

# NEITHER PROGRESS NOR REGRESS: THE THEOLOGICAL SUBSTRUCTURE OF T. F. TORRANCE'S GENEALOGY OF MODERN THEOLOGY

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## *Abstract*

T. F. Torrance's corpus of historical and theological writings contains genealogical reflections on the field of Christian doctrine. The basic shape of the genealogy is determined by what Torrance calls certain "ultimates," theological commitments that derive their justification not from other beliefs that possess more authority than they themselves do, but from the way in which they seek to depict God in himself and in his economic activity. Core ultimate beliefs include the doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the ascension and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These beliefs, more than the idealization of any particular stretch of past history, underlie all of Torrance's genealogical work, for instance, the subjects against which he develops sustained polemic; the overall structure of his genealogical account, which bears only a superficial resemblance to a decline narrative; and, most importantly, the point around which the genealogy revolves, namely, the epistemic reconciliation between human beings and God. This essay illustrates the nature of the genealogical narrative by outlining Torrance's treatment of Scripture and its interpretation and closes by assessing his effort as a whole. While the genealogy contains drawbacks that are worth registering, Torrance's narrative rightly avoids the sort of sweeping evaluative judgments associated with some often-discussed genealogies, and it properly places its focus on the perennial issue of divine-human reconciliation, which manifests itself differently in a variety of historical circumstances, even as it is not ultimately contingent upon them.

## *I*

T. F. Torrance has a genealogy of contemporary theology with a delimited range and a particular purpose. Torrance's genealogical reflections do not constitute a comprehensive view of modernity as such. He concentrates on the discipline of doctrine, though in so doing he ends up commenting on myriad aspects of recent culture—philosophy, science, and church life, among others—as they impinge on his primary concern. This genealogy is thus subject-specific. It is also more restricted in the scope of phenomena

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it assesses than are some well-known theological genealogies. While this article treats his genealogical narrative in a composite or cumulative form, he does not present a single account that is as all-encompassing as one finds in the writings of John Milbank, for instance.<sup>1</sup> Torrance traces out trends he considers problematic on independent grounds, specifically that they undermine cardinal Christian doctrines, which he considers compelling on their own terms, as we will see. Genealogy proves useful because it illuminates difficulties that have lodged themselves deeply within thought forms to which people have grown accustomed.<sup>2</sup> That is, genealogy shows “how that which is contingent has come to be taken as necessary.”<sup>3</sup> Torrance’s genealogical efforts resemble those of Michel Foucault, surely the most influential genealogist of recent years, in underlining how current circumstances took shape even as they might have turned out otherwise, and are for this reason susceptible to challenge, but his genealogy differs from Foucault’s by being more ambitious normatively. Torrance excavates the history he wants to counter and develops his own constructive proposals. Foucault, more modestly, lays out the conditions of our present reality while opening the door to changing it.<sup>4</sup> As he writes, “And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will ... separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the *possibility* of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.”<sup>5</sup> In this way, Torrance’s genealogy of modernity is subject-specific and not all-encompassing, it employs Christian doctrine as its evaluative criteria, and it clears the ground for a bold, positive agenda.

What of the material content and tone of the genealogy? Its substance is largely intellectual. He focuses on how particularly influential figures brought about shifts in the history of ideas that, even now, mark the West and Christian doctrine in particular. Torrance does little with social factors. Further, he does not see the troubles afflicting doctrine within modernity as resulting from a single period that caused long-lasting damage.<sup>6</sup> The challenges that Western modernity faces are perennial issues taking on a specific form in our context. The problems of modern doctrine notwithstanding, his tone is indomitably hopeful. Torrance is never dour or melancholy. Readers do not find him speaking of “the new dark ages which are already upon us,” or how “the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have

<sup>1</sup> John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 112. Relatedly, there is no single book by Torrance where he draws all of the threads of his genealogy together. For an example of a book that does, see Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*, American Philosophy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Koopman, “Must Philosophy Be Obligatory?: History Versus Metaphysics in Foucault and Derrida,” in *Foucault/Derrida Fifty Years Later: The Futures of Genealogy, Deconstruction, and Politics*, edited by Olivia Custer, Penelope Deutscher, and Samir Haddad, *New Directions in Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 46. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> For more focus on a single period, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, second edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016); and Colin E. Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985). Milbank homes in on transformations in culture that took place in what he calls the crisis of 1300, while both Hauerwas and Gunton give greater weight to the more recent shifts brought about by the Enlightenment.

already been governing us for quite some time.”<sup>7</sup> He remains upbeat about the prospects for theology, for reasons that will receive discussion in what follows. In addition, he engages almost exclusively with aspects of pre-modern and modern culture while largely leaving to the side postmodern developments, which were gaining momentum in the final years of his writing career.<sup>8</sup> Torrance’s genealogy assumes that doing theology requires that a certain affinity must obtain between the object of theological inquiry and the knowing subject. What drives his genealogical narrative is the claim that particular modern trends fit with and even facilitate this, while others render it difficult to achieve, though theology may mount a challenge at these points and certainly need not surrender to such challenges.

What is ultimately determinative for the genealogy is its theological substructure. Accordingly, the discussion below lays out the underlying theological commitments that shape Torrance’s narrative. This essay does not intend to rehearse the genealogy in its entirety; it aims to illuminate its doctrinal structure. Torrance inveighs against the modern metanarrative of progress with sufficient vehemence that his work is in this respect akin to accounts that lament the tendency toward secularization over the centuries. Yet noting his criticisms of modernity—a period he by no means rejects in toto—does not get us to the heart of the matter. Only doctrine does so. Theology’s role demonstrates that Torrance’s account does not conform to a decline pattern. A decline genealogy narrates the present as a declension from an ideal or nearly ideal condition, which ought to be restored. Torrance makes relative judgments about periods, but the gestalt of his genealogy is not declension in the above sense. The substructure of the narrative shows that it revolves around the epistemic reconciliation between subject and object that theology always requires. The penultimate section of the essay follows one thread within Torrance’s genealogy, his application of this method to the nature and interpretation of the Bible, to display more concretely how the account operates. The essay then closes by venturing some assessments of the overall picture that emerges.

## II

What Torrance refers to as theological “ultimates” govern his narrative. He writes, “The incarnation and the resurrection really are *ultimates* which must be accepted, or rejected, as such, for they cannot be verified or validated on any other grounds than those which they themselves provide.”<sup>9</sup> With respect to these moments, people “must think only as they are compelled to think by the nature of the divine realities themselves, and they must engage in critical judgments in which they test the persuasive statements in the light of that to which they refer, and test their own preconceptions to see whether they are importing into what is apprehended something that is not really there.”<sup>10</sup> As the quotation makes clear, ultimate beliefs *do* need to be tested and validated. But assessing how well the beliefs cohere with other beliefs that one accepted before coming to affirm the ultimates in question does not constitute the appropriate standard for them to meet. Rather,

<sup>7</sup> Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 263.

