

**THOMAS F. TORRANCE AND THE CHURCH FATHERS:  
A REFORMED, EVANGELICAL, AND ECUMENICAL  
RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PATRISTIC TRADITION**

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T. F. Torrance, one of the greatest English-speaking theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is known for many things, but surely two of the most important are his interpretation of the Church Fathers and his substantive dialogue with Eastern Orthodox theologians. This book, a revision of a Ph.D. dissertation completed at the University of Edinburgh, brings these two aspects of Torrance's work together by focusing on his understanding of the *consensus patrum* and the ecumenical implications of that understanding.

The first two chapters set the stage for Radcliff's portrayal of Torrance's unique reconstruction of the patristic tradition by describing other historical attempts at patristic retrieval. Chapter one surveys such retrievals in Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and different eras of Protestantism. Radcliff unsurprisingly argues that Roman Catholic understandings of the *consensus patrum* have relied largely on Augustine as filtered through Aquinas, and that Eastern Orthodox reconstructions have viewed the Fathers through the lens of Gregory Palamas' famous distinction between the essence and energies of God. The early and later Reformers, according to Radcliff, sought to show the fundamental continuity between the Bible, the early Fathers, and their own teaching, in contrast to the distortions of Medieval Roman Catholicism. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, Protestants had divided into biblicists who essentially ignored the Church Fathers via a rigorous interpretation of *sola Scriptura*, and those like Harnack who saw the Fathers' message as a kernel of biblical truth surrounded by the chaff of Hellenistic philosophy. Then in chapter two Radcliff surveys three 20<sup>th</sup>-century evangelical rediscoveries of the Church Fathers. The first was a conversionist movement, in which evangelicals who rediscovered the Fathers converted to Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism. The second was the movement of Emerging Christianity, whose eclectic appropriation of early Christian practices and beliefs was as much a protest against seeker-sensitive worship as it was

a serious retrieval of the past. The third was the movement of Ancient-Future Christianity and Paleo-Orthodoxy represented by Robert Webber and Thomas Oden. Radcliff argues that this movement was a much more serious appropriation of the Fathers than the first two, but it tended to read Augustinian and Protestant theology back into the entire early Church.

Against this backdrop, Radcliff spends chapters three through five describing T. F. Torrance's approach to the *consensus patrum*. In chapter three, he points out that Torrance was unique as a *Western* theologian focusing almost exclusively on the *Greek* Fathers. He asserts that at the heart of Torrance's understanding of patristic theology lies the Nicene and Athanasian concept of the *homoousion*, from which Torrance argues against any dualism that would divide God as he is in himself from God as he has revealed himself to us. Chapter four describes Torrance's famous demarcation of patristic theology into two axes and two streams. Torrance sees a sharp distinction between the Athanasian-Cyrrillian axis founded on the *homoousion* and the Cappadocian axis with its inherent dualism between who God is and how he reveals himself to us, and he believes that both the Byzantine and the Medieval streams of thought were plagued by such dualism. In chapter five, Radcliff asserts that the significance of Torrance's approach lies in the fact that he remains faithful to the central tenets of Reformed theology (especially the divine initiative in salvation) while seeking genuine dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox. His proposal to return to the Athanasian-Cyrrillian axis requires both Reformed and Orthodox to "unknow" (p. 170) certain elements of their own tradition, elements that Torrance attributes to the dualism that infected both Byzantine and Western theology later in Christian history.

While chapters three through five are mainly descriptive, Radcliff also highlights the most significant and brilliant of Torrance's insights into the Fathers and into Christian theology more generally. For example, he explains Torrance's notion of scientific or "objective" theology, in which God as object is known only through his self-revelation, and he insists that this means that biblical words always point beyond themselves to the divine realities to which they refer (p. 81). Radcliff does well to emphasize this, because in an academic world that tends to oscillate between biblical *words* and theological *concepts*, Torrance's insistence that we focus on the divine *reality* stands as an important corrective. Radcliff similarly points out that Torrance did not hold to the distinction between Alexandrian and Antiochene Christology and that his role in moving patristics scholarship away from that dichotomy (which had dominated early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship) "cannot be overstated" (p. 95). This too is a valuable point, especially considering that the alleged Antiochene/Alexandrian dichotomy *still*

*does* dominate textbooks on historical theology, church history, and the history of interpretation.

Radcliff's book concludes with an assessment of Torrance's *consensus patrum* and a proposed manner of adopting it. He emphasizes the importance of Torrance's claim that one can see contemporary evangelicalism, just as much as Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy, as the heir of patristic theology (p. 184). He correctly points out that Torrance's focus on the ontology and personhood of Christ can provide an important corrective to typical Reformed thought focusing more exclusively on atonement (p. 192). In the midst of Radcliff's great appreciation for Torrance, he also expresses significant reservations. He argues that Torrance's criticism of the Cappadocians may actually have been aimed at the contemporary dualism of John Zizioulas and may have reflected the 1980s more than the 380s (p. 194; cf. p. 137). Similarly, Radcliff disapprovingly notes one of the most frustrating aspects of Torrance's work: he "hardly discusses other patristic scholars or secondary texts and is not always entirely transparent about his filters for reading The Fathers" (p. 194). Radcliff summarizes both his appreciation and his reservations by claiming that while evangelical patristic scholarship needs more nuance than is evident in Torrance's Athanasian/Cappadocian line of demarcation, such scholarship also needs to learn from Torrance's contention that there were streams of thought in patristic theology, streams that we can and should elucidate without delineating them as starkly as Torrance did (p. 197).

This is a very helpful book. Radcliff has summarized the work of a prolific theologian writing about an immense body of theological literature, and I believe his summaries are generally fair and accurate. Radcliff succeeds well in capturing the central features of Torrance's reading of the Fathers, in pointing out problems with Torrance's *consensus patrum*, and in offering fruitful suggestions by which future research might avoid these problems.

At the same time, Radcliff's book would have been stronger with more attention to two major issues that perennially cloud any attempts to appropriate Torrance's *consensus patrum*. The first has to do with the way Torrance handles his patristic sources. Radcliff briefly discusses this matter (pp. 61-2), emphasizing that Torrance does not cite any given edition of the text and often cites many passages in the same footnote. What Radcliff implies but does not state, though, is that Torrance rarely quotes his sources. He includes many, many references, but rarely does he excerpt key passages and analyze them in detail. Radcliff would have done well to focus more attention than he did on the way Torrance uses his patristic sources. The second issue is whether Torrance reads too much

of his own theology (or perhaps, too much of Barth's theology) into the Church Fathers. One could argue that this is the elephant in the room, because the validity of Torrance's approach to the Fathers would be seriously undermined if indeed it were true that Torrance's Athanasius is simply Torrance (or Barth) in fourth-century garb. Radcliff addresses this issue in his conclusion (pp. 191-3), but considering its gravity, one might have expected him to have done more with it.

The fact that Radcliff's book does not go deeper into those two questions does not in any way diminish its usefulness, but it does place the book's value in a different sphere than would have been the case if he had addressed them more substantially. A scholar who is unconvinced by Torrance's interpretation of patristic theology is not going to be persuaded by Radcliff's work. The elephant is still in the room. But at the same time, Torrance's approach to patristic theology is deeply provocative and — if it is even partially correct in its main assertions — profoundly significant. In my opinion, we disregard Torrance's interpretations at our own peril. At a time when not only scholars but even lay people are increasingly interested in the early Church, Torrance's *consensus patrum* deserves a broader hearing than it has received thus far. By pointing us to Torrance's reading of the Fathers, Radcliff has done the evangelical scholarly community, the broader evangelical community, and indeed the still broader ecumenical community, a great service.

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