



# The legacy of Professor Thomas F. Torrance

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On knowing that this was the subject of the paper, *The legacy of Thomas F. Torrance*, you would be entitled to expect me to deliver to you a review of some, at least, of the world-wide scholarly industry to which the work of the Very Reverend Professor Thomas F. Torrance has given rise. And perhaps you would also expect me to scan something of the impact his massive scholarly output has had on two or more generations of ministers of the Gospel on several continents. The focus of what I have to say, however, is more personal.

I spent more than eight years studying in university, and I had scholarly training, some of it of the highest order, and I shall outline to you where some of that training came from. But my working life as a parish minister took off in a direction far from the academic field in which I was trained. The new field I entered influenced me hugely. But I carried into that parish life a genuine legacy from Professor Torrance, and I hope that you may find interest in my account of that legacy and the use I made of it.

In some ways I was very fortunate in knowing Professor Torrance's name well from an early age. And if you should feel that it is in some sense disrespectful of me to refer to him in this paper as 'Tom', please put it down to a genuine family familiarity. My father was a Church of Scotland minister, who in the 1930s was at St Columba's Presbyterian Church in Oxford, and was Chaplain to Church of Scotland students at the University. He was attached to Oriel College where Tom undertook research for a dissertation in 1938–39. So they knew each other well, and 'Tom Torrance' was a familiar and well-respected name in the household, and he and my father remained on first-name terms.

And when I was myself a student at Oxford, Tom on a visit to the University, invited me to lunch and to a meeting he was addressing on an issue of Patristic theology. At that time I was not orientated towards theology or towards the ministry – indeed I had never heard of ‘Patristics’ – but Tom evidently thought attending something so far out of my depth would do me no harm at all. I tell this incident merely to explain how, although I could recognise that Tom was a massive character and a major influence, this was accompanied by a sense that he was a friendly and familiar figure. Perhaps I was thus protected against the awe which sometimes complicated people’s encounters with him. In 1964 I arrived at New College, and in 1965 I set out into the course in Honours Dogmatics under the direction of Tom, and his brother James, and the Canon of Sheffield Cathedral, Roland Walls.



### **Training in dogmatics at New College**

As the years have passed I have become aware of the breadth of Tom’s concerns. I remember reading that when he found that nothing was to come of his longing to travel overseas to be a missionary, he instead saw that his calling would be to evangelise the roots of Western culture. Furthermore, he pursued with enormous energy his quest for harmonious relationship between science and theology. But notwithstanding these vast horizons towards which he directed his intellect and powers, Tom was fully focused on training ministers for parish work in the Church of Scotland.

If we had a pastoral adviser – and I’m not sure that we all had such a thing – then Tom was mine. I remember one occasion when he ended our discussion in his room with a prayer. It was such a powerful event, bringing tears to my eyes, that it took me an hour or more to settle down afterwards. That left me with an indelible sense of his pastoral effect, and I have retained from that a recognition that Tom was at heart a pastor. I have known, ever since that occasion, that he was aware of the significance of individual interaction with people over matters of eternity and the soul. In response to Tom’s pastoral gifts I developed a profound affection for him. In a sense I was a disciple; for I learned much from him.

For another aspect of his work as a scholar was that he was

determined to equip these parish ministers with a theological mind. From Tom's lectures I do remember the sense of being pushed forward by a great force. Every sidetrack was blocked. There was no retreat. The only way was forward, with every question answered. It was a simply marvellous educational experience. Writing papers for Tom's seminars called for a level of concentration that I had not attained when studying for a quite difficult earlier degree. Looking back on it now I recognise the significance of all the attention Tom paid to the Early Fathers. I value immensely his tracing of the way that Christian doctrine developed through the disputes and formulations of the early centuries, as the scholars, teachers and preachers of those generations expounded the Holy Scriptures. I value the fact that in Tom's lectures the doctrine of the Trinity was made a focal point of discovery and understanding. I can still recall a kind of detective investigation I undertook for an essay. I spent hours and hours, reading and thinking, trying to locate the actual historical moment at which the Incarnation was effected. If I remember correctly, I was alert to any danger of a heretical Adoptionism, were the Incarnation to have occurred after even the tiniest delay following conception. And I remember struggling with what seemed to me the inherent docetism of the *enhypostasia/anhypostasia*. These abstruse details of a systematic theology seemed part and parcel of the trustworthy doctrines which were to be the undergirding of an articulated Christian faith. Tom provided his students with the solid foundation of a Nicene faith. Something historical, something solid, something on which you could build a confident faith for yourself and, as a student for the ministry, something on which you could draw to express a solid faith to proclaim.