<sup>8</sup> A genealogy with a focus on postmodern thought is David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1976), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 201.

fitting testing means activating an intuitive capacity to discern the belief's adequacy as a report on divine reality, which reveals itself. Engaging with the reality to which such belief refers inevitably mobilizes some tacit commitments too. Yet those tacit beliefs cannot disqualify an ultimate belief—if that affirmation genuinely serves as an ultimate.<sup>11</sup> Rather, forming basic commitments in this way necessitates reforming one's framework of beliefs as needed to bring them into alignment with the ultimate.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, while accepting ultimates initially entails making a faith commitment, one still ought to strive to understand them over time.<sup>13</sup> This process integrates them more deeply into one's whole outlook. This section will spell out the three ultimates that are most relevant to Torrance's genealogy. As will become evident, the account appears to be a declension narrative only from the point of view of alternative basic commitments.

### Torrance's First Ultimate: Trinity

First, the most encompassing ultimate is the Trinity, who reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God the Father graciously makes himself known through Jesus Christ, his incarnate son, in the power of the Spirit's illuminating light. It is true that "theology can never operate outside the historical situation and therefore cannot but be conditioned by the notions and tools which it uses from age to age."<sup>14</sup> Note here the term *conditioned*. From a realist perspective, theological claims do not reduce to the values and aspirations of the human beings making them. They are, instead, assertions about the nature and character of the divine. That a particular historical context conditions these affirmations means only that they bear a certain imprint from the environment of the person offering them. While the specific angle of vision from which the proposal originates inflects the claim to some degree, theology wanders astray if it ends up thinking of its basic subject matter as anything other than the triune God. It is fitting, then, that the doctrine of God became a major focus of Torrance's own writing: though he never composed a multi-volume systematic theology, he did write three significant constructive works on the Trinity.<sup>15</sup> In describing the goal of one of his seminal writings, Torrance writes,

It is my intention to clarify the process of scientific activity in theology, to throw human thinking of God back upon Him as its direct and proper Object, and thus to serve the self-scrutiny of theology as a pure science. At the same time it is the aim of the argument [of *Theological Science*] to draw out the implications for the human subject of the fact that he is addressed by God and summoned to faithful and disciplined exercise of his reason in response to God's Word.<sup>16</sup>

Proper Christian doctrine concentrates on God, stressing that theological knowledge comes *to us*, as opposed to *from us*. The knowing subject is not simply a passive recipient of the truth about God, however: the subject's intellectual capacities must come into a degree

<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 98-130.

<sup>12</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 202.

<sup>13</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996); Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), xiii-xiv.

of conformity with the known object as the subject enters a relationship with God through Christ and in the Spirit.

This theological focus, while hardly novel, has notable implications for the practice of genealogy. The genealogical account discusses ideas more than their circumstances of genesis, but it never claims that knowing God outrightly *requires* a fitting intellectual-historical location. Knowing God is contingent on God's self-disclosure, not a person's position in the history of ideas. As Torrance explains, "As I see it, this is *the* [not an element in the] great story of modern thought, whether it be in theology, science, or philosophy: the struggle for fidelity, for appropriate methods and apposite modes of speech, and therefore for the proper adaptation of the human subject to the object of his knowledge, whether it be God or the world of nature or man." He continues: "But it is also the story of the struggles of man with himself, for somehow the more he comes to know, the more masterful he tries to be and the more he imposes himself upon reality, the more he gets in the way of his own progress."<sup>17</sup> The perennial conflict human beings face is thus not with intellectual currents per se, or at least such dynamics existing apart from themselves. The more essential struggle is with *amor sui*. This is fundamentally what must be overcome—and, for Torrance, sounding a characteristic Reformed Protestant theme, it is divine agency that overcomes this.<sup>18</sup> Because intellectual-historical location is not determinative, the past cannot straightforwardly constitute the answer to theology's problems. Even when Torrance reads important historical texts, he interprets them with an eye to their subject matter, not as a window onto past belief for its own sake: "But in so far as we are now able through prior formulations to apprehend the objective reality in a greater fullness than they could specify at the time, the basic concepts and relations they involve will accredit themselves to us as rooted in the structure of reality and therefore as belonging to the essential content of the faith."<sup>19</sup> A further way in which the history of ideas is not ultimate is that even if many troubles beset contemporary theology, a compelling reason to hope remains, for if theology will reconnect with its object, then the obstacles are not insuperable.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Torrance draws inspiration from Karl Barth challenging anthropocentric currents that originated from the nineteenth century and developing a new approach more in tune with theology's proper focus of study.<sup>21</sup> Fruitful doctrine always depends primarily on giving heed to divine self-disclosure, not on the theologian's ambient circumstances.

God's primacy in theology also explains why Torrance frequently targets with polemic what he dubs the "New Theology." The New Theologians do not represent a substantively unified school of thinking, nor are they closely linked to the same institution or institutions. What holds them together is essentially the mistake they all make. Theologians such as Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and John Robinson allow the subjective component of theology to arrogate to itself undue priority. Torrance offers a vivid analogy by way of confronting this trend: "An eclipse of the sun, Buber reminds us, is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself. So, it is with the eclipse of God that is

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, see Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 235-44.

<sup>19</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 201-17.

now taking place, for something has stepped between our existence and God to shut off the light of heaven, but that something is in fact *ourselves*, our own bloated selfhood."<sup>22</sup> He develops his critique by setting the New Theologians in a historical narrative. According to this account, John Calvin noted that knowledge of God and knowledge of humanity relate to one another reciprocally; yet some subsequent theologians began to pit these two against each other, and in due course knowledge of the human tended to overwhelm knowledge of God.<sup>23</sup> Theology must shake itself free of this tendency. And it can. Theology has made great strides through its history and stands ready to make additional gains now. The aberrations of the New Theology do not negate the "central march of Christian theology through the centuries."<sup>24</sup>

### Torrance's Second Ultimate: The Incarnation

The incarnation serves as a second ultimate that conditions Torrance's genealogical strategy. Several points about the incarnation bear directly on the genealogy. (A) In an early lecture, delivered even before he had completed his doctorate, Torrance says, "The significance of Christ for faith is simply that Christ is the Object of faith, and One in whom we believe; as such he has absolute religious significance—that is the essence of Christianity."<sup>25</sup> The incarnation does not indicate that the man Jesus Christ somehow became deified at a certain point in his ministry; nor does it claim that divinity loosely associated itself with a human being who can therefore act as its symbol; it refers rather to the hypostatic union, according to which the same subject, Jesus Christ, was both divine and human in nature.<sup>26</sup> Crucially for the early Torrance, the incarnate Son *comes* into the world: his advent is active, an initiative on his part, a movement into the fallen creation. In his initial teaching stint, Torrance expounds a Christology in agreement with Karl Barth's categorical opposition to natural theology. (He had not yet worked out his own nuanced version of natural theology.<sup>27</sup>) The upshot of this is that Torrance insists forcefully that the advent of Jesus represents a judgment upon all human efforts to make an overture in the direction of the divine.<sup>28</sup> God comes to humanity, not the other way around:

It is here [in the incarnation] that we see where the chagrin of modern Renaissance man comes from—for it means nothing less than the smashing of all his cherished hopes, the surrender of his self-will and vaunted human autonomy by a condemnation of it as sin, and indeed a disqualification of the rights of man, for man is now forfeit before God; so in fact it means ultimately the disqualification of civilisation and the great and magnificent tower of Babel which man had built and goes on building.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> On Calvin, see Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 61.

