CHAPTER THREE

TORRANCE: THEOLOGY COHABITING WITH NATURAL SCIENCE

Although Torrance insists that he is simply travelling further along the road in the direction in which Barth pointed (see footnote 36, chapter one), it is nonetheless the case that Torrance travels so far down that road, constantly interrelating and cohering theological and natural science into a unitary framework of knowledge, that he has left Barth so far behind as to lose sight of him, not least because it forced him to reassess Barth's ban on natural theology.

This balance between maintaining the Barthian integrity of theological science, and offering appropriate bridges to other disciplines is summed up neatly in one sentence by Carvin1: “Religion must learn to live with whatever cosmology, whatever theory science provides, but on no account must it ever marry any of them.” Polkinghorne offers a similar distinction between ‘assimilationists’ (the marrying kind) and ‘consonantists’ (cohabiters), classing himself as the latter.2 The reason that it cannot marry them is that otherwise (as Bultmann argued) when scientific paradigms change (dramatically – as they have and no doubt will do) so the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith would also be threatened.3 Galileo’s heliocentric theory appeared as such a threat because it threatened both the Bible and Aristotle thus undermining both poles of the Thomist synthesis.

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3 See McGrath. Vol. 3, 2003, p. 220 – McGrath makes a good point against Bultmann, in pointing out that Christianity had already passed through other cosmological paradigm shifts – in particular the medieval one to the Ptolemaic system – and that adjustment and accommodation rather than radical demythologising was required. For as Barth had concluded:

“The Christian Confession has in course of the centuries passed through more than one world-picture. And its representatives were always ill-advised when they believed that this or that world-picture was an adequate expression for what the Church, apart from creation, has to think. Christian faith is fundamentally free in regard to all world-pictures, that is to all attempts to regard what exists by the measure and with the means of the dominant science of the time.” (Barth, 1949, p. 59).

Theology must learn to ‘live with’ whatever culture it finds itself in, firstly because it has no option, but also because it is religiously undesirable for Christian believers to retreat into a self-referential sect. Theology cannot therefore be independent of, nor dependent on, a certain natural scientific paradigm. There can be no retreat into either the polarities of fundamentalism or deism seeking hermetically to separate theological and natural truths. Neither should the necessary yet ultimately tentative and contingent synthesis of theology with the natural scientific paradigm of the day, whether that paradigm be Ptolemaic, Aristotelian, Newtonian, entail that a rebuttal of the latter would fatally undermine the truth claims of the former. I think it is worth quoting Torrance at length here, particularly as it throws light onto his relationship with his theological peers:

Now there are people today who insist that the advances of modern science in the understanding of the universe make it necessary for us to discard the fundamental framework of the Christian faith as one that is bound up with an obsolete cosmology. Even the basic concepts of the classical creeds have to be changed for they are alleged to be but constructs of an objectifying kind of thought that makes use of transitory patterns in man’s understanding of the cosmos in order to establish itself. Hence we must dispense with the objective forms in which faith is cast and find new conceptual forms congenial to modern man in which to express our attitude to the universe, and so on.

If this is what is called the ‘new Reformation’ then it is a disastrous misunderstanding. Certainly the church can never stand aside from what is going on in the world, for it is only within the world, and not outside of it, that she lives and acts and speaks, and fulfils our mission. But let us see what actually happened in the eras of great cosmological change in the past. In each of them theological foundations underwent their due measure of adaptation and restatement, yet in each the essential imagery and the basic conceptuality of Christian doctrine did not change and the church adjusted itself remarkably well. There were certainly great struggles, but the apostolic and catholic faith proved adequate for all that was required of it in the change and advance in the understanding of the universe.4

This is indicative of Torrance’s status as a ‘type four’ theologian according to Frei’s typology, substantiated by David Ford in *The Modern Theologians*5 (though confusingly and inexplicably inverting Frei’s nomenclature). This typology forms a sliding scale of how far a

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