

***CULTURE AS A SOCIAL COEFFICIENT:
TOWARD A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF CULTURE***

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Introduction

'Let us now reflect a little on the way in which Christian understanding of God as the Holy Trinity bears upon our human culture, in science and philosophy and in our social developments.'¹

This unassuming comment by Thomas F. Torrance appeared in the midst of an essay on 'The Trinitarian Structure of Theology' in his 1985 book *Reality and Scientific Theology*. His words capture, in the simplest form, the concerns of this essay.

In sum, this essay will suggest that Thomas F. Torrance, churchman, philosopher of science and 'scientific theologian', may be read as a theologian of culture, and that in his writings may be found the clues and resources necessary for the development of a theology of culture that is distinctively trinitarian. Those resources, in particular, may be found through thinking together his doctrine of God as triune Creator, creation as contingent and the human person as a 'priest of creation and mediator of order'. These three ideas form the basis of, in the words of Torrance, 'the ontological substructure of our social existence.' This ontological substructure of our social existence' both necessitates and generates what Torrance refers to as 'social coefficients of truth' and it is these social coefficients of truth that bear a striking resemblance to modern anthropological theories of culture, both in their development and function.

However, while most anthropological theories of culture would understand the idea of God to be a cultural product, when placed within the framework provided by Torrance's doctrines of God, creation and humanity, culture may be seen as the invention of a triune Creator, the purpose of which is to bear witness to the creativity of God, to sustain the frailty and manifest the glory of the human creature formed in the divine

¹ T.F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, vol. 1, *Theology and Science at the Frontiers of Knowledge* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 192.

image, and as a tool for the advancement and embodiment of God's purposes for the world.

To suggest that Torrance may be read as a theologian of culture is, in one sense, to assert the obvious. Torrance has reflected theologically on numerous facets of the human experience and his engagements with Western scientific philosophy and culture have earned him significant recognition. In continuity with Niebuhr he has articulated a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the relationship between Christ and culture, primarily through his reflections on the God of Jesus Christ as the triune Creator of a contingent creation. In continuity with Tillich his work embodies the critical utilization of Western scientific culture as a positive theological resource. And in implicit recognition of the importance of doing theology contextually his work addresses the distinctive thought forms and epistemological concerns of Western culture as a whole, although his interest in 'scientific theology' goes well beyond the specific concerns of the West. That Torrance has reflected theologically on many areas of human cultural achievement, as well as the worldview assumptions that give rise to those achievements, would seem to be beyond dispute.

However, does the above legitimate our suggestion that Torrance be read as a theologian of culture *per se*? Does Torrance's thought provide us with clues and resources for thinking about the nature, dynamics and purpose of culture *in an anthropological sense*?² If so, then are the resources on offer in Torrance's thought such that a distinctively *trinitarian* theology of culture may be developed from them? This essay will operate from the assumption that both queries may be answered positively. In order to demonstrate the appropriateness of this assumption we will explore Torrance's

² See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) chapter 1 for a brief survey of the historical and semantic development of the term.

conception of ‘the social coefficient of knowledge’ and note that the distinctive dynamics of this concept are (1) rooted in Torrance’s doctrines of God as triune, creation as contingent and the human person as a mediator of order and priest of creation, and (2) that this concept bears a striking resemblance to contemporary anthropological understandings of culture, both in terms of how social coefficients of truth are formed and how they function. However, due to the limitations of the time we have together, I will only be able to adequately develop Torrance’s thoughts on the *formation* of social coefficients, leaving the particular *functions* of the social coefficient to be developed at another time.

TORRANCE'S THEOLOGY OF CULTURE: A SOCIAL COEFFICIENT OF KNOWLEDGE

For Torrance, social coefficients of truth, both their formation and function, emerge from a relational matrix that involves three objects: a triune Creator, a contingent creation and a human creature that bears the image of its Creator. As an image bearing creature the human person has been created in continuity with the contingent order, but also in distinction from it. That distinction lies in its constitution in the image of a triune God and as such, a creature that has been entrusted with a cultural task that is doxologically motivated. As such, the human person is a 'mediator of order' and a 'priest of creation'. The fulfillment of this task is made possible through the mediation and transformation of 'social coefficients of knowledge'. These coefficients function as tools for the sustenance of the human creature, the flourishing of the created order and the fulfillment of God's purposes for it. Their formation and function are fully rooted in Torrance's trinitarian understanding of the relations between God, creation and humanity, and bear a striking resemblance to contemporary anthropological understandings of human culture. Consequently, this concept may serve as a heuristic basis for the development of a theology of culture that is trinitarian in nature and congruent with Torrance's overall theological project.

Introducing the Term

Torrance mentions the concept of a 'social coefficient of knowledge' throughout his writings, and it is a prevalent theme in his thinking. However, he has only explicitly developed that theme on a few occasions: in his 1970 Harris Lectures, delivered at the University of Dundee under the title 'God and the World' and in his Didsbury Lectures delivered at The British Isles Nazarene College in 1982. The former lecture series was expanded and published as the book *Reality and Scientific Theology*, with chapter 4

entitled ‘The Social Coefficient of Knowledge’.¹ The latter lecture series was expanded and published as *The Mediation of Christ*, with chapter 1 treating Israel as a social coefficient of knowledge under the heading ‘The Mediation of Revelation’.² The two treatments are complementary, the latter being an illustrative case study of how the conceptuality of the former functions in terms of God’s formation of Israel as ‘the womb of Christ’ and the ‘conceptual tools’ that are necessary in order to apprehend divine revelation. Another ‘case study’ may be found in Torrance’s 1992 essay ‘The Christian Apprehension of God the Father’ in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*.³ An additional work worth mentioning, and perhaps Torrance’s most extended engagement with a facet of contemporary culture other than Western science (even though in conversation with it), is *Juridical Law and Physical Law: Toward a Realist Foundation for Human Law*. This monograph also incorporates Torrance’s thinking on the social coefficient of knowledge as a basis for transforming the nature and function of canon law and legal institutions, and consequently the role a specific social coefficient may have on broader cultural structures.

Engagement with this aspect of Torrance’s thought has been sparse, although some important and invaluable studies have appeared demonstrating the broad applicability of this concept for understanding the nature of doctrine⁴ and accounting for social and subjective factors in the epistemological process.⁵ It seems clear the direct intention of Torrance in the development of this concept is for epistemological and doctrinal matters, however, Torrance also seems to suggest throughout his writings that with this concept he is articulating far more than simply the parameters of a ‘research

¹ See Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 98-130.

² See T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992)1-23.

³ T.F. Torrance, ‘The Christian Apprehension of God the Father’, in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992)120-43.

⁴ See Elmer M. Colyer, *The Nature of Doctrine in T. F. Torrance’s Theology* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 93-127.

tradition'.⁶ He refers not only to the church as a social coefficient but also to Israel as well,⁷ which suggests that the concept may be expanded and used as a model for understanding the nature and dynamics of human society and culture, thus putting on offer resources for understanding the emergence, purpose and plurality of human culture from within a trinitarian theological framework.

Torrance utilizes a plethora of terms, concepts, and images in articulating his understanding of the social coefficient of knowledge.⁸ In order for us to begin to unfold this important conceptual tool, we will have to form a conceptual tool of our own by attempting an early and intuitive definition of the concept.

For Torrance, a social coefficient of knowledge is *the social embodiment of a knowing relation*. They serve as a subjective and social lens through which persons are enabled to participate in a knowing relation with realities that are external to them, and to be modified by those realities in an appropriate manner. The consequence is a dynamic social reality that enables, sustains and embodies the knowing relation central to it.

In order to develop the term we will consider how social coefficients are *formed*, and, very briefly, how they *function*. In the process of doing so I will mention a number of subpoints under each heading that I hope will make clear both the trinitarian logic that underlies the concept, as well as the applicability and usefulness of the concept for understanding the origin, purpose and plurality of human culture – a task I understand to be central to the development of a theology of culture.

