



The realist and onto-relational frame of T. F. Torrance's Incarnational and Trinitarian theology

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I am indeed delighted to be with you on this particular day to celebrate the posthumous publication of Thomas F. Torrance's book, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*. This event marks the completion of the two volume series of his Edinburgh lectures on Christology, the first volume, *Incarnation*, having been brought out in November 2009. As senior editor of InterVarsity Press, USA I had the privilege of reviewing early drafts of these works and working with Robin Parry in a joint venture to co-publish them with Paternoster Press. And I can report to you that we have been very pleased with their reception.

I regard my involvement with the publication of this series as a particular privilege since I have been acquainted with the writings of Tom Torrance since before my days at Fuller Theological Seminary. I owe a debt of gratitude to the late Rev Professor Ray S. Anderson, who first introduced me, as an undergraduate student, to T. F. Torrance's writings. Ray was a former and avid student of Tom Torrance. He gave me a copy of the published form of his own dissertation, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God*.¹ I attempted to read it through in those early days of my theological pilgrimage. I have to confess that I found it a bit of tough going. So much so, that I can truly say I was relieved to find that the Torrance volumes he subsequently recommended were, for the most part, easier to comprehend than Ray's first book. So Ray graciously prepared me to read and appreciate his own theological mentor in more than one way. Perhaps he knew something about pedagogy!

I had met Tom Torrance for the first time at Fuller Seminary where he gave in 1981 the Peyton lectures that were published as *Reality and Evangelical Theology*.² In 1987, I took up doctoral studies at Aberdeen University with James B. Torrance, his older brother having already retired. It was there in King's College, Aberdeen that I came to a much deeper appreciation of both T. F. and J. B. Torrance's theology.

Today, on this particular occasion, I would like to take the opportunity to reflect with you on what I have come to regard as two crucial aspects essential to T. F. Torrance's framework for pursuing the theological task. I'd like to propound that without giving sufficient attention to the two dimensions of this framework and the part they play in Torrance's teaching, there is likely to be more confusion and less appreciation of the value of Torrance's contribution than is rightly merited. After exploring each of these two themes theologically I want to consider a few implications for practical theology, for Christian ministry, for they are profoundly significant.

It is not too much to say that it is self-evident that Torrance's theology ought to first be characterized as Incarnational and Trinitarian. These two loci, while common to any Christian theology, serve, for Torrance, as twin foci that ground and orient the ellipse, as it were, of his entire theological work. What is perhaps not as readily recognized is that the Incarnational and Trinitarian theology of Torrance takes place within a surrounding two-dimensional framework that can be identified as realist and onto-relational. So Torrance's Incarnational and Trinitarian theology takes place within a realist and onto-relational framework. I want to concentrate on the two dimensions of the framework because failure to do so threatens to compromise a thorough grasp of Torrance's Incarnational and Trinitarian theology. And of those two dimensions I want to particularly emphasize the onto-relational element since it is essential for comprehending Torrance. Unfortunately it is also the aspect most often overlooked or given insufficient weight when his work is presented, critiqued or built upon by others.

To avoid misunderstanding, I need to say at the outset that such a framework does not indicate a kind of philosophical or even theological presupposition for doing Christian theology. The realist and onto-relational descriptors indicate the positive counter-parts to those philosophical or theological presuppositions Torrance found

had to be cleared away, negatively, before he could bring to accurate articulation the meaning and significance of the Incarnation and Trinity at the root of Christian theology. His theological realism and onto-relational frame of mind is the result (not a presupposition) of a profound critique of any alternative frames of mind called for by a profound engagement with and attempt to understand the Incarnational and Trinitarian ‘objects’ of the Christian faith. Torrance’s theology is *a posteriori*, not *a priori*, realist and onto-relational.

Very often, at least in the Western intellectual tradition, the theological task is approached from within an uncritically adopted or assumed two-dimensional frame of mind. Torrance identifies the first dimension as a dualism, deism or theological nominalism. Such a frame of mind represents the alternative to working within a theological realism. The second dimension of this frame of mind Torrance identifies as static, atomistic, mechanical and simply non-relational. Torrance’s claim is that a truly theological engagement with the Incarnation and the Trinity calls into question such a non-realist and non-relational frame of mind and rather requires the theologian to take on a realist and onto-relational frame of mind. This frame of mind is the resulting orientation to the Incarnation and Trinity rather than an assumed starting point.

The frame of mind with which we approach the theological task constitutes more the way we think, or what categories, concepts, images, or figures we use to think theologically than what we think or conclude theologically. It indicates the intellectual tools used to think theologically rather than the thoughts formulated or the doctrines concluded.

It’s unlikely that anyone would come away from Torrance’s writings and fail to apprehend its concentration on the Incarnation and the Trinity. However, it is possible to read Torrance and come away failing to grasp the full significance of his realist and onto-relational approach and miss feeling the full weight of his critique of any alternative frames of mind brought to the theological task. This failure seems often to be the result of not recognizing or not being willing to wrestle with the depth of Torrance’s critique of so much of Western intellectual tradition. His theological project amounts to not just providing us with new ideas to think, but with new ways of thinking.

While the term is over-used, I do believe that following and benefiting from Torrance's work calls for a true paradigm shift, not just minor adjustments to our doctrinal formulations. Without this paradigm shift into a theological realist and onto-relational framework taking place, at best one would come away with something like the theological equivalent of the American doughnut. You'd end up with something perhaps tasty but with the entire centre missing, with a gaping hole right in the middle. I might also add that a critical engagement with Torrance, to be fruitful, will also require accounting for the realist and onto-relational framework. However, I won't be spending much time pursuing that aspect of critical engagement in this paper.

Many have found T. F. Torrance's works difficult. I can think of a number of reasons for that. But at the top of the list must be a recognition that his theological realism and onto-relationality call for a radical critique of much of our native frame of mind that we are not prepared for. Consequently, if one doesn't follow his critique all the way down to the bottom, go in for the full treatment, his theological conclusions won't make much sense and will offer little benefit. A theological train wreck most likely awaits those who attempt to plug a few of his ideas into the very framework he is critiquing – and then 'call it a day'. Theology students heading off into the pastorate who follow this half-way measure often end up with little confidence that any 'payoff' gained for ministry would be worth the effort needed to fathom Torrance.

