

Interview of ALASDAIR HERON

Todd Speidell

Alasdair Heron (Born 1942, began school in Scotland 1947; 1956-1961 Fettes College, Edinburgh; 1961-1965 Classics and Moral Sciences in Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge; 1965-1968 Divinity in New College, Edinburgh; 1973 Dr. Theol., Tübingen; 1973-1974 Research Lecturer, Irish School of Ecumenics, Dublin; 1974-1981 Lecturer, New College, Edinburgh; 1981-2007 Chair of Reformed Theology, Erlangen)

TS: You have known the Torrance clan for a long time. Can you describe your personal history with this historic family?

AH: A very wide question! I knew of Tom Torrance years before I met him, for my father, John Heron, was closely associated with him in the 1950s in the Church of Scotland Special Commission on Baptism. Personal contact with Tom and James began when I came to New College, Edinburgh, in 1965 and was taught by both, particularly when in my third year I specialized in Dogmatics (with Calvin and Tillich as my special subjects). After my graduation it was Tom who suggested the topic for my doctoral dissertation — Didymus the Blind of Alexandria — though at his suggestion the dissertation was eventually submitted in Tübingen, not in Edinburgh, because he felt that the direction of my research was becoming primarily philological and historical and “the Germans are keener on that sort of study.”

It was Tom who put me in touch a year or two later with the Irish School of Ecumenics, where I taught ecumenical theology in 1973-74, and Tom again who then suggested I come to his department in New College to teach in dogmatics. I worked closely with him there till his retirement in 1979, among other things also taking on the editing of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* for some twenty years. I also worked a great deal with James both before and after his departure from Aberdeen, e.g. as examiner in Systematic Theology for the Aberdeen faculty



when I was still in Edinburgh, or in the 1980s, when I was already in Erlangen, in the BCC commission on *The Forgotten Trinity*, which he chaired. This is to say nothing of David, though contact with him was much more occasional, or of the next generation, particularly Iain, now President of Princeton Seminary, who still edits *SJT*, and Alan, who briefly worked with me in Erlangen (and later completed his doctorate there) and is now Professor in St. Andrews. I have had to do with all these Torrances in the last thirty-five years! But there is no doubt that Tom was the towering figure and for me the most influential.

TS: Hm, Calvin and Tillich. How did you find your way theologically to Barth and Torrance? And what do you think of “the major divide of Barth vs. Tillich” dominating 20th century theology, especially in light of your own early research focus on Calvin and Tillich?

AH: The way to Barth and Torrance was already paved by my studies in Edinburgh. The choice of Calvin and Tillich for the final exams was because of an interest I developed in both at New College (which was also approved by Tom as my chief supervisor). My father had also studied with Tillich in Union Seminary in 1937/38 and I still remember his verdict when Tillich died in 1965: “A fine Christian, a great philosopher and a heretic!” At that time, however, I inclined — like many others then — to see Tillich as the major alternative to Barth so far as method in systematic theology was concerned. (I even chose Tillich as the subject for my oral doctoral examination in Systematics with Jürgen Moltmann in Tübingen — an experience I still remember as a classical instance of bumpy reciprocal communication, though it fortunately did not damage the degree result!) By the time I wrote my *Century of Protestant Theology* in the late 1970s I had modified that view somewhat, and my experience with teaching students in more recent years suggests that Tillich (unlike Barth, but perhaps like much existentialist, process, contextual or political theology) has become very dated and remote, indeed almost incomprehensible for today’s young theological students. There is still — or was the last time I looked a few years ago — a kind of academic Tillich fan club active in Germany which holds conferences and publishes in Lit Verlag, but that seems to me now an increasingly shrinking private preserve with little impact or resonance outside the group of insiders. The architecture of Tillich’s philosophical theology remains intellectually challenging for those who make the

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effort to understand it, but in the end amounts to little more than an imposing glass-bead game whose internal complexity conceals its distance from reality in any ordinary sense. In this sense one might say that Tillich in the end never ceased to be a late echo of German Idealism — not really surprising when one remembers that his early academic work was on Schelling.

TS: GWB, who did PhD work on German Romanticism, and TFT shared a disdain for contemporary theology.

AH: You are referring I think to Geoffrey Bromiley's enquiry in his later years whether death of God theology was still alive! He and Tom certainly shared the conviction that much of what passed in their day for fashionable theology was vacuous. Tom at least believed much of it to be positively harmful — his denunciation of "subjectivity" in a Cambridge University Sermon in 1965 still rings in my ears forty years on! And I must admit that influenced me both as a student and later, though I was perhaps somewhat more sympathetic to some contextual concerns than he was.

TS: Do you think that the so-called 20th century divide between Barth and Tillich is still a fruitful conversation? If so, on what basis, or if no, why not?

AH: For the reasons indicated above I rather doubt whether the specific divide between Barth and Tillich is likely to be very fruitful. But the divide between their approaches can still be relevant if it is seen as the contrast between theology and church on the one hand and theology and culture on the other. Whereby culture perhaps tends to change rather more than church!

