

Torrance and Polanyi: image and imagination

Introduction

T. F. Torrance, born August 30th 1913, is without doubt the pre-eminent Scottish theologian of the 20th century. His writings continue to impact the theological scene today with their distinctive cast of Barthianism in which the 'scientific' nature of theology emphasised and explicated.

Torrance studied with Karl Barth in Basel in 1937-8 and the influence of the Swiss theologian's thought is amply evident in his work. But Torrance's corpus is much more than a reworking of Barth's theology; it represents, among other things, an attempt to bring the project with which Barth was concerned into creative dialogue with the world of the natural sciences and, in particular, the epistemological insights which began to emerge through the new physics, in the work of Einstein and others, at the turn of the century.

It is in respect of these epistemological concerns – and their bearing on theology – that Torrance's interest in the work of Michael Polanyi arises. Even a cursory acquaintance with Torrance's large corpus of published works is sufficient to demonstrate the extent to which he interacted with Polanyi's work. It is clear that Torrance discerned in Polanyi a profound thinker whose interests overlapped with his own in significant and potentially creative ways. It is worth saying, since contrary views have been proffered, that it is mistaken to see Torrance's work as an attempt to work out a 'Polanyian theology'¹. Here Alister McGrath's assessment is fair and to the point: "It needs to be made clear ... that Torrance himself regards his use of Polanyi as a means of developing and strengthening his own fundamental theological ideas, and is emphatic that those ideas are not *grounded* in Polanyi's writings."²

It is an important subsidiary intention in this paper to indicate something of Torrance's creative appropriation of Polanyi's work. However, its primary focus will be an aspect of Torrance's work which I believe to be problematic: his insistence upon the priority of the auditory over the visual and his aversion to the role of images in our understanding of God. This aspect of his work needs to be questioned and I will seek to do this. I will also suggest that there are resources in

¹ See, for example, Colin Weightman, *Theology in a Polyanian Universe: The Theology of Thomas Torrance, American university studies. Series VII, Theology and religion ; vol. 174* (New York: P. Lang, 1994).

² Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999). 229. McGrath's emphasis.

Polanyi's work, which become clear and explicit in his later writings³, which offer a corrective contribution in this regard.

Torrance emphasises in his work the *scientific* nature of theology. As a 'paradigm' of theology (if it can be described as such) it offers some particular strengths and insights. However, I will seek to show that Torrance has a tendency to see this as an *exclusive* paradigm for theological knowledge and in this he discounts or marginalises other approaches to theology which ought properly to complement the 'scientific model'. In particular I want to explore the possibilities of artistic understanding as a paradigm in which image and imagination have an integral and legitimate role to play in our understanding of God.

1. Torrance's use of Polanyi

Although, as I have asserted, to read Torrance's work as a theology built upon the foundation of Polanyian epistemology is mistaken, the extent to which Torrance adopts and adapts Polanyi's work is very considerable indeed. References to Polanyi in Torrance's writings are numerous. The extent and depth of his engagement with Polanyi is particularly clearly and concisely indicated in his short essay, "The framework of belief"⁴. This is just one of a collection of essays written by Christian scholars in which they seek to 'quarry from the thought of Michael Polanyi' and to learn from him as a scientist how to rethink certain aspects of the Christian faith. It is clear from the essay that Torrance draws from a deep engagement with Polanyi's ideas.

The fiduciary component in epistemology

Torrance picks up various aspects of Polanyi's understanding of the 'fiduciary' aspect of scientific knowledge. Polanyi insists that science can proceed only upon the basis of various 'beliefs' One such is a belief in the intrinsic coherence of the world which we seek to penetrate and comprehend. In this the realism, as well as the fiduciary component of Polanyi's thought, is to the fore. He writes, "Behind and permeating all our scientific activity, reaching from end to end of our analyses and investigations, there is an elemental, unshakable faith in the rational nature of things, but faith also in the possibility of grasping the real world with our concepts, and faith in the truth over which we have no control but in the service of which our human rationality stands or falls."⁵

The fiduciary component is not limited to a conviction about the inherent rationality of the universe but extends to an 'operative set of

³ Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁴ Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1980).

