

PERSONS, POWERS AND PLURALITIES

Flett, Eric G.

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The best kind of theology is generative. That is, it inspires others to take what they find, develop, expand, and apply it in ways that were perhaps never even imagined by the original author. One of the most encouraging things about the recent burgeoning of interest in T. F. Torrance is the way it has provoked a new generation of theologians to explore its implications for topics about which Torrance himself said very little. This is especially appropriate given that Torrance was essentially doing just this with his supreme mentor, Karl Barth. His pioneering work in theology and science, for example, amounts to a formidable attempt to press through the ramifications of Barth's work for a field relatively untouched by Barth himself.

So it is that Eric Flett, in this lucid and masterly revised doctoral dissertation, asks us to consider how Torrance can help us articulate a trinitarian theology of culture. Why might this be necessary or fruitful? After all, theologies of culture abound. The answer lies, I think, in the profoundly trinitarian character of Torrance's outlook. With very few exceptions, current Christian perspectives on, for example, the arts, politics and economics, are pervaded by what is in effect a unitarian metaphysics — in which a generic theism provides the basic outline, perhaps coloured in at various stages by an appeal to the trinitarian patterns of God's engagement with the world. Quite rightly, Flett, through Torrance, reorients the whole topic unashamedly around the triunity of God, not only as it is displayed in the economy of creation and salvation, but more fundamentally as it characterizes God's own life *ad intra*.

Thus Flett gives us an extended exposition of the Scottish theologian's conceptions of creation and humanity as they relate to the self-disclosure of the three-fold God — and, we might add, with a clarity not always evident in Torrance's own writing (!). Even on its own, this serves as a first-rate summary of Torrance's relational ontology. But the most original part of Flett's study concerns the way he takes this ontology and begins to work it out in relation to culture, focusing especially on Torrance's notion of "the social co-efficient of knowledge." He expands on the meaning of this term in relation to Torrance



himself, but extends its potential and implications beyond what Torrance himself envisaged. In the final chapter, he asks what it means for the life of the Church, not only as the site where the theological realities he has been speaking about are embodied, but also as the agent of transformation. He concentrates especially on the re-configuration of the concept of person, and on what Torrance calls “three masterful ideas” that shaped Western scientific culture: the unity, intelligibility, and freedom of the universe. Flett closes by “improvising” for us: sketching the relations between the triune personhood of God and “a design for living,” between the contingency of creation and the “principalities and powers,” and between human identity/agency and the plurality of human culture.

Flett has started the ball rolling in this field, orienting us in just the right direction. It is now for others — or perhaps Flett himself? — to take things much further than this, and show us in detail how *particular fields of cultural activity* can be transformed, in theory and practice, by the stunning theological vision Torrance has given us.

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