TS: A question on TFT and Scotland: how do you assess his reading of Scottish theology, his impact upon the Scottish church and its ministry, and his significance as a conduit for Barth's influence in Scotland?

AH: Without analyzing these questions in detail, which would take much too long, I would say that the Scottish context (also as reflected in his writing, including *Scottish Theology*) cannot be left out of sight. Much of the Torrancian theology was forged in critical debate with a specifically Scottish version of Calvinism which is still in the air in Scotland, though having lost its determining influence in the nineteenth century. Again, Tom's importance as a mediator of Barth to Scotland and the Anglo-Saxon world is immeasurable: he was not the first here

— in Scotland that distinction belongs to people like George Hendry with his *God the Creator* — but he was particularly industrious and influential over long years; he also stood even closer to Barth than most others.

His impact on the Scottish church and ministry as they are today is more difficult for me to assess: I have been working outside Scotland for nearly thirty years and several of those most influenced by Tom have also spent many years abroad. It may be that TFT's work today has wider influence in North America than Scotland. But others in the *Participatio* circle are better placed to assess that than I am.

TS: How did you become Editor of *SJT*?

AH: Soon after I joined the staff of New College in 1974 Tom presented me with headed *SJT* notepaper carrying my name and New College address. That, as I remember, was it.

TS: What are your reflections on TFT as an ecclesialogist and theologian of the sacraments, as well as a churchman and ecumenist?

AH: Big words for big fields! I would say they apply especially to the middle period of Tom's theology, up to the early 1960s, the period of *Conflict and Agreement*, though of course they did not disappear after that. In brief: Tom was a major spokesman of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition in the ecumenical context of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the setting of ecclesiastical and theological dialogue with the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions. His hopes for major theological and ecclesiological reunification were not realized in his time, however, and their fulfillment has not become any more likely in recent years.

That also to some extent pulls away the carpet from under serious ecumenical engagement with themes of ecclesiology and the sacraments, where at least at the highest official church level there has been very little movement and no real advance for decades in spite of the Roman Catholic/Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. At the level of international and regional, national or local ecumenical meetings the traditions do continue talking to and even (especially locally) working with each other, but that is about all. We are a long way from the heady days around 1960 and the Second Vatican Council. But now I am giving you the slightly tired view of one who under Tom's influence began

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forty years ago as an enthusiastic if critical ecumenical theologian, one who really thought intensive theological exchange on themes of ecclesiology and the sacraments would bring us further than it has actually proved to do...

TS: Do you find that many Barth and Torrance scholars are as interested in constructive theology as KB and TFT were?

AH: Both Barth and Torrance produced so much writing and went through such interesting stages of development in changing cultural, political and ecclesiastical contexts that they supply vast mining areas for continuing research. The temptation is then for such research to focus on "getting them right" as opposed to the many misinterpretations to be encountered along the way. Even when it is accurately done, that kind of hermeneutics easily gets stuck in what they would both have regarded as myopic historicism which is no longer able to ask what they would say today or tomorrow — or what we should say today or tomorrow. The best scholarship on both recognizes and seeks to avoid this trap, but that is not entirely easy because most Barth or Torrance scholars are operating in their own, sometimes very different cultural, political and ecclesiastical situations.

TS: Ray Anderson, Tom's student and my mentor, reclaimed Tom as a practical theologian, and yet others read him as a mere academic preoccupied with epistemology and philosophy of science. What are your thoughts on these very different assessments of his work and concerns?

AH: Ray was outstanding among Tom's students in recognizing and spelling out the profound practical implications of his theology, and doing so in his own inimitable way. (I still possess a copy of *The Gospel according to Judas* which Ray gave me in Fuller in 1992.) Not all students saw this, perhaps because (a) they had little contact with Tom in any pastoral, liturgical or other practical context and (b) he did have a tendency to challenge them so frontally that they shied away in aversion. Think of the apparent gusto with which he retailed stories of elders in his congregations in Alyth and Aberdeen who were so angered and upset by the preaching of free grace that they shortly afterwards "tumbled down into the grave!" And of course there were on the other side those who were more fascinated by the intellectual and methodological challenges of Tom's theology, both as a model of disciplined theological thinking and for the avenues it opened into academically satisfying theological work.

TS: What do you make of the common charge that Tom read his own “Barthian” theology back into Calvin and the Greek Fathers (and some critics like one of my former professors, Richard Muller, claim into all of historical theology!)? Do you think his critics were onto a point (and if so, what’s the most serious charge?) or do you think there’s a greater point of misunderstanding on their side?

