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## Thomas Torrance's Reformulation of Karl Barth's Christological Rejection of Natural Theology

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Nevertheless, it must not be overlooked that in *Der Römerbrief II* Barth already showed some incipient but clear seeds of ambivalence toward and even revolt against Calvin's theological and exegetical arguments that would fully blossom in the later stage of his theological development. More than anything else, his acceptance of the legitimacy of the historico-critical methodology in relation to biblical interpretation was to lead Barth to take considerably different positions from Calvin's on many biblical passages. In addition, Barth's serious reservations about Calvin's doctrine of predestination, founded upon an interpretation of divine-human relationship by means of the concept of causality, eventually led him to revolt against Calvin's position and to reformulate innovatively his own doctrine of election from the perspective of a Christological and actualistic understanding of the divine work of predestination. Thus we can see that, in spite of Barth's appreciative endorsement of what he sees as Calvin's valid insights and arguments, the seeds of Barth's ambivalence toward his life-time theological mentor, Calvin, were already sown in *Der Römerbrief II*.

#### Abstract

Karl Barth's theological relationship with John Calvin has been ignored by scholars for too long without any legitimate reason. Since Barth repeatedly affirmed his strong indebtedness to Calvin's theology, it is essential to explicate his relationship to him in order to understand correctly the character of his theology. *Der Römerbrief II* (1922), which was written to replace *Der Römerbrief I* (1919), shows that Barth made a very careful use of Calvin's exegetical and theological arguments in constructing his own exegetical positions. Even though Barth appreciates positively Calvin's theological insight in many aspects, he is not totally approving in his reappropriation of Calvin's wisdom. In particular, one can find the incipient seeds of Barth's ambivalence toward and revolt against Calvin in the former's serious reservations about the latter's doctrine of predestination. Thus it is arguable that in spite of Barth's appreciative endorsement of what he sees as Calvin's valid insights and arguments, the seeds of Barth's serious challenge against his life-time mentor, Calvin, were already sown in *Der Römerbrief II*.

John D. Morrison

## Thomas Torrance's Reformulation of Karl Barth's Christological Rejection of Natural Theology

*Dr Morrison, who is Professor of Theological Studies at Liberty University, Lynchburg, here continues his critical studies of the theology of T. F. Torrance; his previous articles on this subject appeared in EQ 67 (1955), 53-69, and 69 (1997), 139-55.*

**Key words:** Theology; Barth; Torrance; natural theology

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. . . . I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. (John 10:1,9)

Even the unbeliever encounters God, but he does not penetrate through to the truth of God that is hidden from him, and so he is broken to pieces on God. . . . The whole world is the footprint of God; yes, but in so far as we choose scandal rather than faith, the footprint . . . is the footprint of his wrath . . . apart from Christ. . . . We know that God is He whom we do not know, and that our ignorance is precisely the problem and the source of our knowledge. (Karl Barth, *Romans*)

Natural theology is the doctrine of a union of man with God existing outside God's revelation in Jesus Christ . . . (natural theology) exists in the fact that man depends on himself over against God. But this means that in actual fact God becomes unknowable and he makes himself equal to God. (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II, 1)

Jesus Christ, as He is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We condemn the false doctrine that the Church can and must recognize as God's revelation other events and powers, forms and truths, apart from and alongside this one Word of God. (*Barmen Confession*)

. . . the universe confronts us as an open, heterogeneous, contingent system characterized throughout by coordinated strata of natural coherences of orderly connections of different kinds in and through which

we discover an uncircumscribed range of rationality grounded beyond the universe itself but reaching so far beyond us . . . the universe to which we ourselves belong, with the structure of which we share . . . so that we find our own rationality intimately connected with its rationality and as open to what is beyond us as the universe itself to the ultimate source and ground of all that is in the unlimited reality and rationality of the Creator. (Thomas Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order*)

Karl Barth, throughout his career as Church theologian, was one who consciously sought to think after (*nachdenken*) God's self-disclosed Truth as the triune God and no other, as such objective knowledge is graciously given in Jesus Christ. If this then is the Place of the Word of God, the revelation of God, any other claim to divine revelation must be essentially reckoned as the human claim of inherent capacity for the divine and as the rejection of the one Word of God's graciousness, Jesus. In either case, Barth regards such claims to be grounded in human rebellion, human self-exposition, especially as found to be formative of that highest example of human rebellion, religion, including Christian religion. As natural theology has been applied to and been formative of Christian theological methodology, especially in scholastic representations of *praeambula fidei* (philosophical and general approaches to the general concept and question of God as introductory to and preparatory for Christian theological assertion), Barth is forthright in concluding that such a claim of a two-fold approach to God, general and specific, is not only illusory and sinful at its core, but inherently dangerous — tending to always negate the specific, particular, gracious Word in the Gospel by the general knowledge of divine reality apart from Jesus Christ.

