



RESEARCH ARTICLE

T. F. Torrance, Catholicism, and the quest for church unity

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Abstract

This article examines T. F. Torrance’s engagement with Catholicism. It uncovers the breadth and depth of his ecumenical spirit, while concurrently shedding light on his own theological development. The article reveals an evolution in Torrance’s posture toward Catholicism, moving from fierce criticism to critical praise, with the Second Vatican Council as a watershed in his thinking. His criticism was provoked by what he considered the fundamental problem with Catholicism (namely, the ‘Latin heresy’ in its theology); while his praise was elicited by the evangelical, christocentric, and ecumenical spirit of the Council.

Keywords: dualism; ecumenical; heresy; hermeneutics; mission; Trinity

It has been said that Thomas Torrance seemed destined to be ‘an ecumenical theologian’, for an ecumenical spirit permeated his domestic life.¹ He had an Anglican mother who was also a member of his father’s Presbyterian church, and he married an Anglican woman who also became a member of his Church of Scotland. Torrance was unquestionably one of the most ecumenically active theologians of his era. He was for decades a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. He laboured, albeit unsuccessfully, to bring about a union between the Church of Scotland and the Church of England, but was more successful in helping to bring Reformed and Orthodox churches closer together on the subject of the Trinity.² His paper, ‘The Historic Agreement by Reformed and Orthodox on the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity’, can be regarded as the high-water mark of his ecumenical activity.³

Although Torrance’s passion was dogmatic theology, his ecumenical activity should not be regarded as a distraction from this, for he deemed theology, like the church itself,

¹Joel Scandrett, ‘Thomas F. Torrance and Ecumenism’, in Paul D. Molnar and M. Habets, (eds), *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), p. 51.

²See J. Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Orthodox-Reformed Theological Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018).

³Thomas F. Torrance, ‘Historic Agreement by Reformed and Orthodox on the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity’, *ECNL: The Journal of the Anglican and Eastern Churches Association*, NS 34 (1992), pp. 30–2.

as ‘inescapably evangelical and ecumenical’.⁴ The unity and the mission of the church were interdependent for him. The church’s good news is God’s reconciliation of his creation through his one incarnate Son, but that good news is put into doubt, he rightly felt, by the deep divisions within the one church of Christ. Division in the church gives rise to the blasphemous idea that Christ is divided, that even God is divided. It is therefore imperative for the church to heal its divisions and to realise its true nature as a ‘reconciled community’, one united body of Christ, so that it can complete its reconciling mission to the world.

Torrance’s ecumenical outreach was not limited to Protestant and Orthodox communions. He also reached out to the Catholic Church. This has been acknowledged by some theologians, but so far there has been no investigation into this side of his ecumenism. This is somewhat surprising, because Torrance wrote a lot about Catholicism – about the church, its theology and its theologians. Indeed, if we take the Greek fathers – whom he revered – out of the equation, Torrance wrote more about Catholicism than Orthodoxy.

This article looks into Torrance’s engagement with Catholicism. It uncovers the breadth and depth of his ecumenical spirit, while concurrently shedding light on Torrance’s own theological development. It reveals an evolution in Torrance’s posture toward Catholicism, moving from fierce criticism to critical praise, with the Second Vatican Council representing a watershed in his thinking. His criticism was provoked by what he considered the fundamental problem with the Catholic Church – ‘the Latin heresy’ in its theology; while his praise was elicited by the evangelical, Christocentric, and ecumenical nature of the Council’s theology. Between the 1950s and the 1970s Torrance moved from asserting the ‘impossibility’ of Protestants ‘seeking unity with the Roman church’ to suggesting that ‘the Roman Catholic Church’ is the church that is in position to ‘set the pace for the future of Ecumenism’.⁵

The Catholic Church and the ‘Latin heresy’

Torrance was certain that the divisions in the one church of Christ were not intrinsic to it but were rather the consequences of ‘alien frameworks of thought’ that had infected the church’s theology.⁶ The most damaging framework, in his view, was the epistemological and cosmological dualism that had become ingrained in western culture. It had its origins in pagan Greece and Rome but was transmitted into Christianity mainly through the Latin fathers Tertullian and Augustine, then reinforced through medieval scholasticism, Cartesian philosophy and Newtonian science. Torrance would eventually dub it ‘the Latin heresy’.⁷ The term ‘heresy’ seems inappropriate; it is better I think to call it a worldview – a dualistic pre-Christian one – through which God’s creation and redemption were understood. This worldview generated a split western culture: one that separates the intelligible from the sensible, the subject from the object, the temporal

⁴Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays toward Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 7.