In more academic circles I find that when Torrance's Incarnational, Trinitarian theology is not properly grasped in its realist and onto-relational framework, the result is often misunderstanding and even incomprehension. Of course there will be both pastors and academic theologians who give due consideration and nevertheless come to believe Torrance is mistaken in his thoroughgoing critique. The outcome for those can only be, then, a parting of the ways. But if that is the result that comes about at the end of an honest wrestling match with the fundamental and central critiques of Torrance, very much would still have been gained in the process.

At this point let me commend to you these last volumes of Torrance's, *Incarnation* and *Atonement*. They are undoubtedly the most readable of Torrance and yet all exhibit the four-fold elements

so essential to Torrance's entire theological project that we touched on above. Facilitating our grasp of Torrance, all foreign phrases and words have been helpfully translated and a useful glossary is provided. Together, these two volumes are the most comprehensive of his works. Within them you will find an unmatched development and continuity of thought interwoven with ample biblical references that cover a broad range of theological topics including eschatology, the doctrine of Scripture and ecclesiology. These works comprise as near a dogmatic theology as Torrance produced. (And I can assure you that, due to the expert hand of editor Bob Walker, many of the sentences are now 10–50% shorter!) These volumes serve both as the ideal place to begin reading Torrance and an essential component for grasping the full-orbed coherence of his theological work.

But my comments here will not focus on Torrance's Edinburgh lectures on Christology contained in these two volumes. Rather I'd like to continue exploring the two key dimensions of Torrance's frame of mind that run through all his writings and also consider a few implications for practical theology as well.



T. F. Torrance's theological realism

Let me start with a few comments on T. F. Torrance's theological realism. This aspect of his writings give them a distinct flavour that pervades all his works. One student of mine, after devoting significant effort to digest passages from *The Mediation of Christ*, came to a realization. He approached me after class and said, 'You know, Torrance talks as if it's all true, you know, as if God's really real.' I had to agree, 'Yes, that's it. Torrance talks as if God's real.' Now we might think, 'But who doesn't?' Certainly we all operate, if we're going to engage in theology at all, as if it has some relevance to reality. Otherwise why bother? Well, I think this student really picked up on something vital. It's quite possible to approach theology in a way that God, even if asserted to be real, remains in our theology at a great and abstract distance from us. While affirming the reality of God, we can speak, act and write and possibly even preach as if God were relatively absent and for all practical purposes relatively unreal. In fact theology done in a non-realist, deistic, dualistic or nominalistic framework will

have this effect to one degree or another. For a relatively unbridgeable chasm is assumed in these frameworks that places the knowledge of God and the action of God at an ontological distance from us.

Now Torrance speaks at length on this theme because it is essential to his constructive theology and fundamental to his resulting critique. In the introduction to his *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* he explicitly identifies his work as a realist theology.⁵ It is crucial to grasp his realist frame if we are to own up to the challenges to an Incarnational and Trinitarian theology that face us especially in the sphere of Western culture, whether in academic circles or in general. Torrance is keen to show us that the trajectory of so much Western thought trains us to think, to assume, that God, by definition, cannot or does not interact with creation in any direct way. We may have ideas about God, or revelation from God, or evidences for God, or personal, subjective experiences, likely individual, of God. But we can't have real objective access to God. Even in more conservative and evangelical theology real and objective interaction with God is regarded to have occurred only exceptionally in the earthly life of Jesus for thirty-some years and perhaps very occasionally in miracles today. This is to say that any direct *self*-revelation of God, or any *self*-giving of God to his creatures is ruled out or today, if not always in principle.

As a consequence, much of Western theology operates within the boundaries set by the assumption that any God that might be could only be detected indirectly and could not be known, as a matter of shared public knowledge, at all. Torrance identifies this assumption as cosmological and epistemological dualism or its cousin deism and stepchild, scepticism. In his analysis, unless radically critiqued, such assumed ontological chasms set the rules for doing formal theology and for Christian preaching, teaching and apologetics. Torrance, however, incessantly questions why Christian theology should be confined within such dualistic or deistic philosophical boundaries where God is assumed to be cut off from real interaction with Creation and his creatures? Why should these philosophical assumptions about the shape of reality serve as our fundamental presuppositions? What if the Christian revelation itself, focused on Jesus Christ, sets out for us the essential parameters of not so much of religion but of reality itself?

What if Christian faith is not first and foremost about how to best get along within a dualistic or deistic reality; a reality *within which* we and God, together, try to make the best of it? Rather, what if the Lordship of Christ is a Lordship over time and space, over history and the very nature of creaturely being? What if the Logos of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ is actually the measure of rationality, reality and possibility? That's the proposition that Torrance so forcefully presents. Christian revelation is not about religion, but about reality. It defines for us the true nature of reality itself. The Logos of God, the Son of God incarnate, is the Logos of all things. What if what is possible in reality is what has happened, what is happening and what will happen in and through the Logos of God, the Son of God incarnate, crucified, resurrected, ascended and coming again? Yes, what would happen if we started with an understanding of reality as disclosed to us in Jesus Christ? As one student astutely remarked: 'Well, then ... everything is different.' And that, for Torrance, is exactly what Christian theology is all about.

Now it is understandable that in not every circle would there be enough agreement, even hypothetically, to begin thinking and pursuing our understanding of reality with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. However, it is strange and even perhaps even perverse to attempt to pursue Christian theology on the basis of presuppositions alien to its fundamental convictions, that is, to its own presuppositions. Operating under such inimical constraints would be akin to Marxist scholarship having to assume the intrinsic superiority of capitalism and the impossibility of the dictatorship of the proletariat, or feminist scholarship having to assume the superiority of the male of the species! Or another analogy that Torrance's thought provokes: such restraints would be like prohibiting the scientist from entering the lab but requiring her to arrive at scientific conclusions, regardless!