<sup>26</sup> Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> For an insightful discussion of Torrance's new natural theology, including its intention, achievement, and limitations, see Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*, Great Theologians Series (Farnham, MA: Ashgate, 2009), 93–99.

<sup>28</sup> There is a less agonistic relationship between the incarnation and history in the lectures delivered later in his career, at the University of Edinburgh: Torrance, *Incarnation*. These are heavily revised and expanded versions of the presentations from his early teaching at Auburn Seminary published under the title *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*.

<sup>29</sup> Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, 77.

Jesus' coming as the incarnate one establishes a new order that stands in discontinuity with the old.<sup>30</sup> The incarnation rules out any line of connection from the old order to the new.

The reality of the incarnation, God's entrance into a fallen world, means rejecting an Ebionite Christology and allied notions of generic progress. Torrance uses the term *Ebionite* as a broad trope for any view according to which Jesus Christ was a human being who became divine over time.<sup>31</sup> It is basically synonymous with the thesis that Jesus was adopted by God and came to be divinized, though he was not God from the start of his life. This commitment surrenders the wholeness of the hypostatic union, failing to see Jesus as both human and divine for the entirety of his earthly sojourn. "This view taken in its various historical manifestations consists essentially in the apotheosis of a man, Jesus of Nazareth, and ranges from the idea that Jesus was a great Man far ahead of his times, and so exalted in his teaching and Person, even sinless, that he came to be regarded as Son of God; or as having the value of God, he came to be regarded as God."<sup>32</sup> Torrance views this perspective as problematic in the present, especially since it encourages human beings to imagine that they have the capability of improving themselves indefinitely and thereby making infinite progress. "Christianity sees history as a whole to be under divine judgment and needing radical transformation. Man, however, likes to regard history as normal, or if not normal as it actually is at any given moment, as something that is really adjustable through human efforts, so that it is within the power of man to improve history."<sup>33</sup> This attitude is unacceptable because it assumes that original sin does not characterize the human condition to its very depths, and that what is wrong with the world pertains only to a set of isolated and incidental features, rather than anything more radical and pervasive.<sup>34</sup> That Christ had to come in his first advent presupposes this deeper account of the fall, and that he is coming again in his second advent indicates that no signs of earthly progress straightforwardly equate with what God will achieve in Christ eschatologically.<sup>35</sup>

The writings Torrance composed during his full professorship in Edinburgh find in the incarnation a powerful impetus toward dialogue between science and religion and help in fending off certain Christological misconceptions. This is point (B) regarding the incarnation. Torrance's mature work takes on a rather different tone from his initial lectures: it approaches extramural conversation expectantly and integrates dialogue into theology as a necessary and even prominent feature. Even in the later writing, however, he still refrains from deducing a Christian doctrine of God

<sup>30</sup> Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, 78-79. Torrance makes a similar point in a talk given to students from the same period as this lecture: "The Modern Theological Debate" (Theological Students' Prayer Union Conference, Theological Students' Prayer Union of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship of Evangelical Unions, London, 1941), 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-65.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> On the latter point, see Thomas F. Torrance, "History and Reformation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (1951): 279-91. Torrance would not accept John Baillie's contention that the progress of world missions between the first and second advents of Christ will usher in the *eschaton* (see *The Belief in Progress* [London: Oxford University Press, 1950], 186-235). This claim is incompatible with Torrance's stress on the relativity of every earthly form. Torrance avoids committing to the sort of large-scale pattern that Baillie thinks will connect the time between Christ's ascension and his coming again, saying only that this is a time of dying to the old and rising again in new life, on the model of Jesus himself.

from the existence of the world, conceived of in a secular way. There is continuity between the early and late phases of his theological career to the extent that he never builds a bridge up to God beginning from a world understood entirely apart from a Christian perspective. The most important substantive innovation in the subsequent period, for our purposes, is that Torrance discerns a consonance, though not a strict identity, between theology and major scientific developments of the twentieth century. The incarnation prompts engagement with science, since in scientific study people are “set by God to the task of exploring, and bringing to word, the order and harmony of the universe and all that takes place within it, for the universe is the sphere in which the believer glorifies and praises God the Creator, as well as the medium in and through which God makes himself known to man.”<sup>36</sup> Theology must converse with science because both disciplines concern themselves with the same world, even if the two fields concentrate on different aspects of it: science focuses on the patterns in the contingent order, while theology delves into the transcendent source and ground of this order.<sup>37</sup>

An example from Torrance’s genealogy demonstrates how the dialogue with science unfolds.<sup>38</sup> Relativity theory assists in undermining the container perspective on space and the damaging ramifications it has for the incarnation. To see space as a container means imagining it as sharply bounded, enclosing things within its confines. The sacraments contain, in a similar sense, the grace of Christ, which members of the ecclesial hierarchy dole out to those who partake of the sacrament. Furthermore, according to a container perspective, the human body Jesus assumes confines him; he does not exceed it. This makes it profoundly difficult to see how the incarnate Christ remains the transcendent Lord, one free to act in the world without being limited by it. Einstein’s scientific work breaks down the distinction between space and time, rendering a dynamic view of space-time preferable, on scientific grounds, over the container view. Yet a dynamic view is also preferable on theological grounds, since it does not pressure Christology toward minimizing the transcendence and freedom of the second person of the Trinity during his earthly existence. Torrance portrays Luther and the Lutheran tradition as employing this container or receptacle view. Luther confines Jesus Christ to his human body, for he is unable to see how he could have descended from heaven without leaving that realm. As applied to the human body of Christ, the receptacle notion of space also pressures Luther to depict Christ as renouncing certain properties of deity in his assumption of human flesh. Thus, twentieth-century scientific advances converge with the dynamic construal of space found in church, allowing Torrance to portray the Lutheran Christological trajectory as taking its cue from a deeply problematic assumption.

<sup>36</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 179.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 180. In a discussion of this paper, John Milbank charged Torrance with making theology the passive victim of science. See John Milbank “Response to Darren Sarisky,” Theological Genealogies of Modernity Conference, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GifLTV2zsc&t=1810s>. But Torrance does not actually suggest that theology must adjust itself immediately to whatever the latest findings of science might be, without theology having any conviction of its own about what it should say on matters with which it is concerned. Torrance sees theology and the natural sciences as consonant, especially at a general level in that both fields operate with a realist orientation. Yet he is certainly aware that the two subjects are not identical, for they each have different areas of focus. And he does not hold back from criticizing scientific developments he considers problematic on the basis that they depart from the epistemic stance that both theology and proper science require. For instance, see his criticism of biology: *Space, Time, and Incarnation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 71.