⁵Thomas F. Torrance, letter to *The Scotsman*, ‘On the Impossibility of Seeking Unity with the Roman Church’ (22 October 1957); Thomas F. Torrance, ‘Ecumenism and Rome’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37/1 (1984), p. 62.

⁶Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Interpretation: Studies in Medieval and Modern Hermeneutics*, ed. A. Nigh and T. Speidell (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), p. 46.

⁷Thomas F. Torrance, ‘Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39/4 (1986), pp. 461–82.

from the eternal, the soul from the body and so forth. In Christianity, it means that God is isolated from creation; creation from redemption, the incarnation from atonement, the giver of grace from the gift of grace and so forth. Instead of understanding their relationship to God in terms of 'internal ontological relations', Latinised Christians tend to understand this relationship in terms of 'external' or 'abstractive formal' relations.

In the place of dualism, Torrance does not advocate monism, for that would only lead to the heresy of *Deus sive natura*. He wants to avoid a separation of God and creation as well as a confusion of them. He maintains instead that the creator God interacts with his creation, to the point where he enters into creation without ceasing to be God. In this way, the incarnation of the Son of God exposes the fallacy of the dualistic worldview.

While Torrance believed that Catholic theology had 'an essentially Latin mind', he did not think that the Latin heresy was confined to the Catholic Church. It had naturally infected Protestant churches too, because of their Latin heritage. The big difference, we are told, is that Protestantism includes powerful protests against it that arose with a return to the apostolic faith and the theology of the Nicene fathers. The first one was led by the Reformers, especially Calvin, and the second, and greatest one in Torrance's view, was led by Karl Barth with his *Church Dogmatics*.

One of Torrance's earliest papers on the Catholic Church, however, makes no mention of the problem of dualism. This church he writes 'presents the greatest problem' for ecumenism, because it is curved inward to such an extent that 'truth and subjectivity are identical'.⁸ He notes that this subjectivism also plagues Protestant churches, where it tends to take an individualistic form. But he sees it taking on a corporate form in the Catholic Church, so that the Holy Spirit is identified with the spirit of the church and the 'historical consciousness of the Roman tradition' is identified with the mind of Christ.⁹ Now this strikes us as a tendency toward monism, not dualism; yet a tendency towards monism can be read as an attempt to overcome dualism. Torrance argues that subjectivism of any kind is a 'false objectivity'. The true objectivity, he argues, is the living, transcendent God who reveals himself finally as Word incarnate.

The issue of dualism does surface though in an early piece about the doctrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which became official Catholic dogma in 1950. While Protestants, naturally, reject this dogma on the grounds that it has no basis in scripture, Pope Pius XII defended it for being 'in wonderful accord with those divine truths given us in Holy Scripture'.¹⁰ It is also defended for being in accord with the church's sacred tradition, which has a role equal to scripture in legitimising dogmas. Specifically, the pope contended that the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is grounded on the four Marian feasts in the church and on homilies from the 'holy Fathers' and the 'great Doctors', as well as being 'most closely bound' to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary that was laid down in the previous century.¹¹

⁸'The Problem of Discussion with Rome', in Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), p. 152.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁰Pope Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, 1 November 1950, §24 <https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html>; accessed 6 February 2023.

¹¹*Ibid.*

Torrance denounces the dogma of the Assumption of Mary as another example of the ‘mythologization’ of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic Church. The dogma is unscriptural and at variance with the apostolic foundation of the church, in his view, and even in violation of the Catholic tradition and its own ancient Vicentian canon, where the test of catholicity is ‘what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all’.¹² He accuses Rome of falling into ‘heresy’ with its defence of this dogma, but thinks the mother of this heresy is a conceptual dualism deeply embedded in the Catholic Church and its theology. The dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is based after all on the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, which for Torrance is grounded in a dualistic separation in Catholic theology, going back to the fifth century, of Jesus Christ and our sinful human nature. For, he argues, if Jesus Christ did not assume our fallen humanity, ‘then our fallen humanity is untouched by his work’.¹³ These twin Marian dogmas thus reflect, in Torrance’s view, the Latin dualistic separation of creation and redemption, incarnation and atonement; as well as the notion that Christ’s reconciliation of humanity is accomplished through ‘external relations’ only.¹⁴

The Marian dogmas are intertwined with the Catholic understanding of God’s grace. In a 1959 paper that stemmed from his membership in the Faith and Order Commission, Torrance warns his readers that what Catholics mean by grace is ‘something vastly different from what the Evangelical Churches mean, and certainly from what the biblical documents mean’.¹⁵

