

## BOOK REVIEWS

### T. F. TORRANCE: THEOLOGIAN OF THE TRINITY

*Paul Molnar*

Paul D. Molnar has rightfully gained the reputation of being a prodigious Barth scholar through his previous books and many journal articles. With the publication of *T. F. Torrance, Theologian of the Trinity* (2009), he has proven himself to be a leading Torrance scholar as well. This volume will serve as a landmark study of Torrance's theology and a significant complement to Alister McGrath's *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* and Elmer Colyer's *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology*.

It becomes quite evident that Molnar has a comprehensive grasp of the breadth and depth of Torrance's entire body of work, matched by very few. The range of sources Molnar knowledgeably cites is as impressive as it is useful. This breadth of familiarity is crucial for Torrance scholarship since many topics merely mentioned in his full-length books have been treated in depth elsewhere amid Torrance's voluminous shorter writings. *T. F. Torrance, Theologian of the Trinity* will serve as a kind of subject index to Torrance's theological oeuvre. When combined with Colyer's and McGrath's work, if Torrance wrote in depth on a topic, you can probably find where he did, no matter how obscure the source.

Molnar has not only given us an accurate representation of Torrance's thought but has also faithfully caught the emphasis and proportion, the rhythm and flow, the meter and music of it. And such theological sensitivity is no small feat. Molnar knew TFT personally and had significant correspondence with him. His personal knowledge of Torrance and his work contributes to a book that is fair and faithful to Torrance's thought. Molnar does not merely repeat what others have said. He shapes his own narrative, making some unique observations, including some that are at odds with the assessments of others. It should stand as an authoritative guide and witness to Torrance's theology.



In the first chapter, "Introducing T. F. Torrance," Molnar offers a brief biographical sketch and an overview of the extraordinary range of topics and issues he addressed throughout his lifetime of teaching, research, writing, and involvement with other scholars or church leaders. Of particular interest in this chapter is Molnar's tracing out some of Torrance's rather extensive interaction with Roman Catholic theologians.

In chapter 2, Molnar sets out his thesis for the book, which is clear from its title: Torrance's theology is founded and oriented at every point on the revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is Torrance's conviction that Christian theology is intrinsically and so necessarily trinitarian: its proper subject matter is this particular God, the one revealed in Jesus Christ according to Scripture. If Molnar's book does anything, it shows in chapter after chapter how the ontic reality of God as Father, Son, and Spirit is the source and meaning of every other doctrinal point in Torrance's theology.

After setting forth his thesis in chapter 2, Molnar goes on in the subsequent chapters to show how this is so for Torrance in the doctrines of creation, the incarnation, the atonement, pneumatology, resurrection, and ascension; and finally the church, sacraments, and ministry. Working through Torrance in this way, Molnar covers the whole sweep of doctrinal territory in a way that gives us a good idea of what a single-volume systematic theology written by Torrance might look like,<sup>15</sup> commendably tracking the key themes that inform Torrance's work. All this adds up to showcasing Torrance's theological or revelational realism in striking contrast to other systems of thought such as legalism, pantheism, panentheism, moralism, mysticism, and theological nominalism.

The third chapter takes up the doctrine of God as Creator. The key theological insight here is to see, as Torrance does, the significance of the incarnation. Following Athanasius, as Torrance most always does, grasping the difference and yet some similarity of the God-creation relationship with the Father-Son

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15 The closest thing we have to a systematic theology written by Torrance himself is the two-volume work comprising the content of his courses on Christian dogmatics given at New College, Edinburgh, edited by his nephew Robert Walker and published posthumously: *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Jesus Christ* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008); *Atonement: The Person and Work of Jesus Christ* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

relationship has enormous value. This theological exercise gives priority to the Father-Son relationship and distinguishes that eternal and internal (*ad intra*) relationship from the external (*ad extra*) and contingent relation to creation that occurs, then, *ex nihilo*. God from all eternity, and not merely as an act of will, is always the Father, Son, and Spirit. God is, to use a term coined by Torrance, onto-relationally Triune. Creation then is the act of the Triune God to create that which is not God. The internal relationships of the Triune God are not dependent on relationship with creation, but that external relation, culminating in the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God, bears the exact same quality of relationship as do the internal relations. That is, the act of creation is an act of love that reflects or corresponds to the internal and eternal love of Father, Son, and Spirit. God acts in freedom and in love toward creation because God is Triune. But that relation, in contradistinction to the internal relations, is (1) contingent, (2) gives creation a contingent intelligibility, and (3) grants creation a genuine freedom within limits.