<sup>38</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 56-76.



There is a further point (C) about the incarnation with implications for Torrance's genealogy: the incarnation unites transcendent and immanent, thereby becoming the touchstone for what Torrance calls integrated or unified thinking. In Jesus Christ, God reveals himself thus: "The transcendent God is present and immanent within this world in such a way that we encounter His transcendence in this-worldly form in Jesus Christ, and yet in such a way that we are aware of a majesty and transcendence in Him that reaches out infinitely beyond the whole created order."<sup>39</sup> There is an exclusivity to this revelation in that God is knowable only through Jesus Christ, not apart from him.<sup>40</sup> Yet neither can one know Jesus Christ apart from the world he entered and imbued with light. Christ's advent activates the world's signifying function: "This constitutes the theological field of connections in and through Jesus Christ who cannot be thought of simply as fitting into the patterns of space and time formed by other agencies, but as organizing them round Himself and giving them transcendental references to God in and through Himself."<sup>41</sup> There is no "oneness or even any proportion between God and the world,"<sup>42</sup> for worldly signs are distinct from the one to whom they point. Still, the world has a dimension of depth, which Christ and the Spirit enable human subjects to perceive, for it points beyond its own finite limits and to God. Because the immanent sphere refers to a transcendent domain, human thinking should strive to become congruent with this feature of reality. Frameworks that are successful in this regard Torrance dubs integrated or unified.<sup>43</sup> They allow the connection-in-distinction between God and creation to come into view. The hypostatic union in a sense constitutes an example of unified thinking,<sup>44</sup> but it is not simply an example among many. As an ultimate belief, the incarnation transforms the human knower's whole perspective on all that exists, reorganizing one's understanding of God and the entirety of the world as well.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 79. According to John Milbank, Torrance ends up denying the incarnation altogether by insisting that Jesus Christ had a fully realized divine nature even upon entering the world of space and time. See Milbank, "Response to Darren Sarisky." If by *incarnation* Milbank is referring to his own distinctive theological views of that topic, then surely Torrance is indeed denying *that* construal of the incarnation. Milbank's Christology erodes any boundaries between Jesus and his followers: "Jesus, therefore, figures in the New Testament primarily as the new Moses, the founder of a new or renewed law and community. It is for this reason that he cannot be given any particular content: for the founder of a new practice cannot be described in terms of that practice, unless that practice is already in existence, which is contradictory. This is why Jesus is presented not simply as the source of the Church, but as arriving simultaneously with the Church." See John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 152. Furthermore, Milbank writes, "It is these metaphors, at the heart of the metanarrative commentary, which contain the germs of speculations about 'incarnation' and 'atonement'. And yet the effect of implying that a person situated within the world is also, in himself (like God) our total situation, or that which is always transcendently presupposed, is to evacuate that person of any particular, specifiable content. It is to ensure that Jesus who is in all places, because he is all places, never in fact appears" (Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 150). The result of all of this is to make Christ and the church co-constituting and reciprocally dependent. Torrance's whole realist orientation to the theological task means that as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus' identity is a given, shining through in his engagement with creaturely reality, without being a function of such an engagement. Were it a product of this engagement, that would make the nature of the creator dependent on the state of creation. Torrance does not have to struggle, as Milbank so clearly does, and without evident success, against the charge that the name of Jesus is dispensible in his theology: see Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 152-55.

Torrance dubs any disruption to unified thinking dualism, a term that appears frequently in his genealogy. Dualism indicates any in-principle hiatus between immanent and transcendent that keeps the two permanently apart, or even other disjunctions that are broadly similar and could ultimately have ripple effects that unsettle incarnational doctrine. This basic difficulty crops up across a broad range of contexts. For instance, dualism arose in the Greco-Roman world; early Christian theologians had to confront it as the church spread out geographically from its original center in Jerusalem.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the nascent church had to confront a litany of fundamental divisions, which have a long legacy: “The Platonic separation between the sensible world and the intelligible world, hardened by Aristotle, governed the disjunction between action and reflection, event and idea, becoming and being, the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, the temporal and the eternal, and was built by Ptolemy into a scientific cosmology that was to dominate European thought for more than a millennium.”<sup>46</sup> Much the same pattern appears in certain strands of nineteenth- and twentieth-century biblical studies: “There we find a phenomenalist bracketing off of ‘the appearances of Jesus’ from the frame of their natural intelligible connections in the evangelical witness, so that they inevitably become fragmented like the phenomenal particulars of observationalist nature science or philosophy, and the conclusion sometimes reached is that there are several ‘Christologies’ in the New Testament.”<sup>47</sup> What readers should do, instead of operating dualistically, is to interpret Scripture holistically by reading synthetically across the whole range of canonical documents and seeking to relate the historical manifestations of revelation to their ultimate ontological ground in God himself. When they do so, they can see that the various biblical texts are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that cohere into a picture that corresponds to the early church’s creedal teaching about Trinity.<sup>48</sup> The polemic against dualism, though not always precisely controlled, is a function of Torrance’s positive commitment to securing incarnational teaching.<sup>49</sup> What made these manifestations of dualism wrong is that they undermined thinking of the Son and the Father as of the same substance. Later figures such as Descartes and Newton find their place in the same story about this paradigmatic problem, which still looms over Western culture because of their influence. Once again, the driving concern is to keep intact “the ontological bond between Jesus Christ and God

<sup>45</sup> Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 47.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, x. Torrance also finds resonances between problems in biblical interpretation and trends in aesthetics whereby form and substance drift apart from one another. See his *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 47. This is yet another area of Torrance’s thought that John Milbank questioned at the Theological Genealogies of Modernity conference. See Milbank, “Response to Darren Sarisky.” Milbank asked how fitting it is to speak of Plato and other Greek philosophers as dualists, given that Plato worked hard to address the problem of the one and the many. It is true that Torrance does not always deploy his terminology with as much precision as he might. But the thrust of the point he makes with it here is that there were dynamics within the thinking of pre-Christian Greek philosophers that prevented immanence and transcendence from coming together in the way that they do *in the incarnation*. This claim is not incompatible with acknowledging that such philosophers did not hold immanence and transcendence apart to a maximal degree. But any frame of thought that inhibits an affirmation of the incarnation must be challenged. That is Torrance’s most fundamental concern in deploying the language of dualism. His interest here chimes in with recent research on patristic theology that interprets early Christian theologians as reforming their philosophical inheritance to align it with the incarnation; some of this work presents early Christian theology in a more granular way than Torrance typically does. For instance, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

the Father.”<sup>50</sup> Louis Dupré’s depiction of the breakup of the pre-modern synthesis between God, world, and self provides more texture than Torrance’s narrative does, but his work complements Torrance’s by detailing how immanent and transcendent drifted apart in the establishment of modernity.<sup>51</sup>