It seems to me that the acceptance of dualist, or even deistic or agnostic presuppositions within theology are most often enforced by certain (false) notions of both objectivity and subjectivity. Torrance himself has traced these back to Enlightenment notions of rationality which has its roots, of course, even further back in the annals of Western intellectual history. Immanuel Kant and Adolph von Harnack seem to be key conduits of such notions into Christian theology,

especially of the Protestant variety. René Descartes and Isaac Newton seem also to have played supporting roles in setting up the foreign parameters. Our so-called postmodern context might perhaps be best understood as the natural and inevitable outcome of modernist frame of mind now collapsing entirely under its own weight, but nevertheless still maintaining, *a priori*, the same barriers to working within a theological realism.

Torrance's radical critique of the intellectual cultural captivity of Christian theology is grounded in his regard that the Incarnation and the Trinity serve as the reality constituting foundations for theology. It is at those junctures where God has directly interacted with Creation, providing not just revelation, but self-revelation; engaging not just in giving, but in actual and real self-giving. Torrance's warning is that if the Christian revelation in Jesus Christ is hindered from performing this crucial and critical restructuring of the foundations of theological life, then some other assumptions about the structure and possibilities of some other assumed reality *will inevitably* and *necessarily* take its place. These assumptions then will serve as our actual and controlling religious convictions, the boundaries within which all subsequent theological reflection must conform. Assumptions about reality, despite Harnack's critique of the early church, are inevitable and unavoidable, whether they are speculative or not. And if unavoidable the only option we have, other than remaining in a state of naïve oblivion, is critical engagement with these fundamental assumptions. And this is exactly the attack Torrance has so forcefully mounted – with the Incarnation and the Trinity in the forefront, leading the way.

For if the foundation of Christian theology is the Incarnation of the Son of God then while it may not be possible for human beings with their great or small rational powers to discover and know God, it is apparently within the power and purpose of God to accomplish, nevertheless, a self-revelation in time and space, flesh and blood, face-to-face, and in person. Apparently, the God of the Bible doesn't need permission to work around, or, more accurately, to work with human limitations to accomplish his good purposes to reveal and reconcile humanity in Person.

Of course scepticism about either the objective or subjective powers of persons to discover God is entirely consistent with the all-

too-warranted suspicion that human beings are eager to create gods after their own images, deify them and then find themselves amazingly justified by those very gods – gods that condone most everything they are and do, while condemning everyone else. However, the scepticism of the biblical revelation matches or exceeds both modern scepticism and popular postmodern agnosticism. The danger of human propensity to make and then regard images of creaturely things as if divine was enshrined millennia ago in ancient Israel's strictest of prohibitions regarding idol-making and idol worship. Feuerbach, Freud, and Durkheim were not the first to discover the dangers of human religion. They offer mere reminders of what had already been declared among the ancient people of the God of the Bible. Jesus goes further: 'No one knows the Father but the Son. And no one knows the Son but the Father' (Matt 11:27). According to Jesus it is not only doubtful that humans can know God, it is impossible! Unless ... Unless God is clever enough and motivated enough to figure out how to actually, really accomplish a self-revelation. If so, then there is no reason, *a priori*, not to regard the Incarnation as God's own self-presentation, self-interpretation, self-naming, self-revelation – a direct revelation that both fulfills and offends all our human religious aspirations. One that kills our human presumptions and yet regenerates, as a sheer act of God's grace, all our humble hopes for salvation, redemption, communion and fellowship.

The fact that human limitation cannot imprison God in an impossible situation identifies both the sovereign grace and the gracious sovereignty of the God of the biblical revelation. The Incarnation, then, marks out the epistemological implications of grace, the grace of the Triune God. To deny this possibility of God, even in the face of human limitation and perversity, is of course to deny grace itself and, so, the Christian Gospel *in toto*.

Can we actually claim, *a priori*, that we know that any god that might be cannot accomplish such a self-revelation? Such a sceptical assertion carries within it an awful lot of positive knowledge! An amazing amount of humble self-confidence! Is it impossible for God to actually and really establish a place where God can be known? Christian theology, especially focused on the Incarnation, ought to be the place where such a possibility can be discovered, explored,

and mined within its own proper limits. Torrance can be of immense assistance for setting the study of theology on its own proper realist basis. I recommend him to you. These two recent volumes will refresh your memory if you've had some exposure to it. If you're not familiar, the radical critique and refreshing alternative paradigm will certainly invigorate a serious engagement with Christian theology and prepare us for vital Christian worship.



Theological realism and pastoral theology

Now let's turn next to the pastoral situation. Christian ministry also takes place in the context of the dualist, deistic and sceptical legacy of our Western intellectual tradition. The result is a pressure to turn Christian service in the direction of the pragmatic (not that this stream is not well represented in the intellectual environs as well!). Is a sign of this pressure the fact that we often name the discipline devoted to training for ministry 'practical theology'? Would that make dogmatic or systematic theology impractical? Well, perhaps it is, when conducted in a deistic and dualistic framework! But that's just the question, isn't it? Is the everyday practical separated from the actual dealings and real knowledge of God?

In the context of the church and its various para-church extensions there is a strong temptation to substitute a pragmatic approach for a theologically-founded one oriented first to the reality of God present, known and at work among us. This substitution takes various forms. Perhaps the primary sign of the malady is our tendency to be preoccupied with our selves and with our means for accomplishing something for God. What else can we do if God remains at a relative distance? It needn't be denied that God can be identified by name and certainly has a will. A conceptual or logical connection of God to us may be affirmed. But beyond that point, often the connection between us and the living God seems rather tenuous. So for all practical purposes 'reality' essentially shifts over to *what* we do and *how* we do it. God may be the source of the ideal and theoretical, perhaps captured by the *ideas* of Incarnation and Trinity. But we are put in charge of the actual and real. God is located relative to us in unreality.

Although not likely to be put this way in the church, the line of thinking seems to go something like this: God has done his part, now it's up to us to do our part. For all practical purposes God completed his work 2000 years ago now it's our turn, of course with the exception of the odd miracle here and there. Jesus, since his resurrection, is effectively unemployed. And who knows what the Spirit is up to. So the questions that occupy us become: What should we do and how should we do it? And sermons following suit are designed to address those questions: what we really ought to be doing and how best to be effective in the doing of it. We, then, become the primary objects of contemplation.