Those following Molnar's writings will recognize this theme as one central to his own thinking. Here Molnar shows us just how essential the distinction and priority of the Father-Son relation over the God-creation relationship was for Torrance and does so in greater detail here than in his other writings. Molnar thus brings into the spotlight a sustained critique of Jürgen Moltmann's panentheist view of a mutually conditioning and necessary relationship between God and creation, which denies the *creatio ex nihilo* and requires that God makes himself in need of redemption. The contrast between Moltmann's view and Torrance's couldn't be clearer.

One other significant aspect of this chapter that warrants comment is Molnar's discussion of Torrance's proposal for a new natural theology, in which Molnar sides with Barth over against Torrance's position—at least as he, Molnar, understands it. This is a notoriously difficult topic on which there is some disagreement among Torrance scholars. Despite what might be connoted, Torrance is not at all claiming that there is a slightly improved way to give consideration to some aspect of creation, independent of revelation, that logically leads to a proper knowledge of God. Molnar agrees on that with Torrance. He objects, however, that Torrance seems to allow for at least an initial consideration of creation that could ostensibly point abstractly to the Triune God of revelation. The phrases

he finds objectionable in Torrance's works involve claims that a consideration of creation shows something like "the signature of the Creator," points beyond itself "with a mute cry for sufficient reason," and "suggests, or directs us to, a transcendent ground of rationality as its explanation." Most egregious to Molnar, it seems, is that Torrance in his attempt to reconstruct a natural theology allows for the "bracketing" (Torrance's term<sup>16</sup>) of a natural theology from knowledge of God via revelation (pp. 95, 97n122, 99).

Now the question is whether these particular claims of Torrance amount to his establishing a relatively independent starting place for knowledge of God. Molnar believes that Torrance is inconsistent at this point. But others dispute that charge.<sup>17</sup> The issue seems to be how those phrases, noted by Molnar, are to be interpreted. Arguments have been made that Torrance was consistent throughout, allowing for no *dogmatic* knowledge of God on the basis of a knowledge of nature but rather allowing for a dialogue between science (which strictly pursues the knowledge of nature) and theology that gives consideration to methodological analogies occurring between the two disciplines with their respective subject matter. Such an interaction is then regarded as being strictly heuristic so that natural theology provides no content to theology, that is, provides no normative knowledge of God, and that natural theology (the overlap of natural science and theological science) must be understood finally within revealed theology.

The disagreement over what Torrance means does raise the question as to whether it is best to identify what he is describing as a new natural theology. What Torrance sets out is not exactly a theology of nature either, as Molnar points out. All this is to say that, especially on this topic, a close reading of Torrance himself must serve as the final arbiter.<sup>18</sup>

The fourth chapter, on Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, stands at the center of Torrance's thought since the self-revelation of God in his person and work

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16 T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, pp. 42, 59-60.

17 See Elmer Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, pp. 192-207.

18 Readers wanting to pursue this topic would do well to study Torrance's very detailed description of the relationship between theological science and natural science in his book *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* and essays in *Reality and Scientific*, especially chap. 2, "The Status of Natural Theology."

determines where and how God's relationship to his creation are to be known and entered into. The signal value of this chapter is Molnar's bringing together the various key elements of Torrance's unique contributions to Christology. Molnar demonstrates the profound integration of Torrance's thought by showing us the interconnections, sometimes missed, between the *homoousion* of Father and Son, the second *homoousion* with us (of Chalcedon), the hypostatic union of God with humanity in the humanity of Jesus Christ as well as the anhypostatic and enhypostatic dimensions of that union, and the vicarious humanity of Christ. Molnar ably brings out the significance of these doctrinal formulations in protecting the free and loving grace of God enacted uniquely in time and space for our knowledge of God and for our salvation into eternal union and communion with God through the humanity of the Son of God by the Spirit. Letting go of these interlocking formulations weakens and indeed threatens the integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ itself, evacuating it of its truth, love, light, and life.