⁵ See Mark P. Achtemeier, 'The Truth of Tradition: Critical Realism in the Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre and T. F. Torrance', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994), 355-74.

⁶ This is the way the concept is explored by Mark P. Achtemeier.

⁷ Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, chapter 1. Torrance also points out the correlation between the university as a place of research into the nature of the created order and the existence of a free society. Healthy social coefficients mediate knowledge of the real world that transforms persons and communities and so enables a free society.

⁸ In a single essay, Torrance has referred to the social coefficient of knowledge as a nurse, a framework, an environment, a matrix, and a medium. He refers to one of its central components as 'a predisposition lodged in our social consciousness'. It would seem that the anthropological equivalent to these descriptions would be 'world view'

The Formation of Social Coefficients

A. Social coefficients are *formed around knowing relations established with objective reality*

Social coefficients are formed around ‘knowing relations’, which, for Torrance, are composed of an objective and subjective pole. The object to be known in this relation exists apart from the subjectivity of the knower, even if the subjectivity of the knower plays an indispensable role in enabling and expressing the knowing relation.

However, the subjective and objective poles in the knowing relation are not the only variables that contribute to the shape of the social coefficient, the actual *relation* between the two poles is also a variable, and that relation can be healthy, translucent and ‘apposite’ or unhealthy and distorted. These three variables: the objective pole, the subjective pole, and the quality of the relation between them, act together to form particular social coefficients.⁹ Social coefficients are driven and determined, shaped and embodied by the dynamic interaction that takes place in history between these variables.

Since the relation between these two poles of the knowing relation is as important as the poles themselves, Torrance clarifies the role and function of each pole in the knowing relation. It is the objective pole of the knowing relation that is to determine the means by which the intelligible ground of reality is *engaged and known*, while it is the subjective pole of the knowing relation that determines the way it is *received and reflected*. This is simply another way of saying that the object one seeks to know must determine the way in which it is known, while also recognizing that the way in which something is known is made possible through, and conditioned by, subjective factors.

and perhaps the sociological equivalent would be Berger’s ‘plausibility structure’. See Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 98-127.

⁹ See Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 190ff. for a discussion of ‘the subject-object-relation model’ as applied to an understanding of the Holy Trinity.

With these clarifications it is clear that Torrance is asserting a certain asymmetry in the knowing relation, with priority being given to the objective pole, in that it is to determine how it is to be known and under what conditions. This is rooted in Torrance's assertion that the contingent order, though having a distinct rationality of its own, and characterized by a freedom and flexibility gifted to it by its Creator, nevertheless has been given determinate boundaries that must be respected, boundaries that, according to Torrance, are frequently violated when an inordinate priority has been given to the agency of the human subject in the knowing process.¹⁰ Such violations not only threaten the integrity of the objective pole of the knowing relation, but have detrimental effects on the subjective pole as well.

B. Social coefficients are socially constructed *matrices formed through a historical process*

Secondly, Torrance's emphasis on the priority of the objective pole in the knowing relation does not prevent him from affirming that *social coefficients are socially constructed matrices formed through a historical process*. A knowing relation is a relation that is dialogical and dialectical in nature. It takes place in history between an objective and subjective pole and the consequence of that dialogical relation is the social embodiment of the knowing relation. Torrance describes the process between God and the formation of Israel as a covenant people in these terms. This 'covenant partnership between God and Israel involved a running conflict between divine revelation and what St. Paul called "the carnal mind."¹¹ That 'running conflict' took place within the

¹⁰ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 8.

¹¹ Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 10. The subjective pole of the knowing relation is described here in negative terms, as something that is 'carnal' and as such constantly in conflict with divine revelation. For Torrance, this is rooted in the fallen nature of the human mind and not in any deficiency of the created order or the ability of history to mediate divine revelation. That this conflict takes place is a reminder that human persons are in need of redemption and transformation. It is not a general statement about the ultimate value of the subjective pole of the knowing relation, which Torrance understands as both essential and good. This is rooted in Torrance's doctrines of creation and incarnation.

boundaries of the created order and involved, not only the thinking of a particular people, but their entire way of life.

For Torrance social coefficients, and the epistemological projects or knowing relations they bear witness to, are sustained by what he calls a ‘circle of knowing’. The dynamics of this circle are very similar to the dialectical process that Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe in their work *The Social Construction of Reality*.¹²

There are three distinguishable steps or ‘moments’ (as Berger refers to them) in the dialectical process that serve as the basis for Berger’s theory of culture:

Externalization, whereby the needs of the human creature are externalized into the physical and social world. This is due to the fact that the human creature enters the world incomplete, making externalization an anthropological necessity. In the words of Clifford Geertz,

We are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture – and not through culture in general, but highly particular forms of it.¹³

Objectivation, whereby the products of externalization, both material and symbolic, come to confront the human person as a facticity outside of itself, even though they originated in the subjectivity of the self. What was once constructed by the self, now has the power to not only instruct the self, but to destroy the self.

The final ‘moment’ in Berger’s dialectical theory of culture is **internalization**, whereby the objectivated externalized world is reabsorbed into the consciousness of the

¹² A more condensed version of the process described in *The Social Construction of Reality* may be found in Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1969)1-28 with a more condensed version still in Wuthnow, et al., *Cultural Analysis*, 34ff.

¹³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 49.

human person, and where the structures of that world ‘come to determine the subjective structures of consciousness itself.’¹⁴

The dialectic that stands at the basis of Berger’s theory of culture, with its three ‘moments’ of externalization, objectivation and internalization, may also be discerned in the thought of Torrance regarding the formation of social coefficients. This similarity extends not only to the actual dialectic itself, but also, to some degree, to the anthropological and cosmological assumptions upon which it is based.

Where Berger and Geertz ground the dialectic that stands at the basis of society in human biological incompleteness, Torrance would locate it in the creation of the human person in the image of the triune God and the vocation of the human person as a priest of creation. For Berger, the fundamental plasticity and sociality of the human organism leads to a diversity of social constructions and a willingness and ability to be formed by what the human organism creates.¹⁵ For Torrance, the plasticity of the contingent order as a whole, and the sociality of the human person, become the basis for the expression of the image of God and the fulfillment of human stewardship by enabling cultural plurality and by making it possible for the human person to take on a concrete cultural identity through the process of internalization. This is a normative feature in the process of becoming a person. Torrance also understands that very plasticity and sociality to be just as much a threat to the human person as it is the very essence of the uniqueness and dignity of human persons created in the image of God. This is because the very openness of the human person to the world that this requires also opens the human person to being determined by the world they are open to.

¹⁴ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 15.

¹⁵ Torrance also recognizes the ‘plasticity’ of the human person and understands this plasticity as a quality of personhood: ‘As person...man is the being who is open to others as well as to the world’ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 193.

In order to set the human person free to be *determinate* without being *determined* a transcendent reference point is required.¹⁶ For Torrance, this reference point is the triune God, and it is this reference point that safeguards the personal structure of human being even while safeguarding the plasticity of the human person from becoming a means of bondage as opposed to liberation and the fulfillment of its unique *telos*. A dialectic of externalization, objectivation and internalization that is incongruent with the divine *telos* for the created world evolves into the determination and oppression of creaturely being and the subversion of the human vocation as priest of that created order. This is summed up by Torrance in the following way:

I submit that it is only through a divine Trinity who admits us to communion with himself in his own transcendence that we can be consistently and persistently personal, with the kind of freedom, openness and transcendent reference which we need both to develop our own personal and social culture and our scientific exploration of the universe.¹⁷

What Torrance introduces here is the idea that social coefficients, like the human organisms that generate them, are incomplete in themselves. They are realities that require completion beyond themselves in order to fulfill their reason for being. For Torrance, the purpose of the social coefficient is to mediate meaning, primarily by placing human persons in contact with an external world. However, the external world they are placed in contact with is also contingent, and as such cannot bear the burden of meaning without a transcendent reference point or orientation.