As a student and disciple of Karl Barth, Thomas Torrance would seem to find himself in something of a theological-cosmological dilemma. On the one hand, Torrance espouses and advances, through his own significant, constructive theological endeavors, the realist objective knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the particular, gracious and redemptive, self-disclosure of the triune God. Theological science, if faithfully undertaken (says Torrance), follows after its own proper Object (the self-revelation of God) in the way that God has given himself to be known (just as physics must follow after its own proper object as it gives itself to be known). But, on the other hand, Torrance's high regard for the truth and the theological value of post-Newtonian (i.e. relativity and quantum) physics, especially as such displays the depth of the multi-leveled God-world-human interactive relatedness and the complexity of onto-relations therein, requires that he give a role to 'natural theology' of some kind. Can Torrance have it both ways? Is it possible to coherently allow for a natural theology within a theological vision

which is emphatic that the one revelation of God is Jesus Christ alone?

### Karl Barth's Christological Rejection of Natural Theology

Helmut Gollwitzer has stated that 'the theology of Karl Barth is beautiful.' By this he meant not beautiful only in the sense that Barth writes well, but primarily that Barth writes with passion and objectivity in relation to the proper Object of theology, the revelation of God. Barth's one theme is God, the triune God, who has graciously revealed himself to and in the world to be known as he is in Jesus Christ according to the witness of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Contra any historicist anthropologizing of the liberal agenda, Barth looks away from the state of faith and from any and all human capacities to direct all attention to the objectively disclosed content of the faith.

Thus Barth is consciously Christocentric and Trinitarian from first to last. The knowledge of God in the strictly Christian sense is understood to be the result of a once-for-all event of history. 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn. 1:14). The triune Creator-Redeemer God confronts the creature as Object (God's primary objectivity) and discloses himself as such via the particular earthly realities. This revelation is the reality of Jesus Christ and the witness to Jesus Christ which is effected through him and made efficacious to persons in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit (God's secondary or indirect objectivity). 'What God is as God . . . is something which we shall encounter either at *the place* where God deals with us as Lord and Savior, or not at all.'<sup>2</sup> Barth is emphatic about the specificity and the particularity of all that is truly revelation. Further, divine revelation as such is always the revelation of God as he is, in order to be known in his gracious redemption. Revelation is always redemptive in its secondary objectivity. 'Revelation means sacrament, i.e., the self-witness of God . . . and thus the truth in which he knows himself, in the form of creaturely objectivity.'<sup>3</sup> 'The Word became flesh.' In this way God himself is in the world, earthly, conceivable, historical and visible. 'As he is this man . . . God himself speaks when this man speaks in human speech.'<sup>4</sup>

1 Helmut Gollwitzer, 'Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth,' in *Church Dogmatics: A Selection* ed. Helmut Gollwitzer (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), 1.

2 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, Ltd., 1957), 261. Hereafter the *Church Dogmatics* will be cited CD.

3 *Ibid.*, 52.

4 Karl Barth, CD, IV/2, 51.

Barth's point then is that between God and man there stands only one, the person of Jesus Christ, himself both God and man in his mediation. It is in Christ that God reveals himself to humanity. It is in him that we see and know definitely and surely the God who is truly God. In him is revealed the eternal will of God for humanity and the eternal ordination of humanity according to his will. In Jesus, God unveils his plan for his judgment on and his redemption of humanity — God's Word, God's gift, God's claim and God's promise. 'He is the Word of God in whose truth everything is disclosed and whose truth cannot be overreached or conditioned by any other word.'<sup>5</sup> Therefore, says Barth, the Church of Jesus Christ is shut up to one Word, one gracious revelation, and so to only one Gospel.

The subject-matter, origin and content of the message received and proclaimed by the Christian community is at its heart the free act of the faithfulness of God in which he takes the lost cause of man, who has denied him as Creator and in so doing ruined himself as creature, and makes it his own in Jesus Christ, carrying it through to its goal and in that way maintaining and manifesting his own glory in the world.<sup>6</sup>