In recent years I have had renewed acquaintance with Tom's theology – most recently through Bob Walker's superb editing of Tom's lectures on the Incarnation. I have been struck by the beauty and the complexity of his arguments. I have been reminded of the impression I received on reading Calvin's *Institutes*, even in the very formal English translation by Henry Beveridge. Calvin's *Institutes* reminded me of a cathedral: each small corner is beautifully designed, carefully crafted, and leads simply to the next part of the building. On and on the process of description and discovery goes, and in turn larger vistas appear. And finally the entire edifice stands united before

you, from the tiny details at the edge of the floor, up past the gossamer-like stonework of the windows to the soaring arches and pillars raising high the roof. That was the image Calvin's work summoned to my mind. And Tom's thinking has brought the same image to my thoughts.

My years at New College were in an era of considerable upheaval for the Faculty. Tom's intolerance of 'Liberalism' and his absolute defence of God's self-Revelation as the only path to Christian truth meant that tensions developed between the different departments of the Faculty of Theology. As students we had to attempt to orientate ourselves between competing, if not opposing, poles. During my own years as a student for the Ministry I was aware that Tom's absolutes were not shared by everyone. Even within the Dogmatics department itself there was, for instance, the quixotic figure of Roland Walls. Roland's lightness of heart, allied to a brilliant intellect and a phenomenal memory, offered a de-pressurising perspective on these certainties, and Roland's own assurance seemed based more on a mystical practice. But no-one could say of Tom that 'his trumpet gave an uncertain sound'. The Dogmatics department seemed to be guided by a clear note.



## **Into parish ministry**

Although I had discussed with Tom the possibility of studying for a PhD, working on the Greek text of Basil of Caesarea's work on the Holy Spirit – I went uneasily and uncertainly down a different road altogether. Swaddled in incomprehension about what I was doing, I became a minister in a huge urban parish in Castlemilk in Glasgow, and moved with my family into a small council house up a close, a common stair. I moved from the social ambience of academic discussion and the company of middle-class professionals into a working class community of uniform housing, and a population of low-paid workers and the unemployed, undifferentiated by one single other salaried professional. The difficulties of suddenly running a team of three parish workers, in a parish area with 25,000 people, being chaplain to five schools, two old people's homes, with a dwindling congregation, an expensive building, constituted indigestible fare.

The impact of working class life, and the particular intensity of

Glasgow's confrontation with Christianity, the Troubles in Northern Ireland rising to their height, and the housing scheme being bitterly divided, meant that my theological armoury was severely stretched. But I did often recall that Tom had been a parish minister, and in particular I remember him speaking in a lecture about an experience he had had in the wartime, praying with a young dying soldier. I came across his description of such a scene in his war memoir. Though he was a non-combatant, and not a commissioned Chaplain, but serving with the Church of Scotland Huts and Canteens, Tom was often at the front line offering support. In the Italian campaign he was with the troops as they approached the enemy at a hamlet called San Martino. They had just come through a night of fierce bombardment. He writes:

When daylight filtered through I came across a young soldier (Private Phillips) scarcely twenty years old lying mortally wounded on the ground, who clearly had not long to live. As I knelt down and bent over him, he said "Padré, is God really like Jesus?" I assured him that he was ... As I prayed and commended him to the Lord Jesus he passed away.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Tom's teaching was set, in my mind, against the background both of his parish experience and also of his first-hand knowledge of the battlefield. That gave his academic teaching an authenticity, an authority, for someone going into a parish ministry. I was to be the minister of that parish for the next 37 years. And I preached from the pulpit for those 37 years. And I relied on the inexhaustible resources of the biblical texts to provide whatever sustenance the congregation would need.