I see churches and ministries across the conservative-liberal spectrum often caught in the same trap. The list of 'actionable' items on the agenda will be decidedly different, depending upon where along the political or theological spectrum the body of members belong. But the approach will often, and ironically, be the same. A kind of inadvertent Kantian obligation to do our duty to fulfill the God-given categorical imperative rules, while God remains 'at a distance' while we go about his work. Perhaps we don't intend it, but does this not result in a Pelagian or deistic approach to ministry and the Christian life? In that frame hasn't the weight, the burden of reality, gotten shifted back on our shoulders, whether it we want it there or not? I think this is indeed the trap of practicality that those in ministry are often caught in. Torrance's critique offers a way out. It's worth the effort to trace it out.



The motivational psychology of the turn to the pragmatic

There's another factor at work that contributes to reinforcing the pragmatic trap. Dualist or deistic assumptions often collude with a commitment to a certain motivational psychology. God's role is portrayed as providing the plan and the potential. The will of God then is construed as an ideal. Our part is *merely* to make the ideal real, to actualize the potential. That's all! According to this theory, the bigger the gap is portrayed, between what is and what ought to be, the greater will be the motivation to get things done. So working for God

requires waking up each morning to a huge credibility gap, between God's ideal and what we call the 'real'. That – and strong coffee – is what's required to get us up and running.

This motivational theory works best among those who are psychologically optimists, idealists, and sometimes for the plain inexperienced. Those who are pessimistic Puddleglums or simply cynical most often become either paralyzed by the prospect of having to shift the potential to the real or are repelled by the thought of Christianity as a God-given form of idealism. They become paralyzed. And even for those who take up the challenge of 'actualizing a reality', the gains seem to be short-lived. The optimists moved by the psychological model of the credibility gap often turn into persons driven by guilt, fear and anxiety. And after a while those well-intentioned idealists, under the burden of upholding reality, come to exhibit a domineering pride and competitiveness or alternatively collapse into resentment and bitterness – that ends up being just as domineering. Doesn't the collusion of a deistic God with an idealistic form of Christianity more often than not lead, in the long run, to disillusionment and resentment if not paralysis? And sometimes even to a cooling to the Christian faith?

But more serious than that, doesn't such a pragmatic motivational framework fail to draw on the truth and reality of our actual real relationship with the God present, active and known in Jesus Christ by the Spirit? Following in the Torrance tradition, Ray Anderson used to caution us, 'Burnout in ministry and Christian life is a theological problem!' Have we gone off the theological rails?

Some of us may be getting very nervous right now. What's the alternative? Won't emphasizing the action of God lead to human irresponsibility? If God's work takes up all the available volitional space, there won't be any room for us to act. Perhaps we should pray like we're Calvinists and act like we're Arminians (as some wryly suggest). If something's not ultimately up to us, what is our significance? What difference will we make? If we don't do our part then it's not going to get done. Without the credibility gap, without the idealism, won't we set people up for antinomianism, or worse, plain sloth? Wouldn't eliminating this lever of motivation cut the nerve of Christian effort?

Oddly enough, Torrance's theology, along with Barth's, has often been criticized in this fashion: too much of God's actualizing and not enough of human effort. In defence I would say: Indeed if God remains at a deistic distance and cannot be really known, passivity may very well result. If the enactment of the will of God in the world really has to be divided up into God's part over there and back then and my part over here and now, then yes, what Torrance has to offer could wind up leading to indolence. But Torrance questions that entire dualist, deistic framework. That model, tipped either towards divine or towards human action, in the end undermines, erodes and eventually corrupts faithful witness to God and faithful human obedience. If the motivational nerve of responsibility requires neatly dividing up the volitional space available for divine and human agency so as to carve out a relatively autonomous space for human action, then Torrance would say that nerve should be cut – and an entirely new one grown!



Beginning with the Who question

So, what is Torrance's alternative way of approaching Christian ministry if not from a dualistic or essentially deistic angle? What does Christian life look like when pursued in a realist framework? Most of what is needed to redirect us can be accomplished by beginning with a certain simple question to mark our theological starting point. And that starting point is identical for Christian life and for Christian theology.

Yes, identical. In the realist frame grounded in the Incarnation and the Trinity, the foundational question, the essential starting point for our constant consideration, is the question Who? – Who are you Lord? Raising and answering the Who question on the basis of the biblical revelation ought to be our first and primary occupation. And then all our other activity and theological reflection should follow as a response to a deep recognition of Who this God is. Torrance in this regard aligns with a similar emphasis given by both Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Who question takes as its primary object God in Christ. It resists a dualistic or deistic separation. Directed to the Incarnation, it objects to an indirect and impersonal engagement with God. Consequently, faith, hope and love are engendered by the

recognition of Who exactly this God is. These theologically driven motivations, if you will, are the alternatives to motivations of guilt, fear, anxiety generated by the credibility gap of a Christianized idealism.

Beginning with the theological Who question means setting aside other common but relatively abstract questions of What? How? or even Why? These last journalistic questions have somehow become more natural to us even in our theology both practical and systematic. Certainly they are more endemic to our Western culture and more amenable to our pragmatism. Those of a philosophical bent might like to begin with the Why or What questions. Those of a practical orientation will perhaps have a penchant for the How questions. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ places at the centre of our attention the question of Who? Jesus' own ministry again and again forces this question into the minds and onto the lips of his would-be followers. Jesus often seems to do things deliberately to raise it: Who is this, then? Indeed the whole of biblical revelation seems to address this central concern above all others. The actions and the words of God have as their target the revelation and identification of Who, in particular, this God is. In the person and work of Jesus Christ, which includes his own self-interpretation (think of all the 'I am' declarations of the Gospel of John), what is discovered to us is Who God really is.