For Barth then, Jesus Christ is the action of God, the determinative center and formative content of all human and cosmic destiny. This then is the only real revelatory-redemptive basis upon which one can stand. Christian proclamation must be the declaration of certainty, and so neither general conjecture nor private opinions. The Christian faith is only such when it derives its proclamation from the one basis which has been graciously given to it, Jesus Christ, the sum of certainty and the truth itself. For Barth anything else would not be Christian faith. All which seeks a revelation prior to Christ has in fact left the Word God has given. Thus, any attempt to 'get behind the back of Jesus' to some other 'general' revelation or to 'natural' theology is to leave the truth of God and all certainty in proclamation and theology. The outcome of such would be no more than what Feuerbach described as a projection of the highest human image, 'a hypostatized image of man.' Error regarding God and his relation to the world is said to be sourced in 'negligence or arbitrariness with which even in the Church the attempt was made to go past or to go beyond Jesus Christ in the consideration and conception of God, and in speech about God.'<sup>7</sup> But when theology, for any reason, is pushed away from the particularity of its one Word, Jesus Christ, then God is inevitably jostled out by that hypostatized image of humanity. So theology 'must begin with Jesus Christ, and not with general principles,

5 Karl Barth, *CD*, II/2, 94-95.

6 Karl Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 3.

7 Karl Barth, *CD*, II/2, 4.

however . . . relevant and illuminating they may appear to be: as though he were a continuation of the knowledge and Word of God, and not its root and origin, not indeed the very Word of God itself.'<sup>8</sup> We do not know the truth of God from ourselves or from our understanding of our existence, situation or world. We must be told in and through the self-disclosure of the triune God in Jesus Christ.

As noted earlier, Christian theology has long given a formative place to the natural knowledge of God, and thus to a general revelation and natural theology, which it has understood as the knowledge of the divine which human beings are capable of receiving in and by the world and human consciousness in general, apart from the particular, historical divine act of revelation. Barth's examination of the history of theology shows that the influence of such natural theology became acute in the centuries leading up to the liberal tradition of Schleiermacher and Ritschl.<sup>9</sup> A prominent feature of this line of thought, which Barth also finds inherently problematic, is the medieval anthropological notion of the *analogia entis* (analogy of being, the assumption of likeness between finite and infinite being which lies at the basis of the *a posteriori* proofs of God's existence and discussion of *attributa divina* in Thomist thought).

Against this, Barth concluded that original, redemptive divine action and revelation cannot be understood as separate from or differentiated from Jesus Christ. In speaking of the original will and act of God, he says

We did not speak in the light of the results of any self-knowledge or self-estimate of human reason or existence. We did not speak with reference to any observations and conclusions in respect of the laws and ordinance which rule in nature and human history. We certainly did not speak in relation to any religious disposition . . . proper to man. There is only one revelation. That revelation is the revelation of the covenant, of the original and basic will of God . . . the revelation in Jesus Christ. . . . Apart from and without Jesus Christ we can say nothing at all about God and man and their relationships one with another.<sup>10</sup>

For Barth, then, the truth of God and, thus, the gracious revelation of God leading to redemptive knowledge of the triune God, cannot be a discovery and conclusion of natural theology. Revelation of God is always the revelation of God's grace, of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ which is inaccessible to human discovery. It is for this reason that Barth criticizes natural theology as the teaching of a 'union of man with God existing outside God's revelation in Jesus Christ.'<sup>11</sup>

8 *Ibid.*

9 Karl Barth, *CD*, II/1, 172ff.

10 Karl Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 45.

11 Karl Barth, *CD*, II/1, 168.

Natural theology is said to work out a knowledge of God that is possible and real because of this independent union with God, a union with consequences for the whole God-world-human relationship. In fact, Barth emphasizes that natural theology arises directly from the reality that 'man depends on himself over against God' and that as a result 'God becomes unknowable to him and he makes himself equal to God.' For anyone who would refuse the grace of God, who would seek knowledge of the divine apart from Jesus Christ, 'God' becomes merely the 'substance of the highest that he himself can see, choose, create and be.'<sup>12</sup> Contra Emil Brunner, Barth is emphatic that revelation is not something in nature that can prepare the way for God's special, gracious revelation. Revelation 'comes to us'; revelation determines the person; we can at best simply let the truth be told to us. Revelation creates the reception. The only proper response to revelation is faith, all else is unbelief.

To reiterate, Barth's positive Christocentricity, the revelation of God only in Jesus Christ, has engendered from him consistent criticism of natural theology and its dangers to Christian theology. He considers connection of Christian thought of God with a supposed general knowledge to be a fateful error. The purpose of revelation is to rescue humanity from its own imaginings concerning 'God'/the divine, imaginings which lead to that highest form of human rebellion and unbelief, Religion, including Christian religion. All such stands under the judgment of the one divine revelation of the triune God.

For what ensues, it is crucial to note again the heart of Barth's '*Nein!*' to natural theology, the coupling of nature and grace. No revelation of God can be differentiated from or be more original than revelation in Christ. Apart from and without Jesus Christ we can say nothing about the God-world-human relationship. There is no second source of Church proclamation alongside the one Word of God. Or, as was stated negatively in the opening words of the Barmen Confession, 'we condemn as false . . . (recognition) as God's revelation other events and powers, forms and truths, apart from and alongside this one Word of God.'