To be sure, a Protestant in the 1950s delving into the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* would be bewildered by its treatment of grace. Grace is defined initially as ‘an inward and supernatural gift given to us without any merit of our own, but through the merits of Jesus Christ in order to gain eternal life’.¹⁶ But then the reader would be taught about ‘sanctifying grace’, ‘habitual grace’, ‘actual grace’ and even a ‘first grace and second grace’.¹⁷ Torrance decries this multiplication of grace, which, in his view, is the consequence of grace becoming detached from Jesus Christ (that is, the gift from the Giver), and of it becoming attached instead to impersonal ‘causal categories’ of nature.¹⁸ Instead of seeing grace as mediated directly through the Word of God made flesh, it is pictured as mediated through the priests and sacraments of the church. The church is then conceived as a ‘sacramental institution of grace’, because it is mistakenly understood as a *Christus prolongatus* in space and time.¹⁹

Torrance is sure that these problems with the Catholic doctrine of grace can be traced back to the dualist mind-set of Augustine of Hippo. Instead of understanding that Jesus Christ, by his incarnation, overcomes definitively the gulf between God

¹²Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.’ Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* 4.3.

¹³Thomas F. Torrance, *The Incarnation*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 62.

¹⁴Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992), p. 40

¹⁵Torrance, ‘Problem of Discussion’. Torrance always uses the term ‘Evangelical’ for the churches that stem from the Reformation. But since the word ‘evangelical’ has quite different connotations today, I have chosen to use the term ‘Protestant’ instead throughout this article.

¹⁶The Catechism of St Pius X <<http://www.cin.org/users/james/ebooks/master/pius/psacr00.htm>>; accessed 6 February 2023.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Torrance, ‘The Roman Doctrine of Grace from the Point of View of Reformed Theology’, in Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), pp. 169–90.

and the world, Augustine, he contends, pictured the church doing this instead, because he thought it was able to span both spheres. The Latin father is also blamed for the depersonalisation and subjectivisation of grace, thus reducing it to an 'interiorizing of a divine power' that enables us to obey the divine commandments.²⁰

Catholic theologians and the Latin heresy

The 'Latin heresy' may have been 'Roman to the core' for Torrance, as Douglas Farrow opines, but that does not mean he had no use for 'Roman' theologians.²¹ The disconcerting fact, though, is that Torrance did not have much use for Augustine, the greatest and most influential 'Roman' theologian, who determined the shape of much of Catholic and Protestant theology. He faults Augustine for giving a dualist shape to theology. Naturally, Torrance admires those 'Roman' theologians who were not slavish followers of Augustine. First among them was the fourth-century theologian Hilary of Poitiers, who earned the title 'Athanasius of the West'. Torrance says, in his study of Hilary's hermeneutics, that he could find 'no evidence' that he 'operated as Augustine did later, with a radical disjunction between the sensible and the intelligible world'.²² This lack of dualism leads him to conclude that Hilary is the best biblical theologian the West has ever produced, since like no one else he allowed the Bible to 'shape and direct all his understanding and thinking of God'.²³

Torrance had high praise as well for the theology of Anselm of Canterbury, whom he treats in his study of medieval hermeneutics. On the one hand, his admiration comes as no surprise, since his *Doktorvater* and mentor, Karl Barth, also held Anselm in high esteem. In *Fides Quarens Intellectum* (1931), Barth even credits the former Archbishop of Canterbury for helping him to formulate a better theological method. On the other hand, Torrance's praise is somewhat surprising, because Anselm was very Augustinian in many ways. Yet Torrance takes pains to distinguish Anselm from Augustine, underscoring how the former tried to overcome the deadly dualisms of the latter. Anselm, he writes, avoids 'the radical dichotomy between the intelligible and sensible worlds that one finds in Augustine'.²⁴ This is evident, he thinks, in Anselm's understanding of the relation between a 'word' and an 'object', including our knowledge of objects. His understanding of objective reality, including every word that is thought about it, is determined by that reality itself. In sum, Torrance is certain Anselm had a more realist, more scientific epistemology, in comparison to Augustine's more Platonic, more idealistic one.

Of course, no medieval theologian has had a greater influence on Catholic theology than Thomas Aquinas. In fact, the influence of Aquinas increased over time, culminating in Pope Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which made Thomas' theology the official one of the church and which subsequently sparked a neo-Thomist movement in Catholic seminaries and universities around the world. One would expect Torrance to excoriate Aquinas as the embodiment of the Latin heresy, yet in fact he thinks the Angelic Doctor helped to loosen the grip of this heresy on the medieval church by

²⁰Torrance, 'Roman Doctrine of Grace', p. 174.

²¹Douglas Farrow, 'T. F. Torrance and the Latin Heresy', *First Things* (Dec. 2013), p. 27.