But I also started a weekly Bible Study group, which, once begun, continued with only brief summer interruptions throughout those years. With almost the first meeting of the study group I was back in the Dogmatics classroom. These housing scheme Christians, some who could scarcely write more than their own name, none of whom had an 'O' Grade, one of whom had done a course of evening classes through his sister's union membership and proudly displayed on his living-room wall a framed certificate (in his sister's name) 'Higher English (Failed)', these ordinary church people who had had a very

poor education had intelligence the equal of any. They could not harmonise the God of the Old Testament with the God revealed in Jesus. They read in the Old Testament of God instructing his people to slay their enemies, sheep, cattle, women, children and all. And they read in the New Testament of Jesus saying, ‘but I tell you, love your enemies, do good to those that hate you’. The Bible Study members were reacting exactly like the second century Bishop Marcion of Sinope. They could not square the wrathful God of the Old Testament with the loving God, the Abba of Jesus, of the New. They were on the brink of joining the Marcionite heresy. At once I was confronted with the task of explaining the relationship of the Old Testament and the New, and the relationship of Jesus the Son whose approach to humanity in the New Testament seems so different from that of God his Father in the Old.

The Bible Study members at once, in this way, confirmed to me the significance of the work of the Early Fathers. Come honestly and openly to reading the Scriptures, and the Scriptures give rise to these very questions and uncertainties. Here were straightforward Christian believers and enquirers, without any sophisticated academic training, reading the actual texts of Scripture. They found that these huge questions arose naturally in their minds. And I was to go on discovering that my training in the Dogmatics department equipped me to offer appropriate historical reflections on the issues which arose.

It did not take many weeks for us to reach another critical matter. It became necessary to rehearse the interplay of the two natures of Christ, the human nature and the divine. Very swiftly the Bible Study members were inclined to divide up the stories of Jesus into two lists. One was a list of human attributes, noting the occasions on which Jesus is spoken of as weeping, or sleeping, or being hungry, thirsty, suffering, dying. The other list was to be thought of as of divine attributes: walking on the water; feeding the five thousand; turning water into wine; healing the sick, the lame and the blind; rising from the dead. Recalling my training in Dogmatics, I was able to suggest that to divide these stories up in this way was perhaps to misconstrue the picture of Jesus’ life on earth. I suggested that we were perhaps neglecting the divine act of Christ’s ‘self-emptying’, as depicted by Paul. Instead we should more probably see the list of apparent weaknesses as consistent with Jesus

in his divine nature. But even this explanation provided no solution to the persistent Bible Study question: even though Jesus was fully human, did he not have better access to knowledge of God because he was fully divine?

I will not test your patience by prolonging my description of the process by which the Bible Study group set foot on the path so thoroughly trodden by the Early Fathers of the Church. But occasionally, two or three times in twenty years, I sent a postcard to Tom, smiling gratefully towards him for the training he had given me. And always a card would come in reply, full of warmth, and once, at least, asking how I was getting on with Basil and the Holy Spirit.



### **Seeking a new theological language**

During the first thirty years of my housing scheme ministry I was trying to learn the local language, trying to understand what it was about the Gospel which could be construed as ‘good news for the poor’. For the area was by any standard poor. Some black women visited us. They were from Soweto at the edge of Johannesburg. They stayed with us and slept on our living-room floor. They spoke of Castlemilk as ‘the township’. They recognised it as ‘A Township’ at once: they saw that it was built out at the edge of the city, far from the city lights and resources. They saw the low-quality housing, poor shops, bad roads, dilapidated schools, ill-kept doctors’ premises. And the people were poor, with insecure poorly-paid work and many unemployed, and many aimless youth pushing and shoving and drinking and involved in violence. For them, from Soweto, it was just like home.

These years spent embedded in the heart of a housing scheme, with our three children born and growing up there, part of the often violent culture which was awash with the flood of illegal drugs which was sweeping through our society, meant that many solid fixed points of my Christian practice became dislodged and displaced. The conceptual framework of that traditional dogmatic theology – at least what I had acquired of such a framework – seemed unable to respond to the tidal wave of questions to which my new experiences were giving rise. What I called that Cathedral of Systematic Thought, for all its comprehensive beauty, seemed to fall short of what was demanded.

Often my dogmatic framework would offer merely an intellectual solution to an existential and emotional catastrophe. Perhaps you will say I had not adequately understood Sin, or Salvation, or Christ Himself. I am open to that criticism. I am always ready to learn.

But I found myself casting round for other images, other systems of thought, other models of Atonement, to bring challenge or consolation in the myriad pastoral crises I encountered. At one point in the life of the congregation I found that only *The Little Red Book*, the thoughts of Chairman Mao, was any help – Chapter Four: “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People”.

I discovered that something called ‘Liberation Theology’ was at work in the fields I was traversing, and also that elements of the Roman Catholic church seemed more attuned to the matters of social justice which concerned me, than were other religious bodies of my acquaintance.