#### Torrance's Interpretation of Barth's Rejection of Natural Theology

It has become a truism of modern theology that Karl Barth rejected any kind of general revelation and natural theology. As we have seen, Barth was clear in his opinion that truly Christian theology faithfully

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

follows after the one way God has taken to us and for us that we might know him objectively as revealed in Jesus Christ. Barth understands revelation as grace and grace as revelation and so apparently turns from all *theologia naturalis*. There is no way from humanity to God, only from God to humanity in Jesus Christ. Herbert Hartwell is typical of this consensus when he says

. . . Barth's uncompromising rejection of natural theology and philosophy alike as a basis or even a partial basis of theology, is so alien to the philosophical way of thinking of Anglo-Saxon theologians. . . . Because God is God . . . Barth jealously watches over the independence of God and of his revelation in Jesus Christ from the world and from man and over the freedom of God's grace. . . . Being an 'avowed opponent of all natural theology,' Barth wages throughout his theological work a relentless war on it. He categorically denies that man can know God, the world and man as they really are apart from God's particular and concrete revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

More recently George Hunsinger explains Barth's view of the Nature-Grace relation, a view which led to his vociferous criticism of Emil Brunner.

Natural theology thereby presupposes what Barth takes to be an impossible understanding of nature and grace. It presupposes that grace exists *alongside* nature, in the sense that nature is understood to have its own independent, autonomous, and self-grounded capacity for grace. It presupposes (and Barth finds this to be completely inadmissible) that nature in itself and as such establishes certain external conditions to which even grace is bound to conform and which thereby pose a limit to grace in its sovereignty and freedom. It presupposes that nature has its own quotient of sovereignty and freedom apart from that established and sustained by grace itself (i.e. in Jesus Christ).<sup>14</sup>

Such reflects the consensus that Karl Barth utterly rejected natural theology and his Christological reasons for doing so.

Thomas Torrance's response to such interpretations of Karl Barth's views on natural theology is one largely of agreement — both regard-

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction* (London: Duckworth, 2,37,48. Likewise, David Mueller has stated that (according to Barth) Our knowledge of God not only originates in his saving work in Jesus Christ but is also fulfilled through his work as Holy Spirit. Hence at the beginning as well as at the end of our knowledge of God, we must acknowledge with gratitude God's gracious self-manifestation in his revelation. . . . All of these approaches (all natural theology via *analogia entis* or human religion) to knowledge of God are variants of . . . 'anthropological theology.' David L. Mueller, *Karl Barth* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1972), 86.

<sup>14</sup> George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 97-98. Cf. in relation to this point, Karl Barth, *CD*, II/1, 139.

ing Karl Barth's theology and his own constructive neo-Barthian understanding of revelation apart from Christ. But the consensus conclusion, i.e. that Karl Barth rejects any and all possibility of a 'natural theology,' is itself rejected by Torrance. According to Torrance, a proper 'Barthian' recognition of natural theology ought to be formulated on the very bases from which it appears that Barth rejected all possibility of natural theology — Christology and Grace. Yet Torrance acknowledges limitations in Barth's thought on this.

Torrance's relation to Barth and Barth's theological thought is complex and multileveled. On the whole, Torrance defends and develops Barth's theological thinking in and from Jesus Christ, while constructing an agenda that is simultaneously related and distinct. Where Torrance does differ with aspects of Barth's thinking, criticism is given in understated tones. Subsequent theological reformulation and construction are intended to advance Barthian thinking in ways which, in terms of the Christocentric-Trinitarian goal, Barth himself could and ought to have taken. The issue of 'natural theology' is a good example of this connective-constructive development between Torrance and Barth.

Torrance's analysis of theological trends in the history of the Church generally, and of Barth's theology in particular, regularly presents two primary categories from which to understand and recognize faithful and aberrant lines of theological thinking. All theologies are either 'interactionist' or 'dualist.' Interactionist theologies, such as those of Athanasius, Anselm, Calvin, Barth and Torrance, et.al., reflect God as interacting closely with the world of nature and human history without being confused with it. Dualist theologies, e.g. Augustine, St. Thomas, Schleiermacher and Bultmann, variously portray God as somehow separated from the world of nature, history and human knowing by a measure of deistic distance. There are differences of degree herein.<sup>15</sup> But, for example, a theology in which God is thought to be so separated from human knowing that he cannot be the 'object' of our knowledge, as in Schleiermacher and Bultmann, can only gather content through constructions of our own existential encounters or our immanent religious consciousness.