For in the hearing of the Word of God we encounter the personal reality of God, Father Son and Spirit. Consideration of God in his Act and Being and relations, towards us and in himself, provides us with knowledge of his very character and nature. And apprehension of that nature and character of God founds our faith, hope and love, the mainspring of all our responses, all our obedience. Pursued in this way, proper theology always leads to doxology/worship. And proper worship will always send us back to finding the best words, concepts, illustrations, analogies, narratives that most faithfully disclose the truth and reality of the character of the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Who question prompts us to probe the actual, real self-revelation of the whole God in Christ. One simple but crucial implication of concentration on that question is that free speculation about God is reigned back. That self-revelation means that God is exactly like Jesus Christ, all the way down. Torrance often speaks

of there being no God behind the back of Jesus. We might say today, 'What you see is what you get.' The fullness of deity is personally present and active in Jesus Christ. There is no slippage between the Father, Son and Spirit. The mind, heart, purposes and nature of the Father and Spirit are identical to the Son's. He bears the very stamp of the whole of God's character.⁶ Neither the attributes nor the actions of God can be divided up among the persons of the Trinity. The divinity of the Son and the unity of God, Torrance tirelessly stresses, indicate to us that in Jesus Christ we see and hear the whole truth and reality of God. Jesus' whole ministry is to take us to the Father and send us his Spirit. Without collapsing the persons, we have displayed before us in Jesus Christ the saving heart, reconciling mind and redeeming purpose of the whole God – wholly embodied and enacted in Jesus Christ, from his conception to his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and return. God has a nature and it is made known in word and deed in Jesus Christ. We, by the witness of the Spirit through the Word Living and Written, can indeed know it and, on the basis of it, put our trust in this God, Father, Son and Spirit. Faith, hope and love are responses to the recognition and acknowledgement of Who this God is in Christ resurrected and ascended and coming again. The objective revelation calls for, and by the Spirit engenders, a corresponding subjective response in us. Without such a revelation and the gracious drawing of the Spirit there can be little expectation of this particular response. This is why the most practical of questions is the theological question addressed to the biblical revelation of the reality of God incarnate: Who are you Lord?

Where then does our obedience come in? Echoing T. F. Torrance, and perhaps even more explicit in the teaching of James B. Torrance, all obedience is to be a response to and an expression of trust in Who God is in Jesus Christ. The mainsprings for Christian activity, of faith, hope and love, can only be energized by a growing and deepening realization of Who this God is in actual real and ongoing relation to us. Our forgiveness can only be moved by trusting reception of God's forgiveness. Our compassion by God's compassion. Our faithfulness by God's faithfulness. Our truthfulness in God's truthfulness. Our dedication to justice by God's own righteousness. Consequently, the only obedience that bears faithful correspondence to God is the

obedience of faith.³ So any call to obedience of any sort must be informed and grounded in God's own character, word and continuing action among us. This theological foundation must be laid out before we call for our response. For only God's own faithful activity will call forth our proper and life-giving faithful response on our part. The indicatives of grace alone are sufficient to impel the imperatives of obedience, the obligations of grace.

And underneath this correspondence of our obedience to God's faithfulness lies an even deeper truth and reality. One that cuts against any dualistic or deistic or sceptical separation of us from the reality of God. That reality is the abiding humanity and continuing ministry of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. An essential theme of Torrance's writings is the continuing priesthood of Jesus Christ. You will find this in the *Atonement* volume. Since his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus has not been made redundant, he is not unemployed. He remains our one true minister, our worship leader, our servant King. There is only one ministry and it is not ours, it does not belong to one branch of the church, nor is it handed over to all of them put together. Jesus Christ's ministry of reconciliation for the sake of our redemption continues. We do not make it happen. The intercessory and mediatorial ministry of Christ has not ended but continues. That's who he is in his eternal priestly office. We can count on it.

Torrance avoids the dualism and deism that divides the volitional space up between divine and human action. To do so he finds indispensable the biblical notion of *koinonia*, sharing, communion, participation. To sum it up: Our place in the economy of things is marked by the privilege of participating in his continuing ministry by union with his glorified humanity. The key here is grasping the reality of our participation. We join in with Christ in what he, from the Father, is doing by the Spirit now in the time between the times. We are given the privilege of involvement in the out-working of his reconciling ministry being realized by Christ. The Christian life is, then, one of being in relationship, a relationship of union and communion with God. Within that relationship we, by the Spirit, find the place carved out for us in Christ's continuing ministry of mediation. All of Christian ministry and mission, then, is fellowship and communion with Christ. God can and will be faithful without us, but his design

is for us to participate in fellowship, union and communion with him in his continuing ministry of reconciliation. That is where we find our meaning and significance. We were created for fellowship and communion. Our ministry, mission and service are not severed from this, but integral to it. Given who God is and who we are, the reality of the Christian life is participation with God in all our obedience.



The onto-relational framework of T. F. Torrance's theology

Let us turn now to the second dimension of Torrance's framework also essential to giving full theological significance to the Incarnation and the trinity of God. That is the theme of onto-relations. As far as I am aware, Torrance found it necessary to coin this term to speak more faithfully and accurately of God's own revelation and reconciliation. Without using the term, approximately the same approach can be found implicit in Karl Barth's theology of relations: Trinitarian, Christological and human. As Torrance attempted to do justice to the reality and actuality of the Incarnation and the triune relations intrinsic to God, he discovered certain impediments to freely articulating with accuracy what we find in the revelation. Our Western habits of mind almost inevitably regard relationship as extrinsic, as accidental to who and what God, God's creation and creatures are. Everything that can be said to have being is essentially what it is without being related to anything else. All things, whether they are atoms, amoebas, persons or planets remain what they are, in essence, with or without relationship to anything else. They may be affected by relations, but their essence is not established or constituted by those relations.

Apparently this type of thinking can be traced back through the mechanistic construals of the Enlightenment to Boethius and to Aristotle. In a similar way we tend to think of things atomistically and of persons individualistically or autonomously. Perhaps a couple of simple illustrations will help. There's an old American joke of two state of Vermont farmers talking to each other about a mutual friend who had moved down to New York City and had run into quite a bit of success. So Elmer says to Bubba: 'Well, guess Fred's gone to the Big City and has become quite a self-made man.' And Bubba replies to Elmer: 'Yup, guess so ... and certainly relieves the Almighty of

considerable responsibility.’ Perhaps you may recall an interview related by sociologist Robert Bellah in his book, *Habits of the Heart*,⁴ where a certain young woman, identified as Sheila Larson, declared that the only religion she believed in was Sheilism. The study went on to consider that Sheila was not alone in her approach to religion. We tend to regard relationships as accidental and incidental to who we are and – who God is. Torrance found that if we assume such a non-relational ontology and then try to think, speak and relate to the God of the Bible under those constraints then the Incarnation and Trinity become impossible to think or to believe and the Christian life becomes truncated and curved back in on itself. The results are often what have been identified as the various Christological and Trinitarian heresies. But what we find in both the Incarnation and Trinity is that God’s being is eternally constituted by relations.