Among the many topics that Molnar goes on to address, the most helpful is his extensive explication of the problem of container and spatial notions informing theological understanding. Torrance refers to this problem throughout his writings, but Molnar brings these myriad references together in a way that demonstrates the fullness of Torrance's thought on this crucial and pervasive issue.

Chapter 5, on the atonement, is the second-longest chapter in the book. But this is representative of Torrance's own emphasis. It was essential for him to get right the connection between Christ's incarnation and his atoning work. Of special emphasis, Molnar points out, was the significance for Torrance of the full humanity of Jesus, who came as Son of God "acting for us within history without being confused with history itself" (p. 137). Our actual human condition, down to its ontic roots, had to be transformed by the act of God himself upon our humanity. So the Incarnation, the assumption of our humanity by the eternal Son of God, is essential to the atoning work.

For Torrance, following important trajectories of the early church, the humanity assumed and united in Jesus Christ must be our fallen humanity—the only humanity that needs to be transformed. This is a work that does not take place external to God or external to humanity; rather, it is worked out by the Triune God, involving all three persons, and it is worked out in our humanity in the complete fallen humanity assumed and regenerated in Jesus.

Among the other themes Molnar discusses in chapter 5 is the crucial theme of God's suffering for us on no other basis but the freedom of his love. The Father shares in his own nonincarnate way in the Son's suffering in our place and on our behalf so that we might be taken up into God's own life while remaining and even becoming fully human—fully "personalized," to use one of Torrance's unique expressions.

Just as important is Molnar's exposition of Torrance's view on the nature of sin and justification grasped in the light of the Incarnation. Sin, in the light of God's grace, is seen for what it really is—an attack on God and a rejection of grace. Grace, furthermore, is not an act or a substance offered apart from Christ, for Jesus Christ is the grace of God in person. For Torrance this rules out any Pelagian notions of cooperation with God. It does, however, allow a place for human response—but only response—as by the Spirit we are enabled to share in Christ's own perfect human response. So we respond in repentance and faith. Nevertheless, our response is not adequate. We must also repent of it and entrust it to the mediation of Christ, who joins our response to his by the Spirit. So our own responses are justified and sanctified by Christ's. We must do away with any idea of self-justification; otherwise, the unique, once-and-for-all mediation of Christ is rendered superfluous, and another mediation of our own making is set up. Molnar really does justice to Torrance's persistent refrain on this theological theme. Only a full reading of Torrance could generate a greater impact.

Following this line, Torrance intends to recover the full Reformation emphasis on the saving significance of the continuing risen and ascended humanity of Jesus Christ. Such a restatement is vital since his eternal mediation is so often lost across the board in conservative and liberal, Catholic and Protestant theology. Justifying grace in and through Jesus Christ's dual mediation has both objective and subjective dimensions mediated to us by the Spirit, not just the objective alone.

Torrance's views, Molnar reminds us, significantly contrast not only with Pelagianism but also with any kind of panentheism. Contemporary theologians who fail to take into account the whole, real, vicarious humanity of Christ and weaken if not eliminate the grace of justification, according to Molnar's reckoning, are Jürgen Moltmann, Ted Peters, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, John A. T. Robinson, Edward

Schillebeeckx, Maurice Blondel, Joseph Maréchal, and Karl Rahner. Torrance's own particular targets here also include some aspects of the Westminster Catechism as well as strands of Federal theology. For these theologies in one way or another undermine the full human priesthood and continuing unique mediatorship of Christ to which we are joined by the Spirit. The further result is that other mediations are inevitably substituted for Christ's at one point or another.