Torrance admits the limitations, the overstatements, of the young Barth as reflected in *Der Romerbrief*. Barth's early Kierkegaardian stress on the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between God and humanity, eternity and time, and his indirect acceptance of Kant's critiques of the traditional arguments for God's existence via

15 Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1990), 136.

Herrmann, and more, led to a form of uncompromising rejection of natural theology that others have criticized as 'deism' and 'occasionalism.' But the powerful impact of his 'discovery' of the Christological center of the Christian faith, coupled with what he saw as the submersion of evangelical Christianity by 'cultural Protestantism,' with all of its loss of depth and meaning, led him to conclude that this was the result of the assimilation of God to nature and of revelation to history, and thus theology to anthropology. To halt this, Barth tore apart this 'Protestant synthesis' between God and humanity so that God in his distinct and transcendent majesty could again be recognized, and humanity disentangled from its pretended divinity. Only thus can we be truly human and so the recipients of God's grace. But the achievement of this *diastasis*, this renewed distance, led the early Barth to speak of grace and nature in ways which seemed to make God all and humanity nothing, while casting a slur upon creation. Torrance says that Barth's intention was to 'throw into sharp relief the fact that while there is no way of man's devising from man to God,' and that the only bridge from God to humanity is created by God's 'invasion . . . into time,' yet he did speak of divine intervention in a way which tended to develop a 'timeless eschatology' and to express divine activity only in terms of the 'event of grace.' This provoked the charge of 'occasionalism.'<sup>16</sup> Torrance critiques these tendencies in the early Barth as a problematic, residual dualism, largely rooted in the continued influence of Augustinian thought, Lutheran dualism (particularly the young Luther) and the dialectical paradoxicality of Kierkegaard.

In any case, the early Barth was combating the divine-human synthesis, exemplified in the Jesuit Erich Przywara, which held to the notion that all being is *intrinsically* analogical. It was the synthesis, in the romantic Protestant form, which Barth held to be the root of the corruption of German theology for two centuries. In the process of such combat, says Torrance, Barth developed an interactionist type of theology, despite vestiges of dualism. This is said to be especially reflected in his profound objectivity and realism in interpreting the biblical message, his Reformational understanding of the Word as grounded in the eternal being of God, and his realization of the immense significance of the incarnation.<sup>17</sup> Thus,

As Barth sees it, therefore, it is upon the sheer objectivity of the living God which will not allow us to consider his being apart from his act that any natural theology which proceeds by abstracting from God's activity must

16 *Ibid.*, 137.

17 *Ibid.*, 139-140.

invalidate itself. For Barth, this conviction that God is Word in his own eternal being, and that in his Word God's own being personally communicates himself, had to call in question the validity of any knowledge of God's being reached apart from his Word. We cannot steal knowledge of God in some third-person way, behind his back. . . . If we take the incarnation seriously . . . how can we avoid the implication that God is nowhere to be known apart from or behind the back of Jesus Christ? . . . And if once we have come to know God in his own living reality in Jesus Christ, how can we go on maintaining the validity of a natural knowledge of God reached independently of revelation without driving a deep wedge between the God we claim to know by nature and God's own living reality in the incarnation?<sup>18</sup>

So far, this understanding of Barth's response to natural theology would seem to be well within the consensus.

On the contrary, Torrance points out that as Barth's thought moved beyond all Kantian antipathy to the possibility of knowledge of the noumenal realm within the limits of natural reason, he took a position more directly rooted from actual knowledge of God by his Word. As such Barth did not reject the existence of natural theology, nor was it something easily brushed aside. Natural theology has a 'strange vitality' arising from human natural existence as part of the whole movement in which we develop our own autonomy, human self-justification over against the grace of God. Further, it was not to be combated on its own ground for to do so is to concede that very ground (this was part of Barth's problem in his debate with Brunner on 'Nature and Grace,' according to Torrance), the ground which finally naturalizes and domesticates everything, even God's self-revelation in Christ.<sup>19</sup> So Barth does not deny the possibility of the existence of a natural theology. Neither does he deny all natural human goodness, human significance, even human works of righteousness. Rather Torrance underlines the fact that, first of all, Barth found that his attitude to natural theology must be one grounded in *sola gratia*, the grace of God in Christ, and thus the uniqueness and exclusivity of Christ. Then the epistemological significance of Christ and of justification by faith means that humans cannot achieve by their own powers cognitive union with God. To truly know God is to be redeemed from mental alienation from God and so renewed, reconciled and adapted by divine grace to his Reality. Thus the possibility of natural theology is not denied by Barth, says Torrance, but rather any *independent* path to God is 'undermined, relativized and set aside by the actual knowledge of God.'<sup>20</sup> Just as justification by the grace of God in Christ sets aside

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, 142-143.