### Torrance’s Third Ultimate: Resurrection and Ascension

Jesus’ resurrection and ascension conjointly constitute the third ultimate structuring Torrance’s genealogy. These doctrines yield a distinctive view of temporality, one that differs from a secular view. According to a secular conception, which factors out Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, time placings are, to borrow language from Charles Taylor, “consistently transitive.”<sup>52</sup> If A is before B and B is before C, then A is before C. Thinking more theologically about time alters this picture fundamentally: it “introduces ‘warps’ and seeming inconsistencies in profane time-orderings. Events which were far apart in profane time could nevertheless be closely linked.”<sup>53</sup> Torrance’s own terminology for secular or profane time is horizontal time.<sup>54</sup> It unfolds as if on a horizontal plane, or in a linear fashion, and therefore time placements are transitive. Jesus Christ is the point at which linear time and vertical time intersect. Taken together, the resurrection and ascension confer an unrestricted presence on Jesus Christ,<sup>55</sup> with the result that he is with human beings in a way that appears to warp time when it is conceived in exclusively linear fashion. Torrance writes:

But with his ascension Jesus Christ also sent upon the Church and indeed upon ‘all flesh’ his Holy Spirit so that through the Spirit he might be present, really present, although in a different way. In order to think out the relation of the Church in history to Christ we must put both these together—*mediate horizontal relation* through history to the historical Jesus Christ, and *immediate vertical relation* through the Spirit to the risen and ascended Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup>

The first provides the material content, the second the immediacy of encounter.<sup>57</sup> Jesus meets the church now, though this Jesus is none other than the historical Jesus, whose followers anticipate his second advent.<sup>58</sup> At that point, Jesus will not accomplish anything over and above what the cross and the resurrection have already effected: the second advent will reveal more fully what he has already achieved in his first.<sup>59</sup> Christology thus implies that time has *both* horizontal *and* vertical dimensions.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Interpretation: Studies in Medieval and Modern Hermeneutics*, edited by Adam Nigh and Todd Speidell, Thomas F. Torrance Collected Studies (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 46.

<sup>51</sup> Louis K. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). This observation is inspired by John Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, edited by John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain R. Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 589.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 55.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 147-48.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-74, 147-48.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>60</sup> There are parallels between Torrance and a recent genealogy that works with both aspects of time: Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation*, Reading the Scriptures (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

This characterization of time entails that a nostalgic yearning for a previous era cannot drive the genealogy. Nostalgia has no place at all in Torrance's writings if it refers to a longing for a "past plenitude"<sup>61</sup> from which the unfolding of time permanently separates people in the present. To feel nostalgia in this sense is a pitiful state: it represents an overwhelming desire for what definitively cannot be experienced, an intense attachment to what one cannot possess and enjoy any longer, because it is no longer present. Nostalgia could only obtain on the assumption that time is exclusively linear, marching relentlessly forward, never circling back in any sense to a significant moment; nostalgia also depends on the further assumption that contemporary people are therefore terminally estranged from their object of desire.<sup>62</sup> It is thus a "distinctively modern phenomenon inasmuch as it acquiesces in the modern (historicist) view of time as a monochrome vector pointing toward the future, which renders the past as strictly passé, that is, as sheer *inventory* to be, perhaps, objectively known but most definitely incapable of signifying *for* (let alone transforming) us."<sup>63</sup> Torrance unambiguously rejects an exclusively linear notion of time. And with it, he disavows the second assumption associated with nostalgia, for only a strictly linear time could separate people from past texts and force them to read them from a distance. Torrance's genealogy does not so much privilege the past (or any temporal period, for that matter) as it focuses on the person of Jesus Christ. He reads biblical texts and the major theologians as pointing present-day readers to the God-man. Jesus' *parousia* contains within it a past and a future coming. The entire scheme may appear to favor the past insofar as his second coming adds nothing to his completed work on the cross, but this is not quite right, since the advent that Christians still await, when Christ comes in glory rather than in humility, includes a further unveiling of the full dimensions of his finished work. The genealogy revolves around Christology, and its fundamental indexing is not chronological. The account has no room for nostalgia.

Likewise, the genealogy does not imagine the existence of a golden age. Assume that a golden age for theology entails that there actually was a period in ecclesial history to which the present can simply conform, that this ideal period's historically specific location does not prevent current theology from viewing it as a model to imitate. Assume further that in this period "the ordinary ambiguities or corruptions of human history have not obscured the truth of the gospel."<sup>64</sup> Torrance clearly does not think of any period as meeting the first criterion. He is well aware that every context has its own set of distinctive characteristics. Torrance notes that theology always betrays its location in a particular setting.<sup>65</sup> Even as he reads what he sees as compelling theological statements from the past, what he gleans from them is how they refer to their subject matter.<sup>66</sup> Athanasius, Calvin, and Barth are still valuable to today's theologian because they speak of God—not so truly that their readers can afford to read them uncritically, but they write with sufficient veracity that they reward the effort required to understand what they say, even centuries after they wrote, about God and

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 69.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 102. The first criterion derives from the same source.

<sup>65</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

ourselves in relation to God. It is also doubtful that Torrance considers any stretch of the past as qualifying according to the second criterion for a golden age. The Nicene milieu is the closest approximation of this in the record of the church. Torrance reads the leading Nicene theologians in the context of the whole framework of thought they constructed. In that sense, he is interested in their period, not just the creed that emerged from it. Further, he does consider the statements the Nicene creed makes to be unambiguously correct.<sup>67</sup> Yet, he certainly harbors his share of worries about the wider discussion of theology in the period of Nicaea. He sees major problems on the Latin side,<sup>68</sup> more so than among the Greeks, and Athanasius and others had to combat the heretical teachings that the creed itself denounced. The period itself was fraught, in that there was a “troublesome diversity of opinion and contradictory credal formulae current at the time,”<sup>69</sup> though the creed’s affirmations are “irreversible,”<sup>70</sup> continuing to set direction for the church into the present. Therefore, it is not the case that Torrance’s genealogy treats any tract of previous history as a golden age.