### **A Castlemilk theology**

In the late 1990s the Castlemilk East Bible Study meetings set out to create what I called *A Castlemilk theology*. The theology was to emerge from setting major themes of Castlemilk life alongside passages from Scripture and seeing how they interacted. First it was necessary to draw up a list of dominant characteristics which shape everyday life for the people of Castlemilk. Here is a selection of the features which emerged:

- Youth crime and youth violence
- Drugs and alcohol in local life
- Mental health issues
- Housing refurbishment and population fall
- How illegal drug use corrupts local community life
- Unemployment and the work ethic
- Sectarianism and bigotry.

We addressed these themes one by one. To the experience of the people in the Bible Study meeting I added some scripture passages. The outcome was always a stimulus to further discussion. As the

discussion proceeded I was aware that the Incarnation continually emerged as people's point of connection with God, and I saw the importance of our discussion retaining a Trinitarian perspective.

I will focus on one of these themes to illustrate how that perspective was maintained. I'll pick, '*The corruption of community life through the illegal drug trade.*' Illegal drug use affected every street and virtually every family. The illegal drugs trade generates huge sums of money. Elaborate and complex schemes are created to launder money which is acquired through illegal activity. It is not necessary to be an accountant or a banker to find ways of hiding money.

- Any business which deals largely in cash can be a useful means of swallowing the sums of cash acquired through the illegal trade: businesses such as private-hire taxi firms, security companies, tanning shops, saunas, office-cleaners and companies that clean wheelie-bins.
- There is always competition in a market-place, and where there are large profits to be made the competition will be keen. Drug businesses know that well-directed violence can make sure that a rival supplier moves elsewhere.
- In the local community the cause of many violent incidents can be traced back to some aspect of the drugs trade.
- A by-product of violence, namely fear, is an effective way to ensure that secrets are kept.
- In addition there is always ready money to pay for protection for those who are harvesting the wealth, and not even the forces of law and order can be immune to the corrupting influence of the offer of a tax-free gift as an inducement to look the other way.

In the Bible Study group we heard the experience of two of the members. I pick only one. The first to speak was a long-time member of the church, a young grandmother in her early 50s. She had been at the local shops and was walking along the arcade when she saw a man run up behind another man and bring a hammer down hard on the other man's head. The victim fell to the ground. Again and again the attacker raised the hammer and hit the now prostrate victim.

The woman ran forward and stood over the victim and shouted to the attacker, 'That's enough! He's had enough!' 'It's none of your business', the man shouted back. 'Beat it! Get lost!' She stood her ground, refusing to move. 'He's had enough!' she shouted again. By now a crowd was gathering, and seeing that his moment was over the attacker ran off. The victim was semi-conscious when the police came. The police took his name and asked what had happened. The victim said he had no idea who his attacker was, and could think of no reason for the attack. But already people in the crowd were recognising the victim and the now-vanished attacker as men reputed to be involved in the supply of drugs. The police asked the woman if she would recognise the attacker, which she would. They took her name and address, but assured her that she wouldn't be required to give evidence as the whole incident would have been recorded on the CCTV camera at that very section of the shops. Identifying the attacker at an identity parade seemed the limit of what the woman would be required to do.

Several months passed before the case was finally ready to come to court. By this time the CCTV film, which had been in police hands, could no longer be found. 'I had put my faith in the arresting officers,' she said, 'but they let me down badly.' Now the woman was to be the prime prosecution witness. Threats came to her from unknown sources. First she received through the post an envelope containing a drawing of a coffin. Not many days later the post brought her another envelope, this time containing a live bullet. By now she was in a state of terror. For days she did not dare cross the door. She feared for her own life, but she feared as much for the lives of her children, two of whom still lived locally.

Despite such intimidation and regardless of her fears she attended the Court and when called as a witness she stood up to over an hour of hostile cross-examination by the defence Counsel. Her evidence was crucial. The accused man was found guilty and sentenced to several years in prison.

She told the meeting that she did not know how she would have stayed on course had she not had her faith to strengthen her. She had remembered the words of Jesus about how the people who are determined to save their life will lose it, and those who are ready to lose their life will find it. And she remembered the courage of Jesus

himself, holding fast to the truth even though it brought him to death. She knew she would not have wanted to live as a person who had backed down, backed away, when courage was required. And the Bible Study group recognised that only if people are prepared to confront those who are contaminating the community's life with illegal activity and violence, only if people are ready to expose corruption and to go as witnesses into the court, can society as a whole be saved from being blighted with danger.