20 *Ibid.*, 144.

all natural human goodness, so too, in terms of epistemology, justification by grace sets aside our autonomous natural knowledge of God. We know God through his grace and not by the efforts of our own human reason. But again neither a natural goodness nor the existence and possibility of natural theology is denied.

Torrance's concern is that Barth's negativity regarding natural theology, criticism grounded in the singular grace of God in Jesus Christ, not be falsely overstated. The material content of our objective, realist knowledge of God in Jesus Christ can allow no place for an *independent* natural theology — whether in the body of theology proper or as a preamble/prolegomena. Yet human reason is not to despair of itself in the face of divine incomprehensibility or its own radical finitude.<sup>21</sup> Torrance finds that Barth consistently operates from the graciously given positive knowledge of God in which we really do know God, the triune God, in his economic self-giving. Therefore, we are forced to acknowledge that all our natural knowledge of God falls far short, misses the mark, of his majestic reality. 'It is the actual content of our knowledge of God, together with the rational method that inheres in it, that excluded any movement of thought that arises on some other *independent* ground as ultimately irrelevant . . . a source of confusion' when it is cited as an additional or second basis for positive theological science and formulation.<sup>22</sup>

21 *Ibid.*, 145.

22 *Ibid.* Note Torrance's development of this crucial connection when he explains, regarding proper scientific methodology, in this case the theological science, that 'Whenever Barth engages in polemical debate with "philosophy" he is not concerned in any way to dispute the necessity or relevance of logic and metaphysics, but to attack the erection of an *independent* (and naturalistically grounded) *Weltanschauung* within which, it is claimed, Christianity must be interpreted if it is to become understandable in the modern world (e.g. positivism). More particularly and more frequently Barth is concerned to attack the erection of a masterful epistemology, elaborated *independently* of actual theological inquiry, which is then applied *prescriptively* to knowledge of God. In his rejection of the kind of "philosophy" Barth stands shoulder to shoulder with every proper scientist who insists on the freedom to develop scientific methods appropriate to the field of his inquiry and to elaborate epistemological structures under the compulsion of the nature of things as it becomes disclosed to him in the progress of his investigation, all untrammelled by *a priori* assumptions of any kind. A *Posteriori* science involves rigorous methodological questioning of all preconceptions and presuppositions and of all structures of thought independent of and antecedent to its own processes of discovery. Form and content, method and subject-matter, belong inseparable together, but form and method are determined by the nature of the content and subject-matter. Hence, epistemologies properly emerge through *pari passu* or step by step conformity of our understanding with the nature of the object toward the end of scientific inquiries rather than at the beginning, and cannot be detached to constitute some kind of preunderstanding or allowed the kind of priority from which it could dominate knowledge of the object. Rather do they develop out of the inherent intelligibility of the object and serve its verification in our understanding.' *Ibid.*, 146.

Torrance finds it clear then that what Barth rejects in natural theology is not its rational structure but its *independence* from the actual way God has taken in self-disclosure. It is natural theology's 'autonomous rational structure' as historically developed on the basis of 'nature alone' in abstraction from the active self-revelation of the living triune God in Jesus Christ that he condemns. It cannot be independent from the Word made flesh, not a route to 'God' through an inherent God-human synthesis. Rather, says Torrance, Barth allows for the appropriate completion of natural theology's rational structures only in and under the place given where knowledge of God can occur, Jesus Christ. The rational structure for which natural theology labors, but which it cannot reach, but only distorts by its autonomous position, 'may be reached within the understanding of (resulting from) faith and comes to light as we inquire into its objective ground in God himself.'<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason that Barth says that

Natural theology (*theologia naturalis*) is included and brought into clear light within the theology of revelation (*theologia revelata*), for in the reality of divine grace there is included the truth of the divine creation. In this sense it is true that 'grace does not destroy but completes it' (*gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*). The meaning of the Word of God becomes manifest as it brings to light the buried and forgotten truth of creation.<sup>24</sup>

So while human knowledge of God is grounded only in God's own intelligible, objective, gracious revelation to us, such knowledge requires an appropriate rational structure in our human recognition of it for its actualization. But such structure cannot be engendered within us unless our minds faith-fully fall under the compulsion of God's triune being, God as he truly is in his act of gracious self-disclosure.<sup>25</sup> This cannot arise from any analysis of our own autonomous subjectivity.

When Torrance develops this 'interactionist' relation or linkage in and under Christ, in ways which go beyond anything explicit in Barth, he regularly makes use of a transitional analogy which he borrows from the thought of Albert Einstein, the physicist most influential on Torrance's understanding of a proper interactive God-world-

23 *Ibid.*, 147.