This brings us to the third and final component central to the formation of social coefficients: they are not only formed around knowing relations, nor only through a

¹⁶ Perhaps a reminder is in order here. Torrance fully affirms the goodness of being created a determinate being. This is not a negative quality of being human that must be transcended. As noted in chapter four, the determinate nature of human life is rooted, not in the Fall or human sin, but in the declaration of the created order as 'good' by its Creator and the assumption, resurrection and redemption of the created order through the incarnate Christ. For Torrance being *determinate* is good, for it means the realization of God's good purposes for the creature. However, being *determined* for Torrance takes on a different meaning, where the identity and ultimate purpose of the human creature is defined solely by its relation to the created order and not the Creator who brought it into being. Whether something is determinate or determined can only be discerned through an understanding of that object's *telos*.

historical process; they are also formed in an effort to achieve or fulfill a particular goal or *telos*. That goal or *telos* is to mediate and sustain meaning and, consequently, the personal beings whose identities and projects are formed upon the basis of those semantic constructs.

C. Social coefficients are socially constructed matrices oriented toward a specific telos

The primary function of the social coefficient is to put the human subject in contact with an external world, and upon the basis of this contact to lodge meaning and significance in a place that is external to the subjective pole of the knowing relation, namely, the human self.

To accomplish this task, the symbols, structures and rituals that orient the members of a social coefficient must have a *semantic intentionality* that constantly refers them beyond themselves to the intelligible ground of reality where the true locus of meaning exists. For Torrance ‘it is this semantic intentionality that gives meaning to the whole framework of human life so that without it every culture slips away into meaninglessness.’¹⁸

However, such an orientation does not come without struggle. As Torrance notes, ‘the social structure of human life struggles with adjustment to the insistent demands of intelligible reality, and is not infrequently found in flight from the self-criticism and discipline that knowledge of reality brings.’¹⁹ As mentioned above, social coefficients form through a dialectical and historical process. When a cultural form becomes, in the words of Berger, ‘objectivated’, it takes on an objectivity and facticity of its own, which is then internalized by the human subjects who participate in the life of that institution. If

¹⁷ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 196.

¹⁸ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 99.

these cultural forms are incongruent with the demands of reality, a painful transformation in the frame of human knowing must take place, where human social constructs are brought into a greater degree of correspondence and congruence with the objective pole of the knowing relation. This is a form of personal and social self-denial that comes through a process of great difficulty. It is not unlike the process of culture shock experienced by persons traveling to other cultures, who must make numerous individual and social adjustments in order to adapt and flourish in a profoundly different environment.

Requiring that symbols orient the human subject away from their own cultural embeddedness if they are to obtain and sustain meaning is not a form of semantic colonialism or cultural homogenization, where order and significance are impressed upon a community or culture from without and through a single source. What Torrance is suggesting is not a mimetic reproduction of ‘the regularities and invariances disclosed in the frame of created reality’, but rather a *correlation* between our diverse symbolic and cultural forms and created reality. What Torrance suggests is a *correspondence or congruence* that effectively transforms our symbols and structures from being merely reflections of our own in-turned self-consciousness to conceptual tools²⁰ that are suggestive²¹ and translucent.²²

As Torrance notes, ultimate reality

¹⁹ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 100. For Torrance, this struggle is exemplified in the life of Israel. See Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 10-12.

²⁰ For an explanation of this term see Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 6.

²¹ This is a term used with reference to art in particular, but can apply to all symbolic forms. See Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 98.

²² ‘Translucency’ is a quality that results when the appropriate correspondence has been achieved between a cultural form and external reality. When this occurs the cultural form may be described as ‘translucent’. This does not mean the cultural form loses its particularity, rather that the cultural form fulfills its purpose. See Torrance, ‘Christian Apprehension’, 126ff., where Torrance refers to the appropriate role of linguistic forms as ‘transparent media’ or ‘open analogies’ through which ‘the truth of God may disclose itself to us and through which the Word of God himself may sound through to us and be heard by us, and not some word of ours that we have projected into God’s mouth’ (129). See also his *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, where language is described as a ‘transparent medium’ (64) and where

acts *creatively* upon us, not to reproduce itself in our formalizing activities, but to call them, as it were, into contrapuntal sequences and patterns of an open texture through which it can reverberate or resound in the human spirit.²³

The language of improvisational music is most helpful in understanding the dynamic between subject and object that Torrance is describing here. As a musician engages a piece of music he or she is called upon not only to reflect accurately the particular qualities that make the piece of music this piece and not another, but also to bring something of him or herself to the piece in a fresh and creative way. A dialogical relation between the composition (objective pole) and the musician (subjective pole) exists, but without the expectation that there is going to be a mimetic correspondence between composition and performance. In fact, with jazz music in particular, for the composition to be rendered in a mimetic fashion would be a ‘violation’ of the ‘semantic intentionality’ of the piece, if in fact it was composed in such a way as to generate improvisational music. In addition, to so ‘flourish’ the piece as to make it unrecognizable would also be a violation of the composition by granting the subjective pole a freedom and autonomy beyond its purpose and bounds. In the first instance, the objective pole overshadows the subjective and in the second instance, the subjective pole overshadows the objective.

Torrance is not interested in mimetic reproductions of reality in our social life. His doctrine of God as triune, creation as contingent and the human person as a mediator of order will not allow for such an understanding. Though meaning is located in the objective pole of the knowing relation, that objective pole has been brought into being by the creative activity of a triune Creator and is characterized by a contingency that cannot be captured by any single form of social life. The created contingent order is ‘infinitely

linguistic forms, in dialogue with intelligible reality, are to serve as ‘apposite ways of representing the structured objectivities of the universe’ (62).

²³ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 99. Italics mine.

suggestive'²⁴ and consequently there need be no fear that locating meaning there will homogenize cultural activity or cultural forms,²⁵ as any survey of the global Christian church will attest.

However, if social coefficients are meant to put human persons into touch with created reality, and by so doing to sustain their personal being, then we can expect some normative features to be present in human cultural constructs.²⁶ For Torrance, these normative features cannot be solely located in an impersonal created order, but in the transcendent ground of that order that is personal in nature. Ultimately to locate meaning in any other place is to invite the slow erosion of that which is distinctly personal. It is to cut human persons adrift from the 'personal and transcendent ground of their being' – an Archimedean point he identifies as the triune God of Jesus Christ. It is here where Torrance's trinitarian grounding of the social coefficient becomes most clear.

The Archimedean Point

For the social coefficient to fulfill its distinctive purpose or *telos*, namely, to mediate and embody a knowing relation between an objective reality and a subjective knower, an Archimedean point is required. This Archimedean point provides a reference around which the various coordinates in the knowing relation are oriented, thus providing, among another things, a transcendent ground for meaning. For Torrance, that Archimedean point is the triune God of Jesus Christ, as both the transcendent ground of meaning, and of personal being.

²⁴ This is a phrase used by jazz guitarist Pat Metheny when asked about his repeated performance of the Jobim song 'How Insensitive'. Metheny responded by saying that this particular song has a quality that makes it 'infinitely suggestive' and therefore an inexhaustible vehicle for improvisation. We propose that the contingent created order, and the God who has brought it into being, may also be so characterized.

²⁵ Even though this common engagement will result in physical and social structures that are universal and normative for human life, and which make broad structures of human understanding and community possible. See David W. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 48-58.

²⁶ Many of these normative features are noted in Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling*, chapter 2.

We mentioned earlier that the center of the social coefficient has three variables: the subjective pole, the objective pole and the quality of the relation that exists between them. Perhaps at this point we can suggest a fourth variable: where the social coefficient locates its transcendent ground of meaning, or how it identifies its ‘Archimedean point’.