AH: There is a certain valid point here. Attentive readers will see hints at it in my paper in *Participatio* on TFT’s use of Calvin. But it tends to be exaggerated by unsympathetic critics. Tom did not regard historical theology as a spectator sport for detached observers, but as part of an ongoing enterprise still continuing in the present. In a sense he saw the Greek fathers or reformers like Calvin, if not as immediate contemporaries, nevertheless as engaged in the same enterprise albeit across historical and cultural distances of time and space. This can bring with it the risk of interpreting them a little too strongly in terms of one’s own theological perspective or of selecting one-sidedly what one finds most useful for one’s own reflection. But tendencies in this direction do not outweigh TFT’s massive absorption in the work of these earlier theologians or the huge erudition he amassed. To say nothing of the fact that his critics sometimes have an agenda of their own which may be different from his but equally or more open to question. When, for example, they can point out places where he has misinterpreted one of his authorities, that is fair enough and such misinterpretations deserve to be corrected. But when criticism goes so far as to suggest, for example, against Tom that there is no substantial difference between Calvin and later forms of Calvinism, or that the negative significance of “scholastic Calvinism” is exaggerated in the Torrances’ critique, that risks becoming historically misleading and even obscurantist.

TS: What aspects of Tom’s work do you think were most misunderstood, and why?

AH: The prior question is perhaps “misunderstood by whom”? Thinking back to my days in New College as a student in the 1960s and lecturer in the 1970s, I would think it fair to say that many students quite simply found him hard to understand. A fair number of faculty colleagues did not find themselves on his wavelength either. This was doubtless in part the reaction of less profound thinkers to his imposing presence but it also reflected a fair range of different

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competing understandings of the task of academic theology, both among the systematic theologians and between the different theological disciplines. That is already a complex enough picture without going on to reactions in the wider theological and ecumenical community. But there too one can distinguish between a significant minority of appreciative admirers and a larger majority who over the decades became at best indifferent, at worst hostile. But Tom is not the only major theological figure of whom one can say that!

TS: Tom was a bit prickly in his interactions with fellow theologians, many of whom he thought needed to be converted! Tom has also been embraced by others, with a fellowship and journal existing to continue his legacy. Why do you think he elicited the kinds of responses he did?

AH: Saying of an opponent that (s)he needs to be converted is a fairly massive strike that should generally be employed rarely and only when (a) seriously provoked and (b) likely to effect the conversion! (As I remember, Tom didn't actually say it very often, though one could sometimes sense that he thought it. He did, however, sometimes talk down to people, which is also not always a successful method of persuasion: it can leave resentment lingering long after the actual disagreement has faded from memory.) ... But why does anyone evoke both admiration and rejection? Big ships make waves and Tom was no lightweight coracle. But it is also true that he didn't hide his disdain for views and arguments — and sometimes people — he thought didn't deserve to be taken seriously. That could and sometimes did rebound. So much for the negative responses. I imagine the positive sides are already well known to the members of *Participatio*!

TS: What is your take on TFT's "new" natural theology in light of "old" natural theology embedded in what TFT develops within the ambit of revelation?

AH: This is the main point where Tom went deliberately beyond Barth; and it also became the central theme of his work in his later active decades from the late 1950s. He shared with some others the conviction that traditional constructions of an independent natural theology (which Barth rejected in all its different forms) were invalid and illegitimate, but that within the reference framework of divine revelation it was possible and indeed necessary to reintegrate the deliverances and discoveries of natural knowledge and in particular natural science and to see

them (1) as confirming the rationality of creation (and ultimately of God), (2) as cohering in depth with that rationality and so being in turn further illuminated by it, and in turn (3) as helping to clarify and open up new perspectives on the work of theology itself. This was the point where his repeated claims for “rational, scientific theology” came into play, in particular in regard to the development of genuinely scientific method in theology. That is also of course the point where he met not only agreement but also disagreement from others, both on the theological side and on that of natural science.

TS: Do you think there is any residue of the old natural theology that TFT theoretically rejected left in his thinking regarding the project of a new and transformed natural theology?

AH: There is more than a residue in that many of the concerns and even materials of older forms of natural theology are taken up and reincorporated in the new paradigm, but — in Tom’s understanding at least — on a different epistemological basis. He also believed here that he was following pointers laid down by Barth — see on this in particular the introduction to *Space, Time and Resurrection*, written in 1975 and recalling his last conversation with Barth in this specific methodological context.

TS: You mentioned that Tom met some disagreement from natural scientists. Can you specify and expand your point?

AH: First let me say that I was never really much involved directly in Tom’s conversations with natural scientists. He seems to me to have found most resonance with thinkers like Michael Polanyi who were passionately interested in the methodological and epistemological dimensions of natural scientific research and discovery — which most scientists, quite frankly, are not. And not all those who share Tom’s tough-minded critical realism. I have the impression from a distance that there is a widespread tendency in the continuing dialogue between theologians and scientists to take refuge on both sides in some form of weakly symbolic epistemology — so that neither appears to be making too great claims. That was not Tom’s approach, to put it mildly.

TS: What undeveloped frontiers do you see most fruitful to build upon Tom’s legacy, especially for young scholars who have found Tom’s theology as fruitful for their own ministry?

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AH: The continuing clarification of the foundation, sources and method of useful and constructive theological enquiry and the continuation of the dialogue between theology and other academic disciplines, including both the natural and the human sciences.

TS: Many thanks, Alasdair, for your personal take on Torrance, both the man and his theology.