24 Karl Barth, *Theology and Church, Shorter Writings 1920-1928* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 342. Cited in *Ibid.*, 147.

25 Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 148.

26 Note, for example, the explanatory use of this analogy in the following books by Torrance: *Space, Time and Incarnation*; *Space, Time, and Resurrection*; *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*; *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*; *Divine and Contingent Order*; *Reality and Scientific Theology*; and *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge*.

human relatedness.<sup>26</sup> The analogy rises from the post-Newtonian relation of geometry and physics. While the analogy is Torrance's for clarifying Barth's thought, he says that it is an analogy which Barth approved of.<sup>27</sup> Since the rise in this century of four-dimensional geometries, which have shown the deep correlation between abstract conceptual systems and actual physical processes, the old Euclidean geometry, as a detached *independent* science understood to be *antecedent* to physics (Newtonian conception), is no longer valid. Rather, as Einstein explains, geometry must be pursued in 'indissoluble unity with physics as the sub-science of its inner rational structure and as an essential part of empirical and theoretical interpretation of nature.'<sup>28</sup> This relation changes the character of geometry from an axiomatic, deductivist science which is detached from actual knowledge of physical reality to a form of natural science. According to Torrance, the same (*mutatis mutandis*) relation occurs between 'natural theology' and the actual knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, in Barth's theology. Torrance explains that

... natural theology can no longer be pursued in its old abstractive form, as a prior conceptual system on its own, but must be brought within the body of positive theology and be pursued in indissoluble unity with it. But then its own character changes, for pursued within the limits of our actual knowledge of the living God where we must think rigorously (i.e., scientifically) in accordance with the nature of the divine object, it will be made natural to the fundamental subject-matter or material content of Christian theology, and will fall under the determination of its inherent intelligibility.<sup>29</sup>

A faith-ful natural theology cannot be, then, extrinsic from, prior to or apart from actual, redemptive knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, the Word of God's innermost being made flesh. Only as intrinsic to such will it, like a proper 'natural' geometry, function as the essential sub-structure within theological science. Otherwise natural theology has no place in the Church's proclamation of the knowledge of God.

### A Brief Exposition of Thomas Torrance's Christological Integration of Natural Theology

In the preface to *Theological Science* Torrance makes the following statement:

I find the presence and being of God bearing upon my experience and

27 Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1.

28 Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 148.

29 *Ibid.*, 148-149.



thought so powerfully that I cannot but be convinced of His overwhelming reality and rationality. To doubt the existence of God would be an act of sheer irrationality, for it would mean that my reason had become unhinged from its bond with real being.<sup>30</sup>

This is meant to reflect the God-world-human interactive relatedness established by the transcendent triune God in Creation-Redemption, grounded in Jesus Christ.

If, as Torrance advocates, we faith-fully reject any deistic disjunction and all dualistic structures between God and the world, then natural theology cannot be pursued in its traditional, detached, abstract form. As stated above, it must be brought within the body of positive theology, in and under the redemptive Word made flesh, and so pursued in indissoluble unity with it. Not dualistically extrinsic, but as properly intrinsic to the four-dimensional space-time continuum or field of relations in which God is actually known, natural theology is said by Torrance to be 'the necessary *intra-structure* of theological science, in which we are concerned to unfold and express the rational forms of our understanding that arise under the compulsion of the intelligible reality of God's self-revelation.'<sup>31</sup> This means that at its core faith-ful interactionist theology must be grounded in and arise from the space-time historical factuality of the incarnation and the resurrection (though Torrance gives greater weight epistemologically and methodically to the incarnation; but again these form an indissoluble historical-salvational reality). Thus the shift in theological vision and conceptual form arises from the Word/Logos of God as it intersects contingent being and intelligibility via incarnation and so gives to them a unifying semantic reference beyond themselves which comes ultimately to rest, level by interactive level, in God himself. At the same time the other 'pole' of this unitary relationship, the actual contingent nature of being, the space-time creation with its inherent but contingent intelligibility, is the place and framework of a proper natural theology. It is precisely *as contingent*, creaturely being and intelligibility that the space-time continuum requires a suf-

30 Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), ix.