Given the Incarnation and the revelation of the Trinity, Torrance noted that at least these relations are being-constituting relations. Consequently ontological assumptions that rule out this possibility must be set aside to allow the ontic reality of God in Christ to shine through. According to the New Testament witness, Jesus cannot be known or identified or rightly related to unless he is known, identified and related to as who he is in relationship to the Father and the Spirit. Who is Jesus? He is the Son of the Father. And who is the Father, but the Father of the Son. And who is the Spirit, but the Spirit of the Father and the Son. The triune relations constitute the unity, the being, the godhead of God. These particular relations are presented, through Jesus Christ, as intrinsic and essential to the being of God. If God were not Father, Son and Spirit in eternal and internal relations of loving, knowing, and mutual glorification, then God would not be God. In fact, God would not be. God has being by being triune. The only God that is, is the triune God. Jesus’ being is constituted by the relations within which he exists not only on the divine ‘side’ but also on the human ‘side’. If Jesus was not eternally the Son of the Father become incarnate for us and our salvation, then he would be someone and something else entirely and could not and would not accomplish what he did. Torrance notes that the reality of the onto-relational nature of Christ was enshrined in the double-*homoousion* of Chalcedon. One in being with the Father and one in being with us in our humanity.

Apprehending and approaching the God of the Bible requires setting aside an atomistic or substantival frame of mind and allowing for a transformation of mind to take place where we think and relate to God in onto-relational ways. Torrance was convinced that the reality of God demanded nothing less than this radical transformation, indeed, the sanctification of our minds.

Now of course our thinking, speaking and acting in onto-relational terms has tremendous implications for our doctrine of God. In terms of the doctrine of the Trinity it means that it is incumbent on us to expand our understanding of God beyond the terms of being and action, to include relations. For the actions of God internal and eternal to the triune life are properly understood as relational. It is requisite, then, not just to overcome the split between the Act and Being of God, so often reflected in formal theology, but to hold together the Being, Act and Relations of the triune God. For without taking the Trinitarian *relational* aspect with full seriousness, the internal acts of God are likely to be thought of in impersonal, abstract, non-relational ways. This leaves those acts to be regarded as essentially mental, conceptual, or merely volitional. Without real relations within God, any movement within God can easily be reduced to acts of pure will, that is to will without a nature, without a character. And God becomes pure, naked and arbitrary willing.

Thus while God may be said to be constituted by Act and Being, when the acts are construed as purely volitional, the notion of God collapses back into mere abstract Being without Act. This is why both Karl Barth and T. F. Torrance, each in their own way, brought out the personal and relational aspects of the Being and Act of the triune God. Barth did this by speaking of the reality of the Love of God in Freedom and the Freedom of God in Loving.⁷ Torrance did the same by his emphasis on onto-relations.

Without the internal onto-relational aspect being highlighted, the external acts of God, in order to be truly revelatory to us, must be said to *constitute* the being of the Son and the being of the Trinity. (This seems to be the claim Princeton Seminary Professor Bruce McCormack has recently made.) The notion that the external acts of God constitute the being of God, if those acts are to be revelatory, seem to require the assumption that the internal acts of God are purely

volitional and not relational and that God is not triune except when constituted by external action and relation. But if those internal acts were relational ones, then God's actions externally correspond to God's triune being antecedently, that is, they really reveal a God who has being by being and acting in relationship as the triune God. The external acts and relations do not need to constitute God as Trinity or as incarnate. They are only needed to accomplish the revelation to us of a God who is antecedently triune. All God's external actions and relations are characteristic of all God's internal actions and relations. That's why and how they are revelatory.

The externally constituting view seems to require that God's Incarnational and Trinitarian being must be regarded as *necessarily* related to his external actions and relations. But if true revelation requires this reconstitution, then God's sheer being God, must *a priori* be understood as pure mind or volition without nature or character, acts or relations. And, furthermore, God can only be free to be God in this way *without* creation. Acts and relations are then alien to the pure Being of God. If this God decides to act and relate to that which is not God, to creation, this God is not free to remain pure volition, but must necessarily reconstitute himself as incarnate and triune if there is going to be a congruence between how God relates to creation and how God actually has come to be, that is if there is going to be a real revelation. For this God of pure volition cannot remain so and at the same time reveal himself. This God must necessarily reconstitute himself to be known. This God cannot remain who he is if he is to truly reveal himself. This God must become something other than what he was in order to redeem. And of course this external action must be regarded as arbitrary, for (apparently) there are no relations and actions internal to God to form and inform those external actions. It also is not clear why this God, subsequent to such external constituting actions, might not arbitrarily reconstitute himself in yet another way discontinuous with the prior incarnate and Trinitarian constitution.

By way of sharpest contrast, and even in explicit anticipation of this construal of a natureless, volitional God without relations who subsequently reconstitutes himself in order to reveal himself, Torrance holds with, among others, St Augustine and I would contend with Barth, that the biblical revelation discloses that what God is towards us he is

antecedently in himself.⁸ The actions and relations towards creation culminating in the Incarnation characteristically *reveal* the actions and relations among the Father, Son and Spirit before and apart from God's actions towards creation. There is nothing incongruent between God's actions *ad extra* and *ad intra* if God really is a Trinity of Being, Act and Relations. If relations are essential to who God is, we can both maintain the freedom of God to act and relate towards creation without construing this as an arbitrary action towards creation. We can also affirm that those acts in relationship are truly revelatory.

It should be pointed out that the acts in relation *ad extra* can and must be distinguished from the acts in relation *ad intra*, but it is one and the same God having being, act and relation in both cases. *Ad extra* bears witness to the *ad intra*. A relational ontology grounds a revelatory epistemology. God has the freedom to be in relation with creation and to reveal himself in relationship without being required to reconstitute himself for so acting and relating, since he is antecedently one in Being, Act and Relation. God is faithful to himself in all his acts and relations, internal and external. For the triune God is free to be true to himself in all his ways.