27

Torrance notes frequently in his writing on the social coefficient of knowledge that

We need an Archimedean point far beyond us, and indeed beyond the world, through which we can be levered out of our rigid fixations and social mechanisms, and liberated for the pursuit of pure science concerned with reality for its own sake, and for the free and open-structured society that is correlated with it.²⁸

Torrance mentions the need for an Archimedean point for reasons that are rooted in his doctrines of creation and humanity and further identifies this Archimedean point as the triune God of Jesus Christ. He continues

He [God] is the one Archimedean point beyond the universe to whom the universe as a whole is so related that it is given authentic meaning...and the one Archimedean point to whom we are so related ...that we are constantly emancipated from ourselves and enabled to transcend the structures of our scientific and social activities.²⁹

Two questions immediately emerge: First, why must we recognize an Archimedean point as an essential component and variable of the social coefficient? In sum, what is its function? Second, what reasons compel Torrance to identify that

²⁷ We are here reminded that for Torrance meaning and rationality are multi-layered. Each social coefficient must reflect and/or recognize this ‘texturing’ of reality and meaning. Each of these layers must be properly tuned to the other and the only way of doing so is by recourse to an Archimedean point. This ‘texturing’ of reality and meaning will be discussed below as a feature of the social coefficient.

²⁸ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 117. With the social coefficient of knowledge Torrance is certainly developing an implicit social theory of his own, and by grounding scientific activity (understood in its broadest sense) in a social coefficient of knowledge, which in turn demands ‘faith in a transcendent reality’, an outline for a theology of culture is clearly suggested. Later, when Torrance identifies this transcendent reality as the triune God, the components for a theology of culture that is distinctly trinitarian in nature are in place.

²⁹ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 117. Italics original.

Archimedean point with the triune God of Jesus Christ? We will address each of these questions in turn with some extensive elaboration under each point.

a). *The Archimedean point as a ‘tuning fork’: its function*

For Torrance, the central function of the Archimedean point is that it serves as a fulcrum; a fulcrum through which we may escape ‘our rigid fixations and social mechanisms’. This ‘fulcrum’ is a conceptual tool (like a myth – the myth of progress) or objective reality (like God) that will set us free from the threats of social determinism, not by enabling us to transcend the historical character of human life, but by enabling us to discern its meaning, purpose and *telos*. As noted previously, the historical character of human life is rooted in our creation in the image of a triune God and the created order as contingent. Human life as intended by God is to be lived within the coordinates of space and time. However, when we situate human life within coordinates that are strictly rooted in the created order itself we lose our way in the world. It is as if we are orienting ourselves upon the basis of a faulty compass or a mis-drawn map. When this disorientation occurs, the social environment externalized and objectivated by the human person as a socio-cultural being undergoes a transformation. With no transcendent reference, a society closes in upon itself and becomes a product of its ‘rigid fixations’ – its unquestioned values, goals and gods. An environment meant to sustain and nurture human life in freedom becomes a ‘social mechanism’, with detrimental effects on human life, and indeed the entire created order. Torrance introduces the Archimedean point as a way to address this destructive dynamic.

The Archimedean point, when properly identified, ‘liberates’ the cultural process (described by Berger in terms of externalization, objectivation and internalization) by orienting the human agent beyond itself. Human cultural activity therefore, is no longer

rooted in what Ernest Becker has referred to as ‘the denial of death’³⁰ but rather a transcendent source of meaning and purpose. The Archimedean point in this way serves both a purpose of particular interest to Torrance (‘the pursuit of pure science concerned with reality for its own sake’), but also a goal of importance to us all (a ‘free and open-structured society that is correlated with it’). For Torrance, ‘science, faith in transcendent reality, and the free society are inseparately interlocked together’.³¹

To refer back to the musical imagery employed earlier, we might understand this fourth variable (the Archimedean point) as a ‘tuning fork’ that serves to keep the relations between the objective and subjective poles of the knowing relation ‘in tune’. The Archimedean point is not variable in a functional sense. All social coefficients operate with one, whether implicitly or explicitly. However, it can be identified in any number of ways. Torrance himself asserts that only the triune God of Jesus Christ can faithfully serve as the Archimedean point for our relations in the world in a way that ‘humanizes’ and ‘personalizes’ them and moves them toward God’s purposes for creation.

The triune God then becomes a ‘tuning fork’ for orienting our relations with each other, with God and with the created order in such a way that they approximate God’s intentions for the world. Freedom, purpose and meaning are the by products we experience as we approximate and embody these intentions in our social worlds.³²

At this point, let us summarize our argument thus far. We will then move on to consider why Torrance insists that the only Archimedean point adequate to serve as a

³⁰ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973) chapters 1 and 2.

³¹ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 117.

³² University of Chicago social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi notes in his book *Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), that the things we desire most in life (freedom, joy and contentment) are only found as by products of our full engagement in other tasks and not in directly pursuing these things in themselves. Nicholas Wolterstorff notes that the byproducts of shalom are ‘joy and delight’. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983)124ff.

tuning fork for the various social coefficients in the world is the triune God of Jesus Christ.

Torrance's anthropology requires that we affirm two realities: First, the necessity of social coefficients of knowledge if human persons are to 'be at home in the universe'.³³ To 'be at home in the universe' is to be a cultural being. Second, the necessity of a transcendent ground of meaning, or 'Archimedean point', to orient those social coefficients and the persons that indwell them. The human person, as a contingent being created in the image of God, is just as open to the world at its boundary conditions as the created order itself. This openness to the world is essential to our constitution not only as cultural beings, but also as personal beings. Yet, the very openness that makes personhood possible is also the same ground that makes the subversion of that personhood an ever present threat, unless personhood is ultimately grounded beyond the contingent order in an Agent who upholds it, even while doing so through the social structures that threaten to subvert it.

Consequently, what needs to be posited is 'a transcendent ground' for personhood and meaning that is not simply functional and rooted in human subjectivity, but that is congruent with the particular identity and task assigned the human person. For Torrance, this can be none other than the triune God of Jesus Christ, even if other 'transcendent grounds' may be recognized.

I submit that it is only through a divine Trinity who admits us to communion with himself in his own transcendence that we can be consistently and persistently personal, with the kind of freedom, openness and transcendent reference which we need both to develop our own personal and social culture and our scientific exploration of the universe.³⁴

b). *The Archimedean point as the triune God of Jesus Christ: its identity*

³³ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 114.

³⁴ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 196. This is yet another indication that for Torrance, the social coefficient of truth has implications much broader than the development of particular research traditions or paradigms.

Why is the proper identification of this Archimedean point so crucial for Torrance? If we were to draw a few conclusions from the material just cited, the ontological integrity of the human person, the health of our personal and social worlds, and our progress in scientific knowledge are, for Torrance, dependent upon the proper identification of this Archimedean point. It also seems clear from Torrance that this Archimedean point must be identified as the triune God of Jesus Christ if we are to realize and sustain any of the above things in a consistent fashion. The common factor here is that only the triune God of Jesus Christ is a personal God who binds himself to human persons, thus making them open for relations beyond themselves, both with God and with created reality. This openness to the other is essential to Torrance's understanding of both divine and human personhood³⁵ and all human projects, whether personal, social, cultural, or scientific. Such openness is only possible through 'the intensely personalizing interaction of the Triune God.'³⁶

However, to note such things is to be speaking at the surface level of Torrance's thought. As Torrance himself would no doubt encourage us, we should try to discover the deeper connections between these assertions. We should attempt to elucidate the 'inner logic' that unites these truths. Why do these things work together in this way? Why does Torrance insist upon making connections between the triune God of Jesus Christ, the ontological integrity of the human person, the health of our personal and social worlds, and our progress in scientific knowledge? Answering this question will take us into the heart of Torrance's evangelical theology.