The sixth chapter, fittingly, addresses the doctrine of the Spirit. Some have criticized Torrance for neglecting the Spirit to some extent. Molnar's chapter, however, sets forth the comprehensive nature of Torrance's understanding of the Spirit and should provide ample evidence as to why and how Torrance is indeed a fully trinitarian theologian.

Of special interest is Molnar's clear discussion of the way in which Torrance accepts the notion of *theōsis*, or *theopoiēsis* (often translated, unhelpfully, "divinization"), and also corrects the rather pervasive misunderstandings of this term. By the Spirit, God gives us himself so that we as humans, united to Christ's glorified and ascended humanity, share in the divine fellowship and communion—that is, the very life of the Triune God. There is no salvation without the Spirit. And salvation has everything to do with the direct, miraculous, and gracious ministry of the Spirit in the name of the Son, who draws us into communion with God by glorifying humanity but not turning it into divinity.

The Spirit is also essential, as Torrance makes clear and Molnar points out, within the eternal life of God. Accounting for the Spirit in the trinitarian life calls for a radical adjustment of the way we conceive of divine being. The *homoousion* applies just as much to the Spirit in relationship to the Father and the Son as to the Father-Son relationship.

Torrance's view then stands in stark contrast with both Moltmann's (who denies there is a single subject) and Rahner's (who claims there is no reciprocal loving relationship in God) (pp. 203–4). The perichoretic communion that constitutes the eternal and internal life of God requires relinquishing the idea that relationship is external, extrinsic, and accidental to the life of God. Rather, Torrance's onto-relational conceptual shift declares to the contrary that communion, fellowship, relationship is constitutive to the very being of God, not accidental or arbitrary. Without this shift of thinking, Torrance shows that we cannot speak faithfully of the Spirit and of God as unity in Trinity and Trinity in unity.

The final major theme of this chapter addresses the perennial problem of the *filioque*. If full weight is given to the divinity of the Spirit via the *homoousion* and the perichoretic being of God in relationship, then the problem of the *filioque* has no reason to arise. For then the fullness of divinity inexists (*enousia*) each of the persons, and the acts of the three persons as one being necessarily involve all three persons, each in their own unique way. So the generation of the Son must involve the Spirit and the procession of the Spirit must involve the Son. The unity of God should not then be located solely in the person of the Father, but rather the unity is eternally a triunity. The Son is begotten of the being of the Father (who is *homoousios* with the Spirit!). The Spirit proceeds from the being of the Father (*homoousios* with the Son).<sup>19</sup>

The next to last chapter, "Torrance's Trinitarian Understanding of the Church, Sacraments and Ministry," covers an impressive range of interrelated themes. It seems to me that Molnar uncovers a relatively unmined area of Torrance's theology here. Expositing the many facets of Torrance's ecclesiology in relation to Torrance's doctrines of the incarnation and Trinity enables Molnar to identify the most salient and far-reaching features of Torrance's thought for the life of the church catholic.

Here I will simply mention just some of the themes Torrance develops to better inform our ecclesiology. (1) The essential relationship between Israel and the new form of the people of God, which includes the ingrafted Gentiles. (2) The inviolable connection between the person and work of Christ and the person and work of the Spirit. (3) The danger of a dualism in ecclesiology that forces the artificial choice between a disembodied spiritual church and an institutional view of the body of Christ. (4) The once-for-all yet eternally valid vicarious priesthood of Christ, who (5) continues to mediate between God and