²²Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 392.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Thomas F. Torrance, 'The Place of Word and Truth in Theological Inquiry according to St Anselm', in *Divine Interpretation*, p. 73.

questioning the prevailing dualist Platonic-Augustinian epistemology, which is predicated on the belief in two separate worlds: an immanent one of sense experience and a transcendent one of ideas. Torrance instructs us that Aquinas, following Anselm before him, embraced instead a more realist, more biblical epistemology; one, he says, that was 'nearer to the Reformers'.²⁵ In contrast to Augustine's approach, it put less emphasis on *visio* and more on 'the word' in acquiring knowledge of God. This, Torrance argues, entailed a 'close integration of language and thought', and an approach to scripture that involved a 'read[ing] within (*intus legere*), to penetrate the sensible surface (*sensus*) and discern the rational meaning (*intellectus*)'.²⁶

Yet, notwithstanding these advances, Torrance feels that Aquinas was ultimately unable to overcome the Latin heresy due to the mastering influence of Aristotle's philosophy on his theology. While 'The Philosopher' helped Aquinas to develop a more realist epistemology, he prevented him from fully realising the significance of the incarnation for his doctrine of God. Aquinas does not treat the incarnation, after all, until *tertia pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*. Even so, Torrance feels that the 'incarnate form' of the Word for Aquinas is not identical with the eternal Word but is only an outward 'instrument' of it, which is an idea that only inhibits the healing of the division between *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino* in his theology.²⁷

Torrance is more critical of the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, a leading neo-Thomist of the twentieth century. The fact that Torrance even wrote a paper on Lonergan's theological method is indicative of the range and depth of his engagement with Catholic theology.²⁸ While Lonergan has to be included in any list of outstanding modern Catholic theologians, he would not be on a list of its most popular ones. Many of his writings are in Latin, and all are quite technical and abstract; moreover, besides theology, he made significant contributions to the fields of economics and modern philosophy. Indeed, one commentator thinks Lonergan should be placed alongside modern philosophers 'of the first rank'.²⁹

Torrance is not included in the upper ranks of modern philosophers, but he and Lonergan had a lot in common. They are arguably the two greatest English-speaking theologians of the twentieth century; they both were deeply concerned with method in theology, with the relationship between theology and science, and they both took a rational approach to the Christian faith. But there are crucial differences between them that become apparent in Torrance's essay on Lonergan. In it he takes issue with the 'subjectivist' element in Lonergan's epistemology, which holds that 'authentic subjectivity leads to objectivity'; and he protests against his 'psychological and intellectualist reinterpretation' of Aquinas.³⁰ In contrast to Torrance, Lonergan is as much concerned (or more) with *the process* of knowing than with the object of knowing. In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan defends the need to go beyond the empirical method of the natural sciences to the 'procedures of the human mind', because the mind of

²⁵T. F. Torrance, 'Scientific Hermeneutics According to St. Thomas Aquinas', *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962), p. 271.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 262–3.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 276–7.

²⁸T. F. Torrance, 'The Function of the Inner and Outer Word in Lonergan's Theological Method', in Patrick Corcoran (ed.), *Looking at Lonergan's Method* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1975), pp. 101–26.

²⁹Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), p. 106.

³⁰Torrance, 'The Function of the Inner and Outer Word', pp. 106, 116.

the knowing subject is a 'fixed base', he argues, in contrast to the incessant variability of religious phenomenon and experience.³¹

For Torrance, the 'fundamental difficulty' with Lonergan's theology is the Latin heresy ingredient in it, which is most apparent its separation of the Trinity from the unity in the doctrine of God.³² In Lonergan's case, though, he believes the heresy has just become more sophisticated with the adoption of 'dualist structures of eighteenth and nineteenth century science and philosophy'.³³ For this reason, Torrance brands this Jesuit's theology a Roman 'twin of Neo-Protestant *Glaubenslehre*'.³⁴

Torrance thinks that, instead of following Aquinas' method, the Catholic Church would have been better served if it had followed that other great medieval theologian, Duns Scotus. While Lonergan disparages Scotus for his naïve realism, for assuming that knowing is simply a matter of 'taking a look',³⁵ Torrance believes that the Subtle Doctor rectified the epistemologies of Augustine and Aquinas, thereby promoting greater objectivity in knowledge.