And the Bible Study group looked at verses and chapters of the Bible which assert that the Holy Spirit equips people to speak powerfully for truth even though they may be deeply afraid.

The process of compiling a Castlemilk theology did not produce a systematic Dogmatic theology. But I consider that my own theological inheritance from Tom was significant in shaping its outcome. Furthermore, I think that the people who attended the Bible Studies, and whose faith became grounded in a confident experience, are themselves part of Tom's legacy.



### **One effect of the Chalcedonian definition**

In 1998 I was talking with a close friend, a childhood friend of my wife Mary. Some of you will recognise his name, Neil MacGregor, now Director of the British Museum. In 1998 he was Director of the National Gallery in London's Trafalgar Square. We were talking about religious art, and of some of the ways in which artists through the centuries have tried to represent the figure of Christ. Neil was explaining how in early medieval times the most effective way for a painter to demonstrate that Jesus was the Son of God was to dress him in royal robes and to surround the image's head, and sometimes the outline of the entire figure, with panels of beaten gold. This meant, of course, that only the rich, and the church, could have images of the Christ, and the representation of the divine nature of Christ tended to dominate over any depiction of his human nature. As artists developed new materials, in particular white oil paint, it became possible to represent light on canvas or board, and a new range of images of Christ could be presented which could express the divine light without eliminating the representation of Christ's human nature.

I explained to him that theologians, too, had had difficulties in expressing, both verbally and conceptually, the relationship between the divine and the human aspects of Christ. I took our conversation off into discussion of the Council of Chalcedon, and the epigrammatic formulation that we worship ‘one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation’.<sup>2</sup>

From this conversation Neil developed an already nascent idea for a celebration of the Millennium. The National Gallery staged a landmark exhibition entitled, “Seeing Salvation”. From the earliest small Christian symbols, through examples of sculpture and paintings gathered from Eastern and Western Europe, from the Middle East and India, and from South America, the exhibition brought together the ways in which artists have portrayed the person and work of Christ. Over a period of ten weeks, 360,000 people visited the exhibition, and it was widely acclaimed as the most significant Christian contribution to Britain’s Millennium celebrations.

An article in *The Pastoral Review* commented:

[...] the exhibition examined how painting can deal with the paradox which is at the centre of the Christian faith: Christ who is both God and man. Words do their best to express this mystery, to define and explore it; paintings can give it visual form, making use of those characteristics which are its own, colour, geometry, visual allusion and a rhetorical appeal to the senses. Murillo’s painting of the *Two Trinities* shows Christ as the centre and intersection of two realms, the heavenly reality of the Trinity, his divine family, and the earthly reality of the Holy Family. This picture is often ignored in the Gallery, as a work of excessive sentimentality, but it is as clear an exposition of the Chalcedonian formula concerning Christ’s two natures as you will find anywhere. And it is actually a stunning masterpiece of painting.<sup>3</sup>

Neil gave Mary and me a copy of the book he wrote which accompanied the BBC TV series on the Exhibition. He inscribed it inside the front

cover with a message, ‘To you both, without whom none of this would have happened.’

Allow for the over-generous words of a good friend. I tell you this simply because I saw it then, as I do now, as a further ripple into the future from Tom’s powerful teaching, a part of Tom’s legacy.



## Conclusion

As I am sure you know, as Tom approached his very great old age the immense energy of his mind moved gradually towards stillness. He transferred into full-time care. I was fortunate enough to visit him there from time to time. He would recall his childhood days in China, and some of the vivid memories he related remain with me. When he spoke of such things I was directly aware of the rich inheritance into which he and his brothers and sisters had entered. His own theological contribution was built on foundations which their parents and earlier generations had set in place. From the mosaic of Tom’s own great legacy I have offered today these tiny fragments from my own experience. And I remember the Collect from The Book of Offices in the Book of Common Prayer (1914) – ‘*as we have entered into the labours of other men, so to labour that in their turn other men may enter into ours*’.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Veterans’ Reminiscences: The Very Reverend Professor T. F. Torrance, <http://www.scotsatwar.co.uk/veteransreminiscences/tftorrance.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> Creed of Chalcedon, A.D. 451.
- <sup>3</sup> Gabriele Finaldi, “Seeing Salvation: The Image of Christ”, *The Pastoral Review* (June/July 2000): 77ff.