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19 In an extensive consultation with a leading delegation of Orthodox theologians, Torrance found that such an onto-relational understanding of the trinitarian relations was acceptable to both Orthodox and to representative theologians of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Their *Agreed Statement on the Trinity* (1992) is a landmark work offered to the whole church as a theologically responsible way of transcending the *filioque* schism. Any contemporary theologian who shares an ecumenical concern should become familiar with this agreement and its attendant documents. See [http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news\\_file/15.pdf](http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/15.pdf)



humanity in and through his continuing humanity, which is (6) both absent and so transcendent over his body and never to be confused with it but also (7) present to us by his Spirit in time and space and so never to be separated from it in any deistic fashion. (8) Ministry then, especially of the sacraments, must be ordered by a living and embodied recognition that all human activity, whether by bishops, priests, ministers, or laity, can only be participations in the ongoing ministry and mediation of the living Christ by the gracious power of the Spirit, (9) thereby ruling out the need to impose any other vicarious or substitutionary ministry or priesthood, as if Christ by the Spirit were absent or were reducible to human activity or control, or (10) conveyed by the supposed potential inherent in natural means or forms that operate independently of Christ's own personal activity. And finally, (11) what Molnar calls Torrance's "massive" achievement: "By focusing on 'God as Man rather than upon God in Man' Torrance embraces a high Christology which concentrated on the humanity of the incarnate Son of God and a view of Eucharistic worship and life in which 'the primacy is given to the priestly mediation of Jesus Christ himself'" (p. 321).

At this point readers of this review may ask if there is any significant interaction with Torrance's critics. While there are a good number of footnotes that address those who diverge from Torrance's view, this matter is for the most part collected in the last chapter of the book, "Considering Some Criticisms of T. F. Torrance's Theology." Although Molnar's purpose is not to conduct an assessment, either in this chapter or in the book as a whole, but to provide a comprehensive exposition of Torrance's work, some readers may be disappointed in the brevity of treatment. Molnar's discussion of critics in this final chapter certainly does acknowledge that there are indeed objections raised against aspects of Torrance's views. But Molnar's concise treatments tend to amount to precise descriptions of the disagreements rather than tackling their nature and offering in depth suggestions for potential resolution.

Molnar has more than just cracked the door open to just such a fair and informed theological engagement with Torrance. His survey of critics does serve to make clearer Torrance's views over against some others. He provides us with explicit citations from Torrance that expose misplaced criticisms and offer a likely line of defense to most of the objections raised. This perhaps too brief of a chapter brings into relief Torrance's teaching in contrast to others, a prerequisite for any

full and fruitful critical engagement. But, although the stage has been set, a full-scale critical assessment of Torrance's work will have to wait for another occasion.

With this book Paul Molnar has pretty well eliminated any excuse not to be able to have a clear, sympathetic, and comprehensive understanding of Torrance's body of theological work. As attested to by the impressive endorsements on the back of the book from John Webster, George Hunsinger, David Fergusson, Elmer Colyer, Alasdair Heron, and Iain Torrance, this work will serve as a landmark treatment that masterfully sets forth T. F. Torrance's constructive work in a way that is detailed and comprehensive and also fully conversant with current theological conventions; it is an indispensable guide.

Gary Deddo

### **THEOSIS IN THE THEOLOGY OF THOMAS TORRANCE**

***Myk Habets. Surrey: Ashgate, 2009, pp. 212, £52.25***

*Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance* belongs to the growing number of publications on the Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance, whom Alister McGrath has referred to as "the most significant British academic theologian of the twentieth century" (*TFT: Intellectual Biography*, xi). This book, however, is one of the most important works, because it is one of the few that deals particularly with Torrance's soteriology. As Habets notes, fresh secondary works with the purpose of either expounding or critiquing Torrance's soteriology are long overdue. In fact, although there has been a significant amount of doctoral theses written worldwide on Torrance's soteriology, Man Kei Ho's *A Critical Study of T. F. Torrance's Theology of Incarnation* (Peter Lang, 2008), Peter Cass's *Christ Condemned in the Flesh* (VDM Verlag, 2009), and Habets's *Theosis*, up to 2009, are probably the only published doctoral theses after Kye Won Lee's *Living in Union with Christ* (Peter Lang, 2003). For people who are interested in understanding Torrance's doctrine of salvation, this book offers a promising and substantial help.

The thesis of this book is that although *theosis* is not *the* central point of Torrance's dogmatics, the concept "is of fundamental importance" in Torrance's