The general position of Duns Scotus can be fixed, on the one hand, by his rejection of St. Augustine's doctrine of the special illumination of the human intellect by the uncreated light of God, and, on the other hand, by his rejection of St. Thomas's speculative theology elaborated from sense-experience. His stand against both of these positions was taken in the interest of objectivity.³⁶

While Torrance laments that the Catholic Church never embraced Scotus' realism, he tries to show that one of the magisterial Reformers, John Calvin, did, with the result that 'modern positive theology was born'.³⁷

The Catholic Church and ecumenism

Torrance had the highest regard for the church. For him, it was truly the body of Christ and 'intrinsically catholic and ecumenical', contrary to appearances. Yet at the same time, he called on the church to realise its intrinsic nature by digging down to 'the foundations', cutting through the dualisms and 'ecclesiastico-cultural traditions' that have disfigured it.³⁸ In this way, the disagreements between the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant communions could be overcome from below. After that, these communions then need to theologise out from their 'common material centre' in the incarnation and the Trinity, and along their shared axis in the Greek Nicene fathers. This explains why Torrance pleaded with Catholics to make a 'rapprochement' with the 'non-dualist theology of Athanasius and Cyril [of Alexandria]'.³⁹

³¹Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 4.

³²Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, p. 100.

³³Torrance, 'The Function of the Inner and Outer Word', p. 123.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 121.

³⁵Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, 5th edn, ed. F. Crowe and R. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 372.

³⁶T. F. Torrance, 'Intuitive and Abstractive Knowledge: From Duns Scotus to John Calvin', in *De doctrina Ioannis Duns Scoti: Acta tertii Congressus Scotistici Internationalis: Studia Scholastico-Scientifica 5* (Rome: Societas Internationalis Scotistica, 1968), p. 292.

³⁷Torrance, 'Intuitive and Abstractive Knowledge', p. 305.

³⁸Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, p. 7.

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) made Torrance believe that such a rapprochement was in the offing. Along with Barth, Torrance took a keen interest in the Council. In fact, he reports that he was ‘pressed to go to’ the Council as a Protestant observer, but that his various academic commitments had held him back.⁴⁰ He adds, though, that he found time still to discuss theological issues with a few Vatican theologians during one of his summer breaks, and even claims to have had ‘a hand in one or two of the basic ideas’ in *Lumen Gentium*, one of the Council’s key documents.⁴¹

In any case, Vatican II would not only transform the Catholic Church, it would transform Torrance’s stance toward this church. Certainly, the theological tone at Vatican II was unlike that of the previous two councils (Trent and Vatican I), which were marked by adversarial outlooks. This time the tone was one of ‘reconciliation’.⁴² In fact, Vatican II made ‘restoration of unity among all Christians’ one of its ‘principal concerns’.⁴³ This buoyed Torrance’s hope that the visible reunification of the church was drawing nigh in his lifetime. After studying the Constitutions of the Council (i.e. its major documents), he was compelled to state that the Catholic Church had gone ‘much farther toward recovering “the face of the ancient Catholic Church” than Protestants would ever have dreamed possible even a generation ago’.⁴⁴ He even thinks that the schism of the sixteenth century would have been averted had ‘the Christological and Soteriological emphases’ in the documents of the Council been present at that time.⁴⁵

Lumen Gentium represents the Vatican’s first serious reflection on the nature of the church.⁴⁶ The document is ‘like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old’ (Matt 13:52). One thing that is old is that the ‘Catholic Church’ is governed by the ‘successor of Peter’, and that this church is the ‘Mother Church’ to which all Christians should return, so that there will be ‘one flock under one shepherd’.⁴⁷ One thing new is that the ‘Church of Christ’ is not strictly equated with the Catholic Church. Rather, we learn that the Church of Christ ‘subsists in the Catholic Church’, and that ‘many elements of sanctification and of truth are outside’ the visible church.⁴⁸

Torrance found other new things in *Lumen Gentium* that he admired and thought would open wider the door to reconciliation between Catholic and non-Catholic churches. First, he found an ecclesiology grounded on a ‘powerful theology of God’s

⁴⁰John Hesselink, ‘A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ: An Interview with T. F. Torrance’, *Reformed Review* 38 (1984), p. 59.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²John O’Malley, ‘The Council’s Spirit: Vatican II: The Time for Reconciliation’, *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, 42/1 (2012), article 3.

⁴³*Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism), Introduction <https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html>; accessed 6 February 2023.

⁴⁴Torrance, ‘Ecumenism and Rome’, p. 60.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶*Lumen Gentium: The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (1964) <https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html>; accessed 6 February 2023.

⁴⁷Ibid., §15.