What, then, holds Torrance’s account together? Because nostalgia does not animate the narrative, and he does not propose returning to a pristinely pure past, the story is not essentially about declension or decline. It is not nearly sufficient just to note Torrance’s early critique of an anthropologically-driven notion of progress and, on that basis, to conclude that he construes the flow of history in terms of decline. To negate progress does not by itself endorse regress: his theological substructure makes things more complicated than this. The red thread running through all his genealogical reflections is epistemic affinity or, perhaps better, epistemic reconciliation. Torrance’s genealogy is a story of how frameworks for thinking about God have drifted away from displaying resonance between knower and known. The specific notion of progress that draws the young Torrance’s fire presupposes that people possess the capacity to reach out to God. But they do not and cannot. They must turn away from themselves and attend to God as he reveals himself in the person of his Son, and it is only in the empowering presence of the Spirit that such a turn is even possible. Recent scientific advances challenge notions of space that generate misunderstandings in Christology and are, in very general terms, consonant with the mandates of theology. The incarnation requires a unified approach to knowledge, instead of any version of dualism, which undermines efforts to think of Jesus Christ as both God and man. Lastly, interrelating horizontal and vertical time means that human beings can relate to God as present to them now, where he discloses himself to them. An exclusively linear time restricts Jesus Christ to the timeframe of his earthly life and ministry.

### III

This section sets out the main contours of Torrance’s genealogy of the Bible and its interpretation, exemplifying in a more concrete way themes discussed up to this point.

<sup>67</sup> Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 13.

<sup>68</sup> For the claim that Nicaea was essentially an achievement of the East, see Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 2. On the Latin Heresy, see Torrance, *Divine Interpretation*, 44–67. I leave to the side, for the moment, detailed consideration of whether the evidence actually warrants this stark division between East and West on the Trinity. Historians of early Christianity have recently raised serious questions about the penchant of some twentieth-century theologians for making such schematic distinctions. See, for instance, Michel R. Barnes, “Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 237–50.

<sup>69</sup> Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

For two reasons, this topic provides a suitable illustration of his genealogical work. First, it is one of the most expansively developed aspects of his overall genealogy of modern theology. Torrance of course wrote widely on science and theology and many dogmatic topics, including the Trinity, incarnation, and so on. The pertinent point here is that the genealogical aspect of his treatment of Scripture and hermeneutics is richly developed—arguably, at least as much as it is in relation to the other subjects. Second, because many of his reflections on the Bible occur in stand-alone historical essays, whereas he typically weaves genealogical work on other matters into constructive proposals, it is practicable to present the thrust of the genealogy of Scripture in summary fashion without burdening the exposition with extensive remarks on how this genealogy serves his constructive concerns, which could quickly become topics for discussion in their own right.

Torrance devised various plans for how to present his genealogy of biblical interpretation. At one point, he intended to offer it as three volumes, dedicating one each to the early church, the medieval era and the Reformation, and the modern period up to his own day.<sup>71</sup> He did not bring this project entirely to completion. But we do have from him a volume on Greek patristics, a study of John Calvin and his background, and a collection of essays on medieval and modern hermeneutics that was edited posthumously (in addition, some draft material still remains unpublished). His hermeneutical studies do not attempt fully to contextualize the major figures on which they focus, nor do they comprehensively explicate the techniques these interpreters used; instead, the projects explore the readers' theological perspective on interpretation, locating the biblical text in a wider field, setting it in relationship to doctrines of the Trinity, Christology, the church, and so on. The conflict between a dualistic and a unified perspective is a major motif running through the whole narrative. The consonance between science and theology also enters the story at key junctures. Despite the problems bedeviling certain episodes within the history of reception, Torrance remains hopeful that God will reveal himself through the biblical witness.

The church's response to dualism initially came together via the work of Greek patristic theologians. Torrance writes in the preface to *Divine Meaning* that one of the main things his study of the Greeks led him to appreciate was their "struggle to secure the integrity" of a Christian perspective "in the face of the dualist and determinist frames of thought then prevailing in the Graeco-Roman world."<sup>72</sup> The patristic period does not constitute a golden age, for theologians today should not just repeat what a previous era's best theologians said, as if we are "blindly following"<sup>73</sup> them. Yet, through their efforts, the church got on the right track. For instance, while Athenagoras did not offer highly developed theological teachings, the main purpose of his writing was to "break through the conceptual barriers of Hellenism in such a way as to make room for Christian convictions."<sup>74</sup> Irenaeus ventured a doctrinally richer set of teachings by developing an approach to exegesis that refused any disjunction between truth and history.<sup>75</sup> The work of Justin Martyr and Melito of Sardis complemented and filled out the contribution of Irenaeus.<sup>76</sup> Yet it was Athanasius,

<sup>71</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), vii.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

according to Torrance, who most decisively routed dualism.<sup>77</sup> His affirmation that the Father and the Son were the same in substance meant that Jesus Christ had brought together truth and history, in addition to the intelligible and the sensible, reducing to a false dilemma any misplaced pressure to choose between them. Theologians today should not simply repeat what their predecessors said, but they ought to follow their example by fighting the dualisms of our day, thereby clearing away obstacles that would otherwise impede confession of the truth.

Torrance's coverage of other historical eras is patchier, but the overriding point nonetheless emerges clearly that the Greeks' unified perspective was fragile, holding together in the thinking of certain commanding figures, but breaking apart in other instances. John Reuchlin (1455-1522) is an example of the latter. Torrance views Reuchlin, the father of Hebrew studies in the Western church,<sup>78</sup> as having "rejected the all-important argumentative mode of interpretation in which the reader of the Scriptures does not simply interpret language with grammatical and syntactical rigor, nor simply meditate upon what is written in order to be lifted up to communion with God, but thinks the realities that are denoted by them and allows his mind to be shaped and directed by the inner logic of those realities."<sup>79</sup> Erasmus is better known to later history, yet Torrance sees his fundamental shortcoming in essentially the same terms, noting that he "never managed to penetrate far behind organised language to the inner connection of the realities denoted—that had to wait for the Reformers."<sup>80</sup> Augustine, Newton, and Descartes count as paradigmatic representatives of formulating problematic disjunctions: the "dualism [they] built into the general framework of Western thought and culture had the effect of cutting back into the preaching and teaching of the Church in such a way as to damage, and sometimes to sever, the ontological bond between Jesus Christ and God the Father, and thus to introduce an oblique or symbolical relation between the Word of God and God himself."<sup>81</sup> More recent scholarship on Augustine provides a nuanced reading of him and calls into question whether he is straightforwardly dualistic,<sup>82</sup> presumably, Torrance could accept that Augustine is not the source of this problem while still conceiving of it as an issue of enduring concern. During the Reformation, Calvin held together "grammatical and theological connections,"<sup>83</sup> just as Barth did the

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 181, 230.

<sup>78</sup> Torrance, *Divine Interpretation*, 132.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>82</sup> See especially Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Torrance is certainly capable of perceiving strengths in Augustine's theology and is by no means always critical of him. He deeply appreciates much about Augustine's theology of grace, for instance, and notes that the Reformation was deeply indebted to him. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 173. Torrance regularly articulates criticism, though, of what he claims is a bifurcation in Augustine's thinking between the sensible and intelligible realms, with the result that the attention of the theologian shifts from the empirical correlates of faith to a supposedly ideal realm existing in abstraction from the life of Jesus Christ. This is a major manifestation of dualism that Torrance finds in Augustine. Ayres's work marks a high point in recent scholarly readings of Augustine that depict him as having reformulated the philosophical conceptuality he incorporates into his work, such that there actually are not dualistic dynamics in his view of the incarnation. In his study of Torrance's use of patristic theology, Jason R. Radcliff perceptively acknowledges that Ayres and others can help us to see value in Augustine that Torrance tends to overlook: *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers: A Reformed, Evangelical, and Ecumenical Reconstruction of the Patristic Tradition* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015), 196-97.

