.

Molnar is eager, however, not to stand alone. He concludes his book where he began:

"My goal was to illustrate that there could be substantial agreement between Roman Catholics and Protestants regarding such crucial themes as nature and grace, revelation, theological anthropology, and the doctrine of God... if and to the extent that they allowed Jesus

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<sup>36</sup> Molnar (181), quotation from McCormack, 253.

Christ in his uniqueness to be the first and final word in their theology” (185).

### Conclusion

Paul Molnar’s book discusses thinkers of diverse denominational commitments, eras, political contexts, and genders: Lutheran (Bultmann and Tillich), Anglican (Robinson), Reformed (Reichel and McCormack), and Roman Catholic (Rahner, Johnson). Molnar’s exposition spans decades as well, from the 1920s to contemporaneity. Yet he finds all whom he surveys alike lacking the theological (i.e., Christological) profundity and penetration reflected in the work of Thomas F. Torrance.

Torrance insists, following the logic of Scripture, that we can know God only by being included in God’s self-knowing. And we can be included in God’s self-knowing only as we are united to the Incarnate Son by Spirit-quickened faith. Throughout the book Molnar exposes how beginning anywhere else entails a denial of God’s objectivity, since the immanent Trinity is then invariably collapsed into the economic Trinity, with the result that an effect or benefit or blessing may be a gift of God but never the gift of God Himself since for Torrance grace cannot be detached from Christ, the giver of grace.

Repudiated throughout is any notion that we may begin with human experiences of whatever sort, and then conclude something about God and our involvement with Him. Without explicitly naming the Hebrew logic of Scripture, Molnar is aware that the characteristic of the living God is that He acts and speaks in Son and Spirit — and therefore that any deity who is concluded, inferred, or deduced by thinking from a center in ourselves is *ipso facto* an idol. For this reason Molnar indicates how it is that any theology that begins anywhere but with Jesus Christ as God’s *first* and *final* Word turns people back on themselves, confuses God’s speaking and acting with their own, and substitutes a deity made in our image for the God who is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not least, Molnar exposes the theological weakness of confusing processions with missions: while the Son is appointed to become Incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth for our salvation (mission), the eternal generation of Son (procession) can neither be reduced to the

mission nor can the missions be read back into the immanent Trinity; otherwise the mission is said to constitute the Trinity, and the eternality of God's Triune objectivity is surrendered.

While the book's articulation is precise and its argumentation unexceptionable, the mood of the book is never caustic. Its critical note always subserves the book's purpose; namely, a magnification of the astounding gift of grace that is nothing less than the giver Himself. Readers will be reminded that for this reason there will always be more mercy in God than there is sin in us; and Christ's grip on us His people will ever be stronger than our grip on Him.