⁴⁸Ibid., §8.

self-revelation and of the incarnation of his Word in Jesus Christ'.⁴⁹ This, of course, is apparent in the opening statement of the document, from which comes the title: 'Christ is the Light of the nations'. But Torrance also found it in the document's recognition of the 'sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ' in all our relations to God the Father.⁵⁰ This principle entailed a strong emphasis on the vicarious humanity of Christ, which he thinks had been downplayed through history as a consequence of the church's battle with Arianism in the first centuries. Torrance himself strove to put the vicarious humanity of Christ at the centre of his teachings on the sacramental and liturgical life of the church, and he was encouraged by a similar move at Vatican II, especially in *Lumen Gentium*, where Christ is described as a 'High Priest taken from among men'.⁵¹

Second, Torrance was impressed by the document's pneumatological emphasis. It is the Holy Spirit who is enabling Christ to be the 'Light of the nations'. He believed this new 'Christological and pneumatological' ecclesiology coming out of Rome – in contrast to older juridical conceptions of the church – invited a rejuvenation of the church's mission, one that would be focused on the 'renewing and gathering up of all humanity' in Christ through 'the sanctifying mission of the Spirit'.⁵²

The theology of Vatican II convinced Torrance that the Catholic Church could 'set the pace for the future of Ecumenism'.⁵³ However, he felt that there were several lingering obstacles to its leadership in this area. The Latin heresy was still the principal one, despite the progress made at the Council in surmounting it. Torrance was pleased that *Lumen Gentium* had shunned a dualistic concept of the church (i.e. an earthly and heavenly one) for a unitary one on the analogy of the incarnate Word of God.⁵⁴ Yet this was not enough to make him desist from thinking that this heresy was a problem in the Catholic Church. Indeed, at this juncture, when Torrance was constructing his scientific theology, the problem appeared deeper than ever before, after he detected other instances of it in that church.⁵⁵

One was the 'receptacle notion of space'. He believed that this concept had a deleterious effect on Rome's ecclesiology, apparent in its construal of apostolic succession and sacramental grace.⁵⁶ He thus implores Rome to adopt a unitary epistemology, one that would take the incarnation more seriously and learn from the breakthroughs in modern physics, which he thinks are helping to debunk dualistic conceptions of the world.

It seems to be the case that so long as the dogmatic constitutions of the Second Vatican Council are not supported from below by a unitary epistemic base, but are only grafted on to an inherently dualist foundation, divisive heretical notions are bound to emerge constantly within the membership of the Roman Catholic Church.⁵⁷

⁴⁹Torrance, 'Ecumenism and Rome', p. 59.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 62; see *Lumen Gentium*, §28.

⁵¹*Lumen Gentium*, §10.

⁵²Torrance, 'Ecumenism and Rome', p. 60.

⁵³Ibid., p. 62.

⁵⁴See *Lumen Gentium*, §8.

⁵⁵See Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Oxford: OUP, 1969); idem, *Theological Science* (Oxford: OUP, 1969); idem, *God and Rationality* (Oxford: OUP, 1971).

⁵⁶T.F. Torrance, 'Ecumenism and Science', in *God and Rationality*, pp. 124–30.

⁵⁷Torrance, 'Ecumenism and Rome', p. 63

The two other obstacles are linked to the main one. The first is canon law. Catholic canon law is basically a system of church rules pertaining to matters of faith, morality and discipline; but also covers such things as the hierarchical structure of the church, apostolic succession, priestly celibacy and papal supremacy. Torrance blamed the influence of canon law for the essentially 'juridical structure' of the Catholic Church. As a consequence, this church is shaped more by law than theology. Yet he did not call for the abolition of law but for its *aggiornamento*, to bring it in line with the *aggiornamento* at Vatican II in doctrine and liturgy.

Torrance calls for a system of canon law that is always open to correction from divine law, and one that is better equipped to serve the evangelical and missionary task of the church. The fundamental problem with canon law, in his view, is that it is based in large part on 'nominalist' and 'dualist' ways of thinking.⁵⁸ He argues that both canon law and civil law have suffered from a 'dualist bifurcation of nature' and an attendant 'nominalist epistemology', with the result that human law now exists independently of the divine law that is revealed through the Word of God.⁵⁹ All human law needs to be 'open-structured', Torrance insists, so that it points upward to divine law to which it is subject.

The other big obstacle was the doctrine of God. Torrance was disappointed that Vatican II did not deal directly with this doctrine, which he felt had been fractured by the Latin heresy. He saw a split in the doctrine, between *De Deo Uno*, the God of reason, and *De Deo Trino*, the God of revelation. And he was certain that Aquinas' theology, despite its renewal by theologians like Lonergan, could never overcome this dualistic understanding of God. 'It should now be clear from the massive work of Karl Barth that there is no way out of this impasse through Thomism.'⁶⁰

For Torrance, the only way out was through an 'evangelisation' of both canon law and the doctrine of God, to make the first more amenable to correction from divine law and to bring the second into harmony with the Christology and soteriology of Vatican II.⁶¹ He did not witness the first, but witnessed an attempt at the second in a work by the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner.