<sup>83</sup> Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, 161.

same during the twentieth century.<sup>84</sup> All in all, Torrance challenges the drift toward dualism and aligns himself with those who were able to avoid it, especially the early Greek theologians together with Calvin and Barth. This excavative effort functions as preparatory work for the exegesis within his constructive theological oeuvre, which also seeks to break out of dualistic patterns.

Finally, modern scientific advances reinforce a sound theology of space and time, and this view has definite benefits for biblical interpretation. In the scientific domain, Torrance underscores the value of Einstein's work:

We have an ally of far-reaching importance, such as Athanasius did not have, namely, a scientific and cosmological reconstruction of our basic attitude to the universe which, ever since the rise of relativity theory, has decisively undermined the damaging dualisms that have afflicted Western philosophy and science and have caused deep splits in our culture with consequent widespread disintegration of form in the arts and social sciences.<sup>85</sup>

Modern theologians can draw upon relativity to challenge a container view of space in Newtonian and Kantian forms, just as the Greek patristic theologians faced a difficulty that was the same in its broad outlines, even if it proved different in its details.<sup>86</sup> Origen, Athanasius, and others confronted and overcame the container view that Plato, Aristotle, and the like made influential.<sup>87</sup> This bears on biblical exegesis given how frequently the concept of space appears in the biblical text. The Bible speaks of God as a temple, for example. Since a container construal of space is false, describing God in this way should not suggest limits on him.<sup>88</sup> As a self-existent being, he is his own place and is not contained by anything else.

#### IV

That Torrance's genealogy is robustly theological is clearly one of its virtues. It is certainly a *theological* genealogy. The doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the resurrection together with the ascension function as they should, which is to say comprehensively. That is, where those doctrines have implications for the deployment of the genealogy, Torrance notes those entailments and follows through on them across a whole range of domains.<sup>89</sup> The primacy of God directs Torrance to prioritize certain polemical targets more highly than others and to locate intellectual-historical episodes within the ongoing process by which God graciously reveals himself to human beings. The doctrine of the incarnation prevents the genealogy from embracing a progressive metanarrative, it holds up integration as the ideal for knowledge and prompts challenges to substantial departures from this, and it motivates engagements with the natural sciences, for these fields share a concern for the same world. The resurrection and ascension require time to have both historical and vertical dimensions, thereby ruling out nostalgia and idealizations of prominent

<sup>84</sup> Torrance, *Divine Interpretation*, 44-67.

<sup>85</sup> Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 228.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-373.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>89</sup> This is my adaptation of Paul Griffiths's notion of comprehensiveness. See his *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.



episodes in church history. Christian theology's comprehensive operation in these areas by no means dictates every detail of what a theologian ought to think about intellectual history, progress, knowledge, the sciences, or time. It implies only that those domains do not exist *alongside* theology. Theological commitments condition them whenever these beliefs function as genuine ultimates. Theology should "provide rubrics under which the facts of all other accounts can be comprehended."<sup>90</sup> It does so here, to Torrance's credit.

There are further virtues to Torrance's genealogy because it makes judgments about history in a piecemeal fashion. Torrance issues relative assessments of different periods: the early church and the Reformation mark high points in the church's history, and what he calls the Latin heresy created pervasive problems for the modern West.<sup>91</sup> But he does not indulge in sweeping condemnations of entire ages as some genealogists do, nor does he pronounce blanket vindications of whole historical epochs. Instead, he typically evaluates major figures individually, even in cases where he assesses their ideas as causing lasting harm. The way he often operates is to say that problem *x* originated with figure *y* and had long-term consequences, which need to be challenged for theology to flourish. The door is always open, therefore, for Torrance to recognize God's work in periods during which problematic ideas gained ascendancy. Briefly comparing Torrance with Milbank will clarify how the former works. Milbank more closely associates theology's troubles with the crisis of 1300. As he says, "Neither the Reformation, nor the somewhat elusive 'Renaissance', nor even the later 'Enlightenment' were anything like such crucial shifts in Western theory and practice as the multiple changes which took place before and after the year 1300."<sup>92</sup> At this time, there occurred a basic "epistemic switch,"<sup>93</sup> whereby a participatory metaphysic lost its sway. Milbank sees the work of Duns Scotus as the fount of much ill, but the degree to which trends he initiated enclose all subsequent cultural activity exceeds what Torrance claims about the domains he is discussing. Torrance is more measured in this respect. And there are advantages to this.

The first advantage to being more nuanced is that it is obviously not as risky. A forthright decline narrative is more liable to overlook positive developments (while the potential drawback that lurks nearby a grand story of progress is missing out on the downsides of the period that supposedly witness a great advance).<sup>94</sup> A genealogy that is not built around judgments that are both utterly categorical and maximally far-reaching in scope is less vulnerable to counterevidence. It is easier to cope with stubborn facts if the genealogy makes only relative evaluations, and it is easier to sustain such judgments by marshalling supporting evidence and working through it in some detail.

The second advantage of exercising greater subtlety in the assessment of historical periods is that doing so properly underlines where the ultimate problem for theology

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>91</sup> Torrance sees the ascendancy of Protestant Scholasticism as the manifestation of many theological mistakes: *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: J. Clarke, 1959), ix–cxxvi. This means that the Scholastics and the Westminster confessions, which synthesized this trajectory of thought, have relatively little value in his eyes. In the waning years of Torrance's life there was a surge of new research into Protestant Scholastic theology that challenged some of his assumptions and advocated a more sympathetic view of the figures Torrance regularly critiques. See especially Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 25, 63, 71, 176, 79, 84, 88. If Torrance had taken to heart these conclusions, it would have resulted in a more positive assessment on his part of the theology that developed between the Reformation and Karl Barth.