⁵ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 9.

convictions or a framework of beliefs'⁶. These both prompt and guide all scientific inquiry and are a necessary component of scientific development. These beliefs ought not to be suppressed or ignored. Instead they should be expressed. They should be opened up for clarification, and put to the test, in the reflexive, self-critical 'moment' of scientific work.

Torrance, like Polanyi, does not think that these beliefs can be demonstrated scientifically; they cannot be directly proved nor can they be disproved. They are 'extra-logical'. But they are not arbitrary since they are established under the pressure of that which they seek to know. Consequently Torrance rejects the opposition of faith and reason "for faith is the very mode of rationality adopted by the reason in its fidelity to what it seeks to understand."⁷ We believe in order that we may understand. Hence, in the midst of scientific epistemology, "we find ourselves back at the roots of the Judaeo-Christian understanding of faith"⁸.

There is, of course, a distinction to be made between natural and theological science. "Faith in God calls for a mode of response in accordance with his nature as the transcendent ground of all created being and intelligibility, but for that very reason faith involves a rational and not a blind commitment to God, in the course of which there ought to take place a steady sifting out of the true from false belief."⁹

Belief: objectivity and subjectivity

Torrance engages enthusiastically with Polanyi's distinction between the objective and the subjective poles of knowing. It is the objective pole which ensures that our thinking is engaged with reality. Our thinking – and, not least, our theories – reach out to the realities which they are intended to represent. The objective pole of our knowledge must be allowed a controlling authority over the subjective pole. Torrance comments, "That is how all meaning arises, when we look away *from* ourselves *to* something else."¹⁰ In this respect he goes on to quote Polanyi's comment in *The Tacit Dimension*: "Thought can live only on the grounds which we adopt in the service of a reality to which we submit."¹¹ Torrance says that "Belief has to do with the elemental interaction between persons and realities other than themselves, entailing a recognition of their independent reality and truth."¹²

⁶ See Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 10.

⁷ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 10.

⁸ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 10.

⁹ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 10.

¹⁰ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 11.

¹¹ Quoted in Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 11.

¹² Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 12.

This is certainly a recognisable Polanyian position, but Torrance's concern is to go on from this to draw some of the implications for his own critically realistic theology. "I have been describing the nature and status of belief in scientific knowledge, but all this applies fully to the nature and status of belief in our knowledge of God. Here too our basic convictions and beliefs are unprovable ...but they arise within us as basic acts of assent and acknowledgment on the part of our minds to divine Reality which we cannot know except on grounds of service and obedient listening or submission."¹³

Torrance is aware of differences between natural and theological science but sees these differences in terms of the nature of that with which the respective disciplines are concerned. With respect to need for beliefs he wishes to suggest a substantial similarity. Hence he sees a fundamental continuity between natural science and theological science in that both necessarily operate with a fiduciary component – notwithstanding the fact that the kinds of belief in operation within the two are quite different.

The power of the real

It is the *real* – the external pole of knowing – which conditions the subjective experience of it. Torrance says we must allow our thinking to be shaped by the structure inherent in that which we seek to understand. Therefore belief has to be understood within the context of rational submission to the claims of reality upon us. Torrance quotes from *Personal Knowledge*: "The freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must."¹⁴ Torrance asserts that "It is this external anchoring of belief that saves it from being subjective or arbitrary, for it binds belief to what is independently and universally true."¹⁵ Torrance points out that this is why, notwithstanding the subjective aspect of the act of knowing, knowledge is pursued, to borrow Polanyi's term, with 'universal intent'.

Torrance also follows Polanyi in his conviction that what is real has the potential to reveal itself in surprising and unanticipated ways. One consequence of this is that the ideas, theories and concepts which we hold with 'universal intent' ought, nevertheless, to be held with a degree of provisionality in that they "remain open toward whatever may yet be revealed from the side of reality."¹⁶ Torrance applies this epistemological insight to theology. He writes, "Because the grace of

¹³ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 12. It is noteworthy, and indicative of Torrance's position, that he singles out 'listening' in this context. Much more will be said about this later in the paper.