Onto-relational implications for God's attributes

Well, we're in pretty deep here. So I won't carry on along those lines any further. But let me say one thing further about the total congruence of God in Being and Act and Relation. There are here significant implications for how we understand the attributes of God. If the God revealed in the Incarnation reveals the inner and eternal nature and character of God as triune, then all the so-called attributes of God must be transcribed in terms of the revelation of Who this triune God is in himself and towards us in Christ. Convinced of this very thing, it seemed to Karl Barth that the whole approach to the attributes of God had to be reconsidered. He undertook the massive task of reformulating the primary scholastic traditions, medieval and Protestant. Keying off the reality-disclosing Incarnation of the eternal Trinity, Barth regarded all these attributes as the perfections of the God who Loves in Freedom and who is Free in his Loving.⁹ The external manifestations of God are entirely congruent with God's own

inner Trinitarian nature and life or being in relation and all that we say about any of the attributes must be congruent as well if we are to be theologically faithful. All the perfections must be interpreted according to the revelation of God in Christ, for they all pertain to Christ incarnate who came for us and our salvation as much as they do to the Father and the Spirit. Otherwise, Jesus Christ would not be one with the Father and Spirit and God would not be in Christ reconciling the world to himself. God would have sent someone else, other than himself, to do the job and provide us information about himself. There would be no self-revelation or self-giving if Jesus Christ did not embody and so reveal the attributes of God to us. The transfiguration of the doctrine of the attributes achieved by Barth is breathtaking. It represents one of his three or four most significant contributions to Christian theology and has yet to be given the attention it deserves.



The onto-relational frame and pastoral ministry

Let us turn now in our fourth section to a consideration of the implications of Torrance's onto-relational paradigm that are perhaps of more direct concern to pastoral ministry, but certainly not irrelevant to formal theological work.

According to Torrance, antecedent to any external relations by which we know and relate to God, God enjoys a rich active inner life of fellowship and communion. Now of course were God to act externally, those actions would reflect and reveal those internal and eternal acts in relation. So if and when God might act and relate *ad extra*, those acts would express the same quality of relationship as exist between the Father and Son in the Spirit: the same faithfulness, the same love, the same being-togetherness.

But if God acts according to his triune being-in-relation, then God does not just do loving things, but is eternally loving in his own being. Since God has his being by being in triune holy relations of love, God then is rightly understood to have created out of the 'overflow', as Torrance says, of that holy love and for the sake of that holy love. Creation, and every creature, exists then for fellowship and communion. And if this God exists as an eternal fellowship and

communion, and acts externally in a way that is faithful to who he is, then what kinds of relations with his creation might this God be interested in? Certainly, not arbitrary relations but communion-creating relations or, to use biblical language, covenantal relations. Relations of union and communion, fellowship and partnership.

And if things went awry in God's relationship with his creation, what might this God's essential intention be, if God remains true to his character and nature as the triune God? Wouldn't it be to restore right relationship with creation and his creatures? Wouldn't it be reconciliation and renewal so that communion and fellowship could be re-established?



The glory of God in Torrance's onto-relational framework

Furthermore what would constitute the glory of this triune God? Would it not be the glory of his sharing with his creation the very holy and loving communion gloriously enjoyed by the Father, Son and Spirit? To the contrary, would it really be glorious for this God to retain for himself his own self-love and self-glory? Or would God's glory be truly manifested by enabling his creatures, those who are not glorious in themselves, not just to view from afar and behold God's relatively incomprehensible glory, but rather to partake, to share in, the very glorious triune life of holy love? Is this not God's glory to glorify with his own glory his creation demonstrated and accomplished in Jesus Christ in our place and on our behalf?

Indeed, is this not exactly what Jesus Christ and his Gospel hold out to us? Can salvation be regarded as anything less than sharing in the glorious divine triune life as the children of God? Most notions of salvation, especially those popularly described as 'going to heaven' fall far short of this. But so do most utopian or idealistic notions of our building God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven! An onto-relational grasp of God's communion purposes, commitment to restoration and glory calls for a deepening and perhaps significant correctives to our very notions of salvation and our proclamation of the Kingdom of God.



Onto-relations and participation

Let's look briefly at what light an onto-relational frame of mind throws upon the character of our participation in the things of God. Remaining true to his triune being, action and relations, what would be fitting for this God to command of his volitional creatures? Would it be surprising if this God, the triune God, would command love? First and foremost, love for God and then in a corresponding way, love for neighbour? Of course I cheated and looked ahead. Indeed, the command of the triune God calls for human living in right, holy loving relations first with God and with others. For then our lives mirror or reflect in our being, action and relations the very purpose for which we were created.

And if those relationships were broken and twisted, what would be entailed by the commands of love for God reflected in our love for others? Would it not engender a desire to see all things reconciled, healed and restored, even if this was costly? Indeed, aren't the actual commands of God found in the biblical revelation mirrors of God's own character and nature as the one who has his being and acts in free and holy loving relationship? If so, then there is nothing arbitrary about the commands of God, whether they be personal or public, private or social. The commander commands according to the nature and character of his being and acting in right relationship. 'You are reconciled, so be reconciled,' announces the Apostle Paul. The so-called ethical implications of the Gospel of Christ arise out of faith, hope and love in the onto-relational reality of the triune God present and active by the Spirit in Jesus Christ. Our obedience can never rise higher than our faith in the reality of the Living God. For that is the Rock upon which it is (or is not) built.



Onto-relations and the vicarious humanity of Christ

Looking further in the pastoral direction we are prepared to take up a last implication of onto-relations as T. F. Torrance spells this out. The God who has his being in action and relation *ad intra* and *ad extra* does not leave us with sheer commands that ought to have formal congruence with the nature and character of God. For thinking that

way would fail to take into account the active and real relationship of grace we have with God through Christ and by the Spirit! Barking commands at us from a deistic distance would be like someone standing on the banks of a raging river shouting to someone drowning in its torrents, ‘Swim, swim. I say unto you, swim!’ Such rescue efforts would be less than useless. What is required is someone tethered to the shore who has the strength to plunge in, grab hold of the victim, and bring him safely to shore. And if necessary to breathe the breath of his own life back into him, to resuscitate him.