Torrance would also assert that intuitive and heuristic leaps are often necessary in order to get to the deep logic of some reality. We will suggest that the deep logic of

³⁵ We should clarify here that for Torrance divine personhood is rooted in the eternal perichoretic relations of the Father, Son, and Spirit and not in any necessary relation with the created order, personal or otherwise.

³⁶ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 193.

Torrance's thought is not only evangelical and doxological, but also sociological, where matters of identity, agency, sociality, embodiment and worship are woven together, providing rich soil from which to grow a theology of culture. By employing the thought of other thinkers these assumptions will be made more explicit, and will be found to repose ultimately upon Torrance's doctrines of God as triune, creation as contingent and human persons as stewards in the image of God.

Torrance identifies the Archimedean point with the triune God of Jesus Christ for epistemological, eschatological, soteriological and reasons. We will confine our comments to the latter two areas: the soteriological and teleological.

1). Soteriological Reasons: Salvation

Torrance notes that 'the social coefficient of human knowledge has immense advantages', the most basic being that it 'enables us to be *at home* in the universe.'³⁷ We are at home in the universe because we are able to 'make sense' of the world we inhabit. The primary tool we use to accomplish this task is language, for it enables us to interpret, categorize and arrange our experiences of the world in an orderly and coherent fashion. Through language, we *inherit* a meaningful world and through language we *maintain* the meaningfulness of that world. As Torrance notes:

The web of meaning that is found lodged in human language is significant, for language, as Heidegger used to say, is the house of being, and it is through language that reality shows itself to us and we become familiar with it.³⁸

It is clear at this point that human language, for Torrance, must have a realist component to it. If it is to function authentically as a 'web of meaning' and in such a way that we find ourselves 'at home in the universe', it must place us in contact with a reality

³⁷ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 114. Italics original.

³⁸ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 114.

external to ourselves, not simply a ‘reality’ that makes sense in a purely subjective fashion. Torrance continues:

This [realist] function of language is basic to what we have been calling the social coefficient of knowledge, as it enables us to be *rightly related* to the intelligible world around us...³⁹

In other words, the objective and subjective poles of the knowing relation must be properly related, balanced and tuned in order for the kind of meaning that will make us ‘feel at home in the universe’ to emerge. The function of language then, as the carrier of a ‘web of meaning’, is to place us in a proper relationship to this world so that the intelligible world can ‘shine through into our understanding’, making meaningful human action in the world a possibility.⁴⁰ Apart from this translucent function of language and the ‘comprehensive outlook’ upon the world embodied in it, ‘we would be rather blind and would not be able to recognize or identify significant aspects of reality’.⁴¹

The ultimate question then, for a theology of culture and for social ethics, becomes: how are we to know when these frameworks are fulfilling their function and when they are not? To return to the imagery of Heidegger, how are we to know when the house of being has become a *prison* house? How are we to know whether the windows in that house are translucent, enabling us to see the external world accurately, or whether they are mirrors, reflecting only the subjective structures of our individual minds? As mentioned above, the realist function of language must be maintained if the ‘house’ built with this language is going to sustain the kind of personal beings that we are. If this realist function is lost or distorted then a key coordinate for relating us rightly to the

³⁹ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 114. Italics mine.

⁴⁰ Language carries with it implicit concepts, presuppositions and values which are internalized by those who acquire the language but which remain at an implicit level. However, at this implicit level they profoundly guide our perception of, and action in, the world. We may *think about* the various things we use language to describe (such as ‘reality’), but language also gives us the implicit conceptual tools that we *think with* (an assumption that this term refers to an external orderly world as opposed to something I can only experience through the loss of my sense of self). Consequently, the presuppositions we think with are rarely examined, except through the most rigorous scientific means or through encounters with others who speak a different language and thus entertain different core presuppositions.

intelligible world around us is lost and our personal being subverted. Human culture, in the form of the social coefficient of truth, is central in providing the coordinates for personal being. For Torrance, the sociological and the ontological are intimately and dynamically interrelated.

This is clearly seen when Torrance describes what happens when the translucent windows in the house of being turn into mirrors, or when ‘the social sub-structure of our thought [becomes] self-contained’.

It [the social sub-structure of our thought] can grow in upon itself and thus lose its openness to the vast intelligibility of the universe. It has the tendency to develop an independent life and momentum of its own, and to assume power in prestructuring our life and thought...This can happen when under pressure from below, the knowing relation becomes inverted and the creative source of intelligibility is located in the human consciousness itself instead of in objective reality when it takes on a categorical and absolute character which cannot be modified by further experience.⁴²

What we have here is an epistemological and sociological description of the fall, the dynamics of which sound very similar to those in Peter Berger’s theory of culture mentioned above. For Torrance, the social coefficient⁴³ becomes ‘self-contained’ when the proper relation between the objective and subjective poles of the knowing relation become inverted. This is due in no small part to ‘pressure from below’, which we understand to mean pressure from the subjective pole of the knowing relation, but perhaps more specifically, the objectivated cultural world that nurtures and sustains the subjective pole of the knowing relation and, as mentioned above, determines how the objective pole of the knowing relation is embraced and embodied.⁴⁴ Consequently,

⁴¹ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 114.

⁴² Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 114-15.

⁴³ Torrance refers to the social coefficient with a number of other phrases. In the essay we are presently exploring it is also referred to as a ‘cognitional structure of social consciousness’, an ‘articulate framework of thought’, an ‘operational framework of thought’ and as the ‘social sub-structure of our thought’.

⁴⁴ See Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 114-15. Torrance’s language is a bit confusing here and open to interpretation. Why is the hierarchical language ‘from below’ employed? We can see how this language would be appropriate when discussing the divine Archimedean point, but is it also appropriate when referring to this worldly points of transcendence? Is he speaking of the subjective pole strictly as the interpersonal structure of the human person (image of God), or is he also including the objectivated social world? If only the subjectivity of the human person, then

momentum in the *objectivated* world could close us off from a genuine embrace of the *objective* world and its appropriate embodiment, as opposed to opening us out toward it.

It would seem at this point that Torrance is entertaining a very deterministic view of the world, in which the human person (subjective pole) is wholly dependent upon its social environment for the sustenance of personal being. If social arrangements put us in genuine contact with the objective world, and we respond accordingly, then personal being is sustained. However, if social arrangements refer us only to the subjective structures of our social consciousness then we are cut off from objective reality and personal being is subverted.

However, dependent as we are upon the socio-cultural matrix for our engagement with the external world, we are unable to tune these relations ourselves. Realizing that these social structures are necessary for the sustenance of personal being, but also that they are in need of transformation, Torrance asks

How do we break free from the social structures which regulate and shape our intellectual development from below, and so gain new insights into a larger whole of which the old framework of thought is found to be only a partial and distorting reflection?⁴⁵

For Torrance, the mere shattering of these old frameworks alone will not secure the desired liberation, for ‘we cannot even begin to advance toward the new without some guidance derived from the old’.⁴⁶ The root of the problem lies not only in the cultural system, but also in the cultural agent as a sinful and fallen being whose relations with God, creation and others are deeply disoriented as the result of an aboriginal act of

how does that ‘gain an independent life and momentum of its own’? It would seem that Torrance is speaking of the two as integrated and inseparable realities.

⁴⁵ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 116.