¹⁴ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 14.

¹⁵ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 13.

¹⁶ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 15.

God comes to us unconditionally but brings with it unconditional obligations, faith that is grounded on grace carries with it a deep sense of both freedom and compulsion. We believe freely but believe as we must. Faith is a free responsible act of our own but it is anchored beyond itself in the faithfulness of God which undergirds and sustains it so that it acquires by the grace of God a strength beyond anything we can give it.”¹⁷

Implied in this is the need for an openness to the reality of God. Torrance writes, “Because Christian faith by its very nature as faith in God has an open, eschatological scope, by asserting our doctrinal convictions under the rubric of *belief* we can claim that they fall short of their intention and are inadequate in themselves. Hence we say with St Paul that we do not claim that we have already apprehended or have already arrived at the end, but we press on in order to apprehend that for which we have already been apprehended by Jesus Christ.”¹⁸

The formation of belief within a framework

Following Polanyi, Torrance says that everyone works and thinks under the guidance of ultimate beliefs. Despite the claims of the positivists the presence of such beliefs is not in question.¹⁹ Such beliefs are ‘irrefutable as well as unprovable’²⁰. Torrance comments, “Ultimate beliefs give rise to a framework of thought of which they are constituent determinants. They stake the ground they constitute as the only ground for their justification, and thereby deny disproof any ground on which it might take its stand.”²¹ This is the circularity of belief of which Polanyi was well aware. But, although such beliefs are irrefutable, they may conceivably be false. It is therefore incumbent upon those who hold them to do so in such a way that they are open to testing and questioning. “We must test our commitments through responsible self-criticism, in order to distinguish genuinely ultimate beliefs from any subjective notions or imaginations on our part, for we can accept as ultimate only what is objectively forced upon us by the intrinsic intelligibility, truth and authority of the reality in the field of our inquiry, which it would be intellectual suicide for us to deny.”²²

Torrance is also conscious of what Polanyi calls the ‘convivial’ nature of human knowing. The subjective pole of knowing is not to be understood individualistically, but in terms of the consciousness of a community of ‘believers’ (whether that be a scientific, religious, or any other community) and the consciousness of individuals as they are

¹⁷ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 16.

¹⁸ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 17.

¹⁹ Polanyi’s role in establishing this case is a seminal one.

²⁰ See *Personal Knowledge* 299ff.

²¹ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 19.

²² Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 19.

formed in the life of that community. Participation in such a community, and the practices, traditions and structures of authority embedded within it, represents a far broader epistemic base than could ever be expressed in explicit statements. This insight of Polanyi's, which transforms our understanding of the nature of scientific knowledge, "has an important bearing upon the Christian doctrine of the Church and the formation and communication of normative beliefs within its developing tradition, in accordance with which over many centuries its dogmatic convictions are formulated, but not without considerable critical testing through the mutual faith and combined authority of the membership of the Church in its on-going commitment to the reality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ."²³

Evaluation

Although Torrance's *theological* appropriation of Polanyi's thought bears little resemblance to Polanyi's own discussions of theology and religion, the influence of Polanyi's epistemology is clearly to be seen in his theology. Torrance's critically realistic (post-critical?) theology is not *rooted* in Polanyi's epistemology, but it is one in which Polanyi's epistemology has been utilised and integrated to a very high degree.

2. Torrance: Images and Imagination

The Problem

I now want to turn my attention to what I identified as a problematic aspect of Torrance's work in the introduction to this paper: his attitude towards 'image' and 'imagination' and the way in which he gives priority to the auditory over the visual.

It is worth noting that in the essay "The Framework of Belief" with which I have just engaged, Torrance sets the scene for his argument by contrasting Hellenic and Hebraic thought. He claims that while the Greeks gave priority to the sense of sight, over and above the other senses, the Hebraic 'habit of mind' was to regard hearing as the more basic mode of understanding. Expanding upon this observation he conveys his strong preference for the latter and suggests, in a not altogether perspicuous way, that the