Karl Rahner's doctrine of God

Rahner's treatise, *The Trinity*, caught Torrance's attention in the early 1970s, and it inspired him at the time to spearhead an international conference on it in Switzerland through the Academie Internationale des Sciences Religieuses.⁶² Rahner's work was chosen, he tells us, because it appeared to provide a chance of 'some real ecumenical convergence between East and West, Catholic and Evangelical Christian', since it sought to make 'the Economic Trinity the norm for all our thought and speech about God' and to break 'the isolation of the treatise *De Deo Trino* from the treatise *De Deo Uno*'.⁶³ Indeed, Torrance felt that Rahner was aiming to do for the Catholic Church

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 63.

⁵⁹T. F. Torrance, *Juridical Law and Physical Law: Toward a Realist Foundation for Human Law* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), p. 2.

⁶⁰Torrance, 'Ecumenism and Rome', p. 62.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (Freiburg: Herder & Herder, 1970).

⁶³T. F. Torrance, 'Toward an Ecumenical Consensus on the Trinity', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 31 (1975), p. 337.

what Barth had done for the 'Evangelical Church'. He saw both of them, notwithstanding their differences, standing against 'the old Western habit' of severing 'the doctrine of the One God' from 'the doctrine of the Triune God'.⁶⁴

Rahner complains that Christians are 'monotheists in practice', since they fail to see any necessary connection between the Triune God and his creation and incarnation. Still, he thinks that faith in a Triune God should *come naturally* for Christians, because God 'relates to us in a threefold manner' and that this is the 'Trinity itself'.⁶⁵ The Trinity, Rahner maintains, 'is bestowed on us' before it ever becomes a church doctrine. There is no other God behind this threefold manner through which we encounter and receive God. This threefold experience of God's salvation is 'truly' God's 'self-communication'.⁶⁶ All this is distilled into Rahner's famous dictum: "The 'economic Trinity' is the 'immanent Trinity' and the 'immanent Trinity' is the 'economic Trinity'."⁶⁷ Therefore, there can be no difference between God as he is in himself (*ad intra*) and God as he has revealed himself to us (*ad extra*) in creation and redemption. On the contrary, there is an identity between them.

Torrance applauds Rahner's goal, but judges that his methodology and assumptions hinder him from reaching it. In his view, Rahner has not fully extricated himself from the 'scholastic metaphysical framework' and the 'profound dualism' that goes with it.⁶⁸ The repercussion of this failure, he thinks, is that Rahner's doctrine of the immanent Trinity is allowed to determine his economic Trinity, resulting in abstract notions creeping into his concept of God. He believes that Rahner would have been more successful if, instead of allowing logical necessity to have a governing role in his theology, he allocated that role to the necessity that flows from 'the fact that God has freely and irreversibly communicated himself to us in the Incarnation once and for all'.⁶⁹

Torrance wanted Rahner to think through all the implications of his principle of having Jesus Christ as the starting point of our awareness of God's self-communication to us. This would mean recognising the *homoousion* as the key to our knowledge of God as he is eternally in himself. If the immanent Trinity is indeed the economic Trinity, then the *homoousion* will compel us to think of the incarnation and cross of Christ as 'falling within the life of God himself'. 'Can one both deny the fact that Jesus Christ died "as God" and affirm that God gives himself in self-communication to man?'⁷⁰

One of the most controversial aspects of Rahner's doctrine of the Trinity is his willingness to jettison the concept of 'person'. The concept, he writes, is 'not absolutely constitutive of knowledge in faith about the Father, Son, and Spirit as one God'.⁷¹ The main problem with it is that the meaning of the term has evolved to the point where it now refers to a 'distinct rational nature'. Yet there cannot be three distinct rational natures in God. To maintain that there are three divine persons is to multiply something that is supposed to be immune to multiplication. Instead of 'three persons',

⁶⁴T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 10.

⁶⁵Rahner, *Trinity*, p. 35.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 36

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁸Thomas F. Torrance, 'Toward an Ecumenical Consensus on the Trinity', in *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p. 339.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 340

⁷¹Rahner, *Trinity*, p. 104.