<sup>92</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 111.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>94</sup> See Peter Harrison's essay in this special issue.

actually lies. Torrance disallows key figures from being as emblematic of entire eras of history as other genealogists do; this means that evaluatively-coded historical periodization does not drive his genealogy in the way that it does for others. For Torrance, not all periods are equal; some are superior to others. But he makes fewer blanket assessments and does not lean heavily on such claims. Torrance does not fundamentally build his account around timeframe evaluations. Here there is only one center, namely, God. The need for epistemic reconciliation between God and humanity is the core of the genealogy. This underlines that humanity's fundamental difficulty is not any set of contingent circumstances in which people find themselves. It is, rather, estrangement from God, who is free to reveal himself in any setting. Thomas Pfau writes, "While the confusion and tension intrinsic to finite, self-interpreting, and imperfectly reasoning human beings may be more conspicuous in certain historical constellations than others, it is an anthropological constant."<sup>95</sup> This is surely true. The only canonical text summarizing both the Old and New Testament stories as one (Acts 13:17-41) makes the relationship of God and people central to the time from the patriarchs to the resurrection of Jesus and the apostolic preaching: God chose a people, endured their rebellion, provided them with land, gave them judges and kings, and finally brought forth Jesus Christ to fulfil his promises to the people.<sup>96</sup> This theme of divine-human reconciliation shines through more clearly in genealogies whose primary point of reference is God than it does in narratives that lay down strict chronological generalizations based on sweeping judgments about long, complex stretches of history. Torrance's clarity about the essence of the human predicament is a major asset of his account.

While Torrance does not make single episodes within history fully paradigmatic for whole periods, there are nonetheless certain limitations to his characteristic mode of engaging with historical material. Several scholars have already raised questions about how close a reading Torrance gives to historical texts.<sup>97</sup> The issue is certainly worth pursuing here, for a genealogy is a narrative account which can only be as good as its interpretation of its sources. Torrance turns to Athanasius, and the entire cohort of theologians whose thinking fed into Nicaea, as figures from whom contemporary Christians can learn.<sup>98</sup> His book treating Nicene thinking most extensively fits better in the genre of commentarial theology<sup>99</sup> than that of standard academic historical theology, which must eschew judging the veracity of the claims made by

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Pfau, "'Botched Execution' or Historical Inevitability: Conceptual Dilemmas in Brad S. Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 46 (2016): 620.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 42.

<sup>97</sup> Frances M. Young, "From Suspicion and Sociology to Spirituality: On Method, Hermeneutics and Appropriation with Respect to Patristic Material," *Studia Patristica* 29 (1997): 424-25; Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 162. The paragraph above primarily concerns the reading of post-biblical historical texts, but the following considerations of what Torrance does with the Bible takes up closely connected issues: John Webster, "T. F. Torrance on Scripture," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65 (2012): 59-60; Darren Sarisky, "T. F. Torrance on Biblical Interpretation," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009): 342-44.

<sup>98</sup> There are useful comments on how Torrance treats his sources in Jason R. Radcliff, "Thomas F. Torrance: Historian of Dogma," in *T. & T. Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance*, edited by Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets (London: T. & T. Clark, 2020), 101-11.

<sup>99</sup> I draw the term from John Webster, "Rowan Williams on Scripture," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible*, edited by Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 106.

the theologians it covers.<sup>100</sup> Portraying Athanasius as a theologian to imitate necessarily turns the focus of the interpretation toward continuities between ourselves and him, and away from the distinctive dynamics of Athanasius's own ancient context. What Nietzsche says about the inextricable downside of what he calls monumental history applies here as well: "It will always have to diminish the differences of motives and instigations so as to exhibit the *effectus* monumentally, that is to say as something exemplary and worthy of imitation, at the expense of the *causae*: so that, since it as far as possible ignores causes, one might with only slight exaggeration call it a collection of 'effects in themselves', of events which will produce an effect upon all future ages."<sup>101</sup> Concentrating on analogies to the neglect of disanalogies is thus one limitation of this type of historical engagement. Torrance also operates with a small set of analytical terms; for instance, dualism is his core, if not sole, category for expressing disapprobation, and he invokes it regularly across all his works that contain a genealogical component. The result of applying the term to various errors spread over several centuries and geographical settings is to highlight the similarities these moves bear to one another; it also indicates what is at stake theologically. Yet it does little to bring into view the uniqueness of the different circumstances in which Athanasius, Barth, and Calvin were operating. This is not to say that Torrance is unaware of how Athanasius develops a polemic aimed precisely against Arius, or that he lacks knowledge about Calvin's Reformation backdrop, or that he is uninformed regarding Barth's attempt to overcome Protestant liberalism. On the contrary, his writings often display a good deal of knowledge of these matters. The point is simply that most of the time the real drive of Torrance's writing is thinking with and beyond these figures, rather than contextualizing them. This constitutes a second limitation with respect to history. These limitations are exactly that—*limits*, boundaries to what Torrance's method will allow him to accomplish. They become dangers only if the intrinsic restrictions of the procedure slip from view.

Lastly, as is true for many theologians of his generation, Torrance could have engaged in dialogue with a broader range of voices. Most of his interlocutors are white men (granted, the "racial" identity of many of the early Christian theologians upon whom he draws does not fit well into our typical categories). As wide-ranging as his genealogy is, it does not frequently refer to female or non-white theologians, though of course Torrance authored a tract opposing forms of patriarchy in the church and advocating that women ought to be able to exercise their gifts by ministering within the church.<sup>102</sup> The Society for the Study of Theology, the main professional organization for academic theologians in the United Kingdom, which Torrance co-founded in the middle of the twentieth century, is only now taking active steps to be more inclusive than it had been in the past. The society seeks gender equity and greater racial diversity among its constituency. It is certainly possible that learning more from under-represented groups might have changed some of the questions that Torrance asked and perhaps even the methods of inquiry he employed. In this way, more attention to theology's social context would have benefited Torrance. But his theology contains a key principle that itself already encourages such conversation. He does

<sup>100</sup> David C. Steinmetz, "Taking the Long View," in *Taking the Long View: Christian Theology in Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 147.

<sup>101</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 70.

<sup>102</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ministry of Women* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1992).

not say a great deal about the element of subject-specific human reception that inevitably makes its presence felt in theological work. The main thing he stresses repeatedly about this component of theology is that it ought not expand beyond its properly delimited scope (recall his polemic against the New Theologians, who offend against precisely this standard). Yet Torrance makes a firm distinction between subject-specific frameworks that witness to God, on the one hand, and divine reality on the other. The first never captures the second. There is a permanent difference between interpretive grid and *res*. As Torrance says in discussing Jesus, “He is so profoundly objective that no culture, no philosophy, no church has ever been able to subject him to its own framework of thought or action.”<sup>103</sup> The Lord Jesus maintains an “invincible constancy and persistence.”<sup>104</sup> This point is broad enough to authorize engagement with a maximally diverse constituency of theological voices, though Torrance himself does not do as much as he might have by way of implementation in his own theological practice.

Despite these limitations, Torrance’s genealogy has great strengths and makes a substantial contribution to current theological discussion because of them. His account allows its underlying theological commitments to operate comprehensively and to shape the narrative fundamentally, for instance, by making it clear that the category of decline does not genuinely apply here. The narrative also issues judgments in more piecemeal fashion than some frequently discussed genealogies, thereby avoiding certain sweeping historical judgments that are difficult to sustain. Finally, it keeps its primary focus where it ought properly to be, on the enduring issue of the reconciliation between God and human beings.

<sup>103</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 174.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.