And is that not a depiction analogous to what we have in the New Testament? The divine act of rescue and resuscitation involves the Father sending the Son into the raging waters of our own fallen situation, hazarding himself. Grabbing on to our broken and rebellious humanity he takes us back to shore whereby his own life is breathed into us by his Holy Spirit. And through the very Spirit by which we have our lives, we are set on a path to bear an embodied witness to that very same rescue and resuscitation, in public and private, in social and in personal arenas alike, as God gives grace.

Key in understanding this scenario is the aspect of the Son of God seizing hold of us at the deepest level of who we are onto-relationally. Torrance identifies this by his emphasis on the twin doctrines of the vicarious humanity of Christ and our participation in it by the Spirit.

The reconciliation of our humanity was accomplished by nothing less than the real, actual assumption of our humanity at its very root. For putting things right calls for a regeneration of our whole entire being-in-relation. Who we are as well as what we do and how we relate. Act, being and relation as human beings. To merely adjust our actions or to reorient our relations without rejuvenating our nature, character and being, would be far from gracious. For we ourselves would be left untouched, having only that which is largely external to us changed in form or appearance. We would be left with the greatest slavery of all, as Scottish pastor and theologian George MacDonald put it, we would be left enslaved to ourselves! Eternally ‘curved back in our ourselves’ (*incurvatus in se*) as Martin Luther termed it. And redemption itself would be reduced to a mere moral improvement programme (with little hope of success), rather than a personal transformation at the root of our being for sharing in the triune life as the actual children of God.

The reconciliation of our humanity was accomplished by nothing less than the real, actual assumption of our humanity at its very root. The Son of God acting in our place and on our behalf, doing for us what we could never and cannot do for ourselves, undoing what we have done, overcoming what we cannot conquer, and re-forging a communion we have forsaken in our humanity. For what God gives us in the Son and by the Spirit is not a commodity, a legal note, a name badge, or even a transfusion, but himself now eternally one with us in being, act and relation. He gives us our restored humanity, judged, reconciled and to be redeemed in and through Christ's own humanity. In faith, hope and love we receive our healed humanity from him, by being united to him by the Spirit. He has really and actually made us his own, so that we press on to make his glorified humanity ours, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul. The righteousness of God is his sharing with us Christ's own humanity; a humanity that exists in being and act and right relationship with the Father and the Spirit.

Without giving full theological weight to the onto-relational aspect of Christ's vicarious humanity, we are hindered from exercising our full participation with joy and peace in our saving union and communion with Christ. For our redemption will inevitably seem to us to remain external and mechanical, at a deistic distance, and relatively unreal unless our autonomous, individualist, moralist and idealist paradigms are broken off and we embrace the onto-relational reality of the vicarious humanity of Christ.



Onto-relations and the humanizing and personalizing work of Christ

The final emphasis of T. F. Torrance that I want to conclude with is merely an extension of his witness to the vicarious humanity of Christ. Paul identifies Christ as the new head of all humanity, supplanting by far that of the old Adam. Jesus Christ himself depicted all humanity coming to him from east and west. The work of Christ accomplished according to the person of Christ (that is according to who he is) was to restore to us our humanity, a humanity that can only truly be and become human in right relationship with God and with neighbours, near and far. This is why Torrance speaks of the work of Christ as

a humanizing and personalizing work.¹⁰ Following up on Irenaeus' emphasis on the Incarnation and the glory of God as 'humanity truly alive', Torrance notes that Christ in his person is the one true human being, and the one true person. He alone has brought humanity to its *telos*, its end and aim being right relationship with God and right relationship with humanity. And he has come to bring us into true personhood, right relationship with God, by way of union and communion with his perfected and glorified humanity, only glimpsed at his ascension. In right relationship with God we don't turn into something we are not, but become the persons we were always intended to be. As we are gripped by the personhood of Christ and see in him the triune persons, we are transformed into human persons. And as we are captivated by Christ's reconciling and redeeming relations with us in act and being, we are drawn up into his true humanity, made ready to offer to others, in his name, their humanity. For he alone is the true humanizing human, bringing to its *telos* the love of every neighbour, in the humanity of his own Person. And we, by grace, participate in and bear witness to the one new humanity already recreated in him.

Now a charge against the whole of the Christian gospel is that it is divisive, alienating and exclusive. The belief in the Incarnation and the Trinity are often brought in by the prosecutors of such claims as exhibits A and B. What are we to say of this charge? I believe that when the Incarnation and the Trinity are grasped in the glory of their onto-relational reality, that there is a hopeful response that does not confirm their worst fears. We may misuse doctrines in order to divide, but when rightly pointing to the onto-relational reality, they unite. If Jesus Christ is who he is in being, act and relation as the Son of God come for us and for our salvation as the new head of humanity, then rather than dividing humanity, he himself is the common ground that the creator and redeemer God has founded for all humanity to meet. His vicarious humanity is the place where all humanity has met and can meet – meet one another and meet God. James Torrance used to speak at length of the 'all-inclusive humanity of Christ.'¹¹ The vicarious and substitutionary humanity of the Son of God is the all-inclusive humanity of the Son of Man. The *exclusive* claim of the incarnate, crucified, resurrected and ascended Son of God is that only in the reality of who he is and what he has done can all humanity

be *included*. No other can atone, reconcile and redeem all humanity because he alone is one with God and one with us in our humanity in being, in act and in holy loving relationship, for us and our salvation. In him alone, the one through whom all things exist and in whom are all things upheld, are all things to be reconciled and redeemed. He alone is the Inclusive One.

The Incarnational and Trinitarian theology of T. F. Torrance worked out in a realist and onto-relational framework, so wonderfully summed up in these two recently-published volumes, bears the legacy of his witness not so much to those doctrines but to the reality present, active and revealed in Jesus Christ to the Glory of the triune God.

Notes

- ¹ Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God: A Christological Critique* (London: G. Chapman; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975).
- ² Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).
- ³ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Belfast: Christian Journals, 1980), ix.
- ⁴ Heb 1:3.
- ⁵ See Rom 1:5 and 16:26.
- ⁶ Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 1985).
- ⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. T. H. L. Parker; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), §28.
- ⁸ See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 97, 99, 108 f., 150, 163, 177, 198.
- ⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, §28.
- ¹⁰ See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983).

- ¹¹ See James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 50 f.