31 Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 40. Note that the term *intra-structure* comes from Henri Bouillard who has criticized Barth's view of natural theology (cf. his *The Knowledge of God*) which Torrance has used in reformulating some of Barth's positions. Following Bouillard Torrance has said that natural theology must never be the heart of dogmatic theology nor as having validity on its own. Natural theology is the 'necessary condition' but not the 'sufficient condition' for theological knowledge. *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 41. Cf. Torrance on Bouillard in *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, 156ff., and in *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge*, 300f.

ficient ground and reason beyond itself in order to be what it actually is — the relation of *ousia* and *logos*, the unity of being and intelligibility.<sup>32</sup>

In his transcendent, lordly freedom in all of Creation-Redemption, God freely relates himself to the universe (without being arbitrary or inscrutable). At the same time the universe has contingent Rationality conferred upon it by creation, a contingent rationality which cannot now be other than it is in relation to the eternal rationality of God.<sup>33</sup> It is in this light that Torrance can say that

... the intelligibility of the universe shows through to us and is accessible to our conceptual representations ... so here in their own unique way the Reality and Intelligibility of God may break through to us in ways we can recognize and apprehend without infringement of their transcendent character. ... If our thought along these lines really has to do with an active Agent who is the creative Source of the intelligibility of the universe, then we know him not because we succeed in penetrating through (to God) ... but rather because he actually interacts with us and the universe, (and so) constitutes himself the active Object of our knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

In all of this God is Lordly Subject who as Lord has given himself to be known objectively. He is ever the living, creative God, and knowledge of God is to be conceived as taking place within that empirical relation in which he acts upon us. This is active interaction which must be understood in and from Jesus Christ.

The incarnation of the Son of God means that as the Logos he is the divine agent of creation through whom it derives its rational order. Thus the incarnation is not to be understood as an intrusion into the creation or into the space-time structures, but it is rather to be properly regarded as the freely chosen way of God's rational love in the fulfillment of his eternal purpose for the universe. By gracious self-communication to the creature, God has established in the incarnation a 'supreme axis' for direct interaction with the creation within its contingent existence and structure. Torrance explains, too, that the incarnation is God's pledge of eternal faithfulness that he will never let go of what he has created but will uphold, redeem and consummate his purpose.<sup>35</sup>

32 *Ibid.*, 44.

33 Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 23.

34 Torrance, *Reality*, 58-59.

35 Torrance, *Divine Order*, 24. Note the significant and parallel work of physicist-theologian John Polkinghorne. E.g. his work *One-World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 97f. Note also Torrance's significant discussion regarding the interaction of faith, in *Space, Time and Resurrection*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 1-24.

### Response to Torrance's Barthian Reformulation of Natural Theology

My own response to Thomas Torrance's reformulation of Karl Barth's Christological rejection of natural theology is Yes with a subdued No. Torrance has long stood between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, though any Brunnerian concerns are formulated through Barthian bases.<sup>36</sup> Concerns regarding the relation of nature and grace have only been accentuated by his long involvement in the dialogue between theology and contemporary physics. But his Barthian Christocentricity has remained firmly in place through all of his constructive scientific theological expression. As an interpreter of Barth, he clearly goes beyond his mentor but he does legitimately develop directions left latent in Barth.

My own ambivalence to natural theology, an ambivalence echoed in Calvin, makes me hesitant toward the nature and place of such in a consciously Christian context, but Torrance's Christological recognition of the significance of creation to God and to knowledge of God within Creation-Redemption unitariness — reflected in the 'new heavens and new earth' — has great merit. I therefore agree with Torrance's Christocentricity as revealing both God for us and in us and all levels of God's gracious covenantal-community relation to the world, again, by both Creation, and especially Incarnation as the basis and completion of such. In this way, the whole economic movement from within the community of God's own triune being (*intra Deo*) to bring into being community with contingent Creation, and humanity as part of such (*extra Deo*), is brought to unitary consummation. Upon such non-dualist bases I commend Torrance's useful Christological, interactionist incorporation of natural theology within and under the unique, specific Word of God in Jesus Christ. On the whole, Torrance has given what I believe to be an excellent, faithful and thoroughly Christian framework within which to pursue the objective, realist, redemptive knowledge of God.

#### Abstract

Karl Barth is widely noted for his antipathy to all forms of natural theology. Indeed, the results of Barth's Christocentricity have made his name synonymous with the negation of all divine revelation apart

<sup>36</sup> In the preface of an early work, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, Torrance explains his mediational role between the two, a role which in other areas, especially in regard to natural theology, he continued. Yet Karl Barth has always been Torrance's primary mentor.

from Christ, the one Word of God. If this is so, then the theology of Thomas Torrance, as a highly significant development of Barth's thought and as vitally concerned with proper natural theology (in dialogue with the physical sciences), becomes a questionable enterprise. This article examines this question and concludes that, while Torrance clearly goes beyond Barth, he is faithful to subthemes in Barth's theology relating to 'natural theology', making explicit and bringing to prominence streams of Barthian thought often left unnoticed.

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