Rahner argues that it is more appropriate to think of God *ad intra* as a being who 'subsists in three distinct manners of subsisting'.⁷²

Torrance disagrees and even accuses Rahner of violating his own dictum. He acknowledges that not every human relation should be 'read back into God', but maintains that the concept 'person' is indispensable to our understanding of God. '[T]he basic lines of connection in Christian theology would be cut if we could not speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as "persons" within the "Immanent" Trinity as well as within the "Economic" Trinity.'⁷³ In his mind, it is not a matter of projecting human personhood into God but about recognising that our personhood is constituted by the person of God. God himself is a person, as 'One Person existing and meeting us in the trinity of persons in one God'.⁷⁴ With Rahner, Torrance is willing to see the trinity of persons as 'three distinct modes of subsistence', yet he insists that God is the 'infinite and universal Person' who is therefore 'person-constituting' in his revelation toward us as Son and Holy Spirit.⁷⁵ Certainly, if God's revelation is about God's 'self-communication', as Rahner maintains, then that would imply a personal being. If God is not personal, then what kind of self could he communicate to us?

Far from casting aside 'person', Torrance wants to see the term 'remoulded and redefined through a development of trinitarian theology', whilst utilising the patristic notion of perichoresis to safeguard the doctrine of God from tritheism.⁷⁶ Now this is precisely what Torrance endeavours to do on his own, beginning with his excavation of the theology of the Greek fathers in *The Trinitarian Faith*, followed by his reconstruction of the doctrine of God in *The Christian Doctrine of God*. While the latter work is not simply a reaction to Rahner, it is a work wherein Torrance certainly tries to improve upon Rahner's rule by arguing – following Athanasius' lead – that God is 'One Being, Three Persons' and 'Three Persons, One Being', and that these two statements are the 'mirror image of one another'.⁷⁷ His main point is that the One Being of God is essentially '*personal, dynamic and relational Being*' and is the 'personalising Person'.⁷⁸ All this is deduced from the fact that God has revealed himself, in the economy of our redemption, as Father through the mediation of his Son and the communing love of his Spirit.

Conclusion

One of the minor achievements of this article is that it uncovers an overlap between Torrance's ecumenical work and his dogmatic theology. His scientific theological method is brought to bear on problems that he thinks persisted in the Catholic Church after Vatican II. Also, we have seen how his own doctrine of God tries to make up for shortcomings that he found in Rahner's doctrine of the Trinity.

A major achievement is that the breadth, depth, and sophistication of Torrance's interaction with Catholicism is brought to light. His writings in this area do not

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Torrance, 'Toward an Ecumenical Consensus', p. 346.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 347.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 348–9.

⁷⁷Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (London: T & T Clark, 2001 [1996]), p. 136.

⁷⁸Ibid., pp. 124, 161.

constitute a large part of his oeuvre, but they are a very illuminating and revealing part of it. For Torrance, Christian theology was inherently ‘evangelical and ecumenical’, and his engagement with Catholicism proves this. He was a genuinely ecumenical theologian with a profound faith in the inherent unity and catholicity of the Church, but one who could not stand idly before the external divisions of the church, for he saw them as both a disgrace and a major impediment to the church’s mission to the world.

We discovered that between the 1950s and 1970s Torrance did a volte-face in regard to Catholicism. Vatican II convinced him to abandon his view that the Catholic Church was a heretical one that stands alone, and to think instead that it was at the forefront of the quest for church unity. For Torrance, the fundamental problem with Catholicism was its distortion from centuries of influence from the ‘Latin heresy’ – that alien, dualist worldview. His relentless strictures against this heresy are based on his unique understanding of the cosmological, theological and soteriological significance of Jesus Christ. The *homoousion* was the linchpin of his christology and the linchpin of his unitary worldview that he tirelessly advocated in place of the dualist one. It is not unusual today for theologians to rail against dualisms in Christianity, but no theologian besides Torrance has taken the attack on dualisms as far or has attacked them with as much rigour. The reason might be that very few theologians share his radically unitary worldview.

Catholic and Protestant relations are better now than they have ever been, and these good relations are found even in Torrance’s homeland. Recently, the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church in Scotland endorsed the St Margaret’s Declaration, a ‘statement of friendship’ that is the culmination of forty years of dialogue and cooperation.⁷⁹ In view of this study, Torrance deserves some credit for this rapprochement. If he were still alive, he would certainly be celebrating the new friendship, yet at the same time he would probably bemoan the fact that these churches are still visibly divided and that their pursuit of unity is not based on the trinitarian faith of the Greek fathers and a scientific solution to doctrinal differences.

⁷⁹Hattie Williams, ‘Kirks and Roman Catholic Scots Celebrate their Common Heritage’, *Church Times*, 27 May 2022 <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/27-may3-june/news/uk/kirks-and-roman-catholic-scots-celebrate-their-common-heritage>>; accessed 6 February 2023.