⁴⁶ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 116. This is another way of recognizing the dialectical relationship between the ontological substructure of culture (the image of God) and the deep (tacit) and surface (focal) levels of culture. We cannot find freedom as cultural beings through attempts to be a-cultural beings, nor is it possible autonomously and instantaneously to throw out the old and introduce the new through a revolutionary act. Freedom is found in and through the socio-cultural matrix, but only as it refers us beyond itself to the true end of our being.

disorder. This disorder is consistently externalized and objectivated in our social existence through human agency. The human person and the social order are in need, not only of transformation, but also of salvation. As Torrance notes

Human society cannot be transmuted into an authentic community of personal being merely through a redistribution of its diseased in-turned structures...Such a transmutation can take place only through the reconciliation of people with God and with one another and through the healing of personal and inter-personal structures in their ontological depths through participation in the creative source and fullness of personal being in the Communion of the Holy Trinity.⁴⁷

Consequently, what is required is not simply a ‘movement of thought’ but

a movement of personal response and commitment in worship, obedience and love in which a transformation of our mind or a spiritual reorganization of our consciousness of God takes place.⁴⁸

Such a movement is ‘initiated by God, informed by his personal address to us in his Word, and sustained through the presence of his Spirit in our personal response to his Word’.⁴⁹ Here we have an epistemological and sociological description of justification by faith through grace. We might refer to this as Torrance’s ‘gospel of the Archimedean point’ for it is only through the initiative of the triune God of grace that we

- Find a point beyond the contingencies of life that is not merely a product of those contingencies
- Find a point that is congruent with our ontological and teleological ‘wiring’ as personal, social and cultural beings
- Find a point that will freely, graciously and redemptively enter the boundaries of our lives, heal the ontological substructure of our personal being, reconcile the relations that sustain them, orient us toward our true end, and empower us to approximate that end within the contingencies of our creaturely life.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 197. This emphasis can also be found in Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 30-31.

⁴⁸ Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 88.

⁴⁹ Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 88.

⁵⁰ We have here, in more nuanced language, the classic tension between the finite and infinite embodied in the human person. However, mere finiteness is not the problem for Torrance, it is rather a tension between the *telos* of the human person as created in the image of God and the socio-cultural environment where that *telos* is either sustained or subverted. It is a tension between ontology and society. Further discussion regarding the tension between the finite and the infinite may be found in Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1964).

As creatures created in the image of God our relations with God, others, and the created order, are mediated by a socio-cultural matrix. However, due to the fall, that socio-cultural matrix has lost its translucency, and thus its ability, to refer us beyond itself and to orient properly the relations that sustain personal life. Consequently, we cannot reach beyond our linguistic and symbolic worlds, and in our attempts to do so we only end up referring obliquely to ourselves. The human being as a social and cultural being stands in need of salvation, and in particular a salvation that is rooted in a divine initiative, not a human one. We are in need of one who will reach into our linguistic and symbolic worlds and open them up or, to use musical terms, ‘tune them’, in ways that will liberate and personalize them – setting them free to realize their true ends. For Torrance, this is only possible through the initiative and agency of the triune God of Jesus Christ as the Archimedean point and transcendent ground of meaning for all our social projects. The semantic projects that orient and govern our lives have no ultimate meaning, and cannot fulfill their true end, apart from the salvific activity of the triune God. For Torrance

He [the triune God] is the one Archimedean point beyond the universe to whom the universe as a whole is so related that it is given authentic meaning throughout all its immanent structures, and the one Archimedean point to whom we are so related within the universe and all its science and social structure that we are constantly emancipated from ourselves and enabled to transcend the structures of our social and scientific activities.⁵¹

That ‘emancipation’ has been secured in an objective sense through the work of the triune God in salvation and reconciliation, but is a constant and ongoing project through the work of the Spirit in sanctification. Torrance does not mean to say that the transmutation of our social structures is not necessary, simply that transmutation alone does not go deep enough. It does not alter the fact that the real problem is ontological, and is thus beyond the ability of human persons to diagnose and heal. The initiative and

agency of God in salvation is necessary because the disorder rooted in creation is ontological, not simply sociological. As Torrance asserts:

The redemption of the universe from disorder requires more than a rearrangement of form...[it requires] the radical undoing and defeat of evil.⁵²

This ‘radical undoing and defeat of evil’ is secured in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for in him both the disordered depths of human personhood and the disordered depths of the entire created order have been redeemed, reoriented and set upon a new basis. The work that has resulted is, in an objective sense, complete.

However, the triune God of Jesus Christ not only saves, but also redeems, sanctifies and consummates what has been objectively reconciled. Consequently, Torrance posits the triune God of Jesus Christ as the Archimedean point not only for purposes of revelation and salvation, but also sanctification.

2). *Teleological Reasons: Sanctification*

What has been objectively secured through the work of Christ must be subjectively realized within the boundaries of the created order through the agency of the ‘*Spiritus Creator*’ who comes to us from the Father through the Son. Again, as with Torrance’s doctrines of revelation and salvation, the triune agency of God is essential, for it is only the triune God of Jesus Christ who has (1) *revealed* to us the true end of the created order and our role in it, (2) *reconciled* the disoriented relationships that keep us from approximating that true end, and (3) *orients and empowers* us to approximate those ends within the boundaries of space and time, so that through our activity as ‘priests of creation’ and ‘mediators of order’ the created and contingent order we indwell, with its intrinsic intelligibility, harmony, and beauty, ‘is discerned to derive from and ultimately to

⁵¹ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 117.

⁵² T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind: Reason, Order, and Openness in Theology and Natural Science*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989) 103.

repose in the uncreated Rationality and eternal Love of the Creator.⁵³ This is the task of sanctification, and it cannot be accomplished apart from the gift and agency of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴

While the salvific work of God (in the Son, through the Spirit) entails much more than ‘a rearrangement of form’, one should not conclude that the ‘rearrangement of form’ is inconsequential to the fulfillment of God’s purposes. It is, in fact, essential. Torrance’s comments above simply highlight the fact that the rearrangement of form alone cannot bring about redemption nor can it fulfill God’s purposes for creation. In sum, social engineering cannot save.

The social coefficient, by reference to an appropriate transcendent ground of meaning, ‘can be given an open-textured disposition within which people are prompted to rise above the patterns of social and religious consciousness, to be transported in wonder, and in wonder to think ahead of concept and word...’⁵⁵ This is the essence of Torrance’s conception of ‘participation’, a dynamic made possible only through the presence and agency of the Holy Spirit and upon the basis of the past and present priestly work of Christ.

At this point, we must bring our conversation on Torrance’s social coefficient of knowledge to a close, even though the concept is only half complete. Torrance notes in his writing that the social coefficient fulfills a number of important tasks that we have only hinted at in our discussion of how social coefficients are formed. However, two broad functions can be noted:

⁵³ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 198.

⁵⁴ See the discussion of the Spirit’s identity and work in chapter 1.

⁵⁵ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 125.

The Function of Social Coefficients

A. Social coefficients *orient, mediate and sustain* our knowing relations

They do so by providing semantic, participatory and multi-leveled structures and thus a cultural environment that is symbolic, ritualized and textured in a way that sustains the human creature by relating it to Creator and creation in a way that furthers God's purposes for the created order and in the process bears witness to the Creator.

Consequently, social coefficients are inhabitable worlds that are integrated and unitary. They can be indwelt not only mentally, through symbolic activity, but also physically through ritual activity. An example of this aspect of the social coefficient may be found in Torrance's writings on Israel as the 'womb of Christ' as found in his *The Mediation of Christ*.⁵⁶ In this instance 'God's revelation came to Israel in such a way that it intersected and integrated its spiritual and physical reality.'⁵⁷ This process resulted in an 'embodied revelation', with the consequence that 'physical behavior is tied up with faith in God'.⁵⁸ It is also on display in Torrance's frequent observation that a child, by the age of five, knows a great deal about physics simply through his or her repetitive interactions with the physical world, even though that knowledge is only tacit and cannot be conceptualized by the child.⁵⁹

Torrance also notes, upon the basis of his doctrine of God, creation and humanity, that

Our interpersonal relations with one another have an open-ended, transcendent relation built into them, which is constitutive of our personal and social reality.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, in particular chapter 1, 'The Mediation of Revelation'.

⁵⁷ Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 15.

⁵⁸ Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 16.

⁵⁹ 'Just as each of us comes to know far more about the physical or moral order of the world than we can ever tell by the time we are five years of age, so we early acquire an ability to read what is engendered in us by the structure of social consciousness in which we grow up.' Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 104. See also Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 89.

⁶⁰ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 111.

However, the ‘open-ended, transcendent relation’ that is built into our interpersonal relations with one another leave the human person open to, not only proper objects of worship, but inappropriate objects of worship as well, objects that have the power to subvert human personhood.

As person...man is the being who is open to others as well as to the world. It is indeed through this openness of being to the world that he can easily become enslaved to the determinate patterns of nature. But what he needs in this state of affairs is an openness that transcends the power of the determinate world to fix him in its rigid structures and suppress his freedom. He requires a transcendent reference, an Archimedean point beyond him and beyond the power of his own sophisticated technology to control or master.⁶¹

We have discussed the importance of this Archimedean point earlier. It is now important to note that the social coefficient of knowledge is to provide the human person with a heuristic, dialogical and multi-leveled structure that refers the openness of the human person not only to the objective created world or to other persons but also to an objective and transcendent ground of meaning. In this way the formation of the human person and the construction of human culture takes place in a conversation between an objective created order and a transcendent ground of meaning, just as the human person and the transcendent ground of meaning are embodied through the agency of the human person as priest of creation. The result is a fertile ground where plurality, both personal and social, of the richest sort may flourish.

However, the plurality that arises from this fertile soil, whether economic, political social or moral, has a particular function, direction, orientation and *telos*, and that is the formation, sustenance and expression of the personal. This *telos* cannot be accomplished apart from the recognition that the world the human person indwells is a textured and multi-leveled one, and that the recognition of these levels and the relation of one level to another is essential for the affirmation and preservation of the personal. As

⁶¹ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 193.

noted earlier, it is through the correlation of these ‘levels of truth’ that human freedom and a free society arises. When these levels are not recognized the human person is understood in a reductionistic sense, whether primarily as a spiritual being, a social being or a creaturely being. As a result, the personal in all its richness is lost through a severance of the vital relations that make human persons what they are. An understanding of Torrance’s concept of levels of truth is essential to his understanding not only of human personhood but also of the trinity of God – both being onto-relational concepts.⁶²

B. Social coefficients *express and embody* our knowing relations

Not only does the social coefficient orient, mediate and sustain knowing relations with the intelligible ground of reality, it is also the means by which those knowing relations are expressed and embodied in the social and material world. The expression and embodiment of knowing relations is not something that may or may not occur. Knowing relations will be socially embodied regardless of the quality of those relations. This is a social fact we mentioned above in conversation with Peter Berger, who noted that one of the primary drives of the human organism is the completion of the self through the act of externalizing the self into the world. We also noted that God has so created the human person in his image that the externalization of human subjectivity into the world is rooted ultimately in God’s desire and will. Since the subjective pole of any knowing relation is a human subject, the externalization of that relation is not an option but rather a human imperative. This is one of the primary reasons we noted for the characterization of the human being as a cultural being.

The social coefficient of knowledge becomes an expression and embodiment of knowing relations in the following ways:

1. By *integrating* the subjective and the objective

⁶² Torrance develops the idea of ‘levels of truth’ in Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 73-111.

For Torrance, all knowing relations have at least three components: (1) the objective pole, (2) the subjective pole, and (3) the quality of the relation between them. The knowing relation takes on a concrete form when the objective and subjective poles of that relation are integrated, where subjective factors enable the expression and embodiment of an objective reality.

The best example of this integration is how Torrance understands the incorporation of ‘anthropic elements’ (subjective factors) into the service of divine revelation, and the best treatment of how and why this process takes place may be found in Torrance’s essay ‘The Christian Apprehension of God the Father’ in *Speaking the Christian God*.⁶³

The work of God through anthropic elements is pluriform, and the role of the presence of the Spirit is of particular interest to Torrance at this point. The transformation of anthropic elements takes place through the sanctifying agency of the Holy Spirit, for ‘the presence of the Holy Spirit empowers, integrates and establishes the [frail forms of contingent rationality with which we are endowed].’⁶⁴

Because of God’s transcendence over the anthropomorphic components employed in his self-revelation, and due to the particular presence and agency of the Holy Spirit, these anthropic elements are adopted, critiqued, transformed and integrated into God’s self-revelation, some in such a way that they become normative for any attempt to participate in a knowing relation with the God who has revealed himself through them. The best example of this is the role Israel plays as a social coefficient of God’s self-revelation, the importance of the language of Father, Son and Spirit in naming and addressing God and the indispensability of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church. It also

serves as the theological basis for the development of contextual theologies that are genuinely contextual, but also rigorously theological.

In each instance, we see the profound and deep integration of God's objective self-giving and that self-giving being expressed and embodied through subjective elements brought to the table by those who hear and respond to that revelation.

2. By *orienting* and *aggregating* human relations

The expression and embodiment of knowing relations is a communal affair. Social coefficients arise and are sustained, not by formal signification systems, but by communities that continue to use those symbol systems to understand, describe, order and act in the world in a specific way. There is no integration of subjective and objective apart from the agency of specific human communities.

Therefore, the work of the Spirit also entails the formation of reciprocal relationships between the object to be known and those who seek to know it. Through these reciprocal relationships the knowing relationship is sustained, expressed and embodied. This is accomplished as participants in these communities allow themselves to be oriented to, and aggregated around, the object to be known. Participants in these communities are oriented to the object to be known through the symbolic language and ritual practices of the community, through which an understanding of the object to be known is communicated as well as appropriate forms of response to it. Consequently, what emerges is a social coefficient that provides the coordinates by which participants in this community orient themselves to the object to be known and, by necessity, to each other. The by-product is a tangible, communal expression of the knowing relation.

⁶³ Alvin F. Kimel, ed., *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 120-43.

⁶⁴ Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 220.

Torrance's understanding of the dynamics of the social coefficient accord well with recent thinking in the field of cultural anthropology, where culture is viewed less as a static reality 'out there' that orders and integrates human relations through external 'force', and more as something that is constantly evolving under the impact of social actors actively involved in the reception, transmission, and transformation of culture.⁶⁵

For Torrance, culture as simply a static deposit of human knowledge is a positive hindrance to human freedom and fosters a determinism of the worst sort, for it cuts human persons off, individually and collectively, from positive and dynamic engagement with the objective world, rendering the objective world mute and the human person adrift in the world without positive coordinates to orient and sustain its life.⁶⁶ Torrance's words are instructive:

No social coefficient of knowledge, no infra-structure of connections in community life, and certainly no axiomatic system of ideas can have ultimate meaning if it is closed in upon itself. Any meaningful rational system must have indeterminate areas where its formalizations break off and retain their consistency only through controlling organization from a higher frame of reference.⁶⁷

It is not enough that human subjectivity finds expression in a world of symbols, those symbols must properly orient the human person *vis-à-vis* God, the created order and other human persons. Ultimately, the accomplishment of this task, requires an Archimedean point, and the character of that Archimedean point will determine the character of the social coefficient that crystallizes or aggregates around it.

3. **By ordering the social and material world**

For Torrance, telling the story of God's work in the world involves the embodiment and expression of God's purposes for it. This story cannot be told apart from

⁶⁵ See the discussion in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 134ff.

⁶⁶ When we speak of aggregating we also call to mind the model of the centered set (and also effect and affect): people aggregate around certain centers, they are not pushed into those centers from without (modern understanding of culture).

the formation of specific communities and their concrete action in the world. When human persons act in the world they function, implicitly or explicitly, as ‘mediators of order’.

These dynamics come through clearly in Torrance’s essay ‘The Concept of Order in Theology and Science’.⁶⁸ In this essay, Torrance notes that

Science and theology are each dedicated in their own way, not only to clarifying and understanding order, but to achieving order, not only to probing into and disclosing the order of things as they actually are, but to the actualizing and realizing of order in our interaction with nature and with one another. That is to say...we are concerned with *the kind of order that ought to be...*⁶⁹

Here Torrance introduces a profoundly eschatological and ethical element into an understanding of human cultural activity, scientific and theological alike, and he is correct in doing so. As Christian Smith notes, every human culture is the embodiment of a moral order, for each constitutes a ‘living narrative’ that is eschatological and moral in nature.⁷⁰ Those narratives are dramatized repeatedly through our actions in the world. Scientific and theological communities not only seek greater *understanding* of the objective world, but are called upon, through their collective activities, to *transform* it as well.

The social and material world, like a piece of clay on a potter’s wheel, is something human agents work with and mold, and they do so with a particular vision in mind, whether implicit or explicit.⁷¹ What results on the turning wheel as the finished product is, more or less, a representation of the vision entertained in the artist’s mind and the particular limitations and qualities of the material the artist is working with. In the

⁶⁷ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 124. We are reminded here that the social coefficient is, as discussed above, a ‘multi-leveled structure’ for semantic reasons.

⁶⁸ Torrance, *Christian Frame of Mind*, 17-34.

⁶⁹ Torrance, *Christian Frame of Mind*, 18-19. Italics original.

⁷⁰ Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See chapters 2 and 4 in particular.

⁷¹ The limitations of this analogy are apparent to me. As I have stated earlier, human agents do not stand apart from the cultural process, but are fully implicated in it at all times. However, that does not falsify the truth that we are also active shapers of our social and cultural worlds as well.

words of Peter Berger, the result is both the externalization and objectification of the subjectivity of the artist.

Consequently, the way in which human communities order their social and physical environments becomes a form of ‘embodied worship’,⁷² a living and concrete witness to their most comprehensive ideas of order, value and purpose formed in conversation with a real and objective world. Our relationships with others, the created order, and God form the fundamental basis upon which this activity takes place. The quality of these relationships will also determine whether the result of that activity (a socio-cultural environment) will sustain or subvert the very relations upon which it is built. For Torrance, those relations, and the cultural environments they produce and sustain, can only be morally legitimated as they enable the embodiment of God’s purposes for the created order and by so doing sustain the personhood and integrity of human agents created in God’s image.⁷³ This is the inner-logic of Torrance’s theology of culture, an inner-logic that is also present in what Nicholas Wolterstorff refers to as ‘shalom’ and William Dyrness refers to as ‘embodied worship’.

However, Torrance is enough of a realist to assert that not all comprehensive visions of order are accurate, and where those conceptions are flawed, so too will our action in the world bring about the embodiment of disorder.

Referring back to our fictional potter as an example, this might occur when the artist has a vision for a clay structure that the properties of the material itself will not allow. At that point the artist must simply recognize the limitations of the material he or she is working with, or alter that material in some way to allow his or her vision to become a reality.

⁷² This is a description that can be found in Dyrness, *The Earth is God's*, 159ff.

For these reasons Torrance will not allow us to say that our cultural activity is bounded only by our imaginations, or that we can order the world in whatever fashion we desire, using whatever means we see fit to employ. The ‘order that ought to be’ is not something we subjectively imagine and then impose upon a neutral or generic world.⁷⁴ Rather, through our cultural tools and activity, we must ‘relate actual order to the ultimate controlling ground of order from which all order proceeds.’ The ‘order that ought to be’ emerges from this activity. Our cultural activity and cultural environments should enable us to correlate and ‘relate’ actual order to the ultimate ground of order. Only as we perform this task (which assumes we have identified properly the ‘ultimate ground of order’) will the ‘order that ought to be’ become embodied in our socio-cultural worlds. The ‘order that ought to be’ arises as we seek ever greater correlation and congruence between ‘actual order’ and ‘the ultimate ground of order’. Consequently, human persons are not blank slates to be socially programmed as we wish, nor is the created order passive material that we can arrange as our needs and socio-economic goals dictate. There is an order already present in reality, created into it by ‘the ultimate controlling ground of order’ prior to our ordering activities. Our task is to create cultural/conceptual tools that enable us to discern that order so that we may cooperate with it, not impose ourselves upon it. This is simply Torrance’s theological science applied to the social and material world.

Conclusion

We close with a quote from an essay Torrance delivered in 1986 at the Lam Chi Fung Memorial Symposium on Christianity and Chinese Culture entitled “The Goodness and Dignity of Man in the Christian Tradition”:

⁷³ As discussed earlier, there is no way of discerning God’s purposes for the created order, or human life in it, apart from an Archimedean point of some kind.

⁷⁴ Torrance would reject Richard Niebuhr’s definition of culture as ‘the artificial, secondary environment which man superimposes on the natural.’ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), 46.

It is now the role of man in union with Christ to serve the purpose of God's love in the ongoing actualization of that redemption, sanctification and renewal within the universe...Thus man has been called to be a kind of midwife to creation, in assisting nature out of its divinely given abundance constantly to give birth to new forms of life and richer patterns of order. Indeed, as the covenant-partner of Jesus Christ man may be regarded as the priest of creation, through whose service...the marvelous rationality, symmetry, harmony and beauty of God's creation are being brought to light and given expression in such a way that the whole universe is found to be a glorious hymn to the Creator.⁷⁵

And, in his latest work *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons*, Torrance again notes the centrality of the created order and the unique role of human persons within it as central to the fulfillment of God's purposes:

Nature itself is mute, but human being is the one constituent of the created universe through whom its rational structure and astonishing beauty may be brought to word in praise of the Creator.⁷⁶

It would seem reasonable to suggest that if we are to follow a line through Torrance's work that line originates and terminates in the Triune God, but not before it has drawn into the picture a created order freely brought into being by the will of God and graciously entrusted to a creature crafted after the image of God. It is this creature, peculiarly constituted and uniquely called, that God 'improvises' with,⁷⁷ as 'scientist', 'midwife', and 'instrument', in order to draw the created order toward its *telos* through the mediation of structures Torrance refers to as social coefficients, which, as we have suggested here, are formed and function very much like anthropological definitions of culture.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Torrance, 'Goodness and Dignity', 387. Torrance's presentation in particular is critiqued in Hing Kau Yeung, *Being and Knowing: An Examination of T.F. Torrance's Christological Science*, vol. 1, *Jian Dao Dissertation Series 3* (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1996). Torrance's parents were missionaries in China and his longstanding interest in the country and its people continues to this day. For a biographical account see Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

⁷⁶ T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 213.

⁷⁷ God 'improvises' with humanity upon the basis of a covenant relation established through the Son and in the Spirit.

⁷⁸ Torrance often describes himself as a 'missionary to Western culture' and as being called to 'evangelize culture'. See Michael Bauman, 'Thomas F. Torrance', in *Roundtable: Conversations with European Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 114; and I. John Hesselink, 'A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ: An Interview with T. F. Torrance', *Reformed Review* 38, no. 1 (1984), 49.

That Thomas F. Torrance is a scientific theologian seems beyond dispute.⁷⁹ But that he may also be understood as a theologian of culture is a permission given us through a consideration of his doctrine of God as triune Creator, his doctrine of creation as contingent, and his doctrine of humanity as a mediator of order and priest of creation, whose work results in, and is enabled by, the development of social coefficients of truth. If Torrance provides us with the fundamental assumptions and dynamics necessary for the development of a theology of culture, then we are also given permission to begin to see his work in this light and to develop it toward this end.

⁷⁹ This has been the consistent claim of Torrance himself, and he has spent a great deal of time and energy developing a scientific theological methodology and a body of work congruent with that methodology. This material is being engaged and explicitly extended by others. See in particular the three volume work being undertaken by Alister E. McGrath, two volumes having already appeared: *A Scientific Theology: Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); and *A Scientific Theology: Reality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). What is perhaps overlooked or underdeveloped is that Torrance's theological and scientific work flows from an implicit theology of culture that sustains, nourishes and guides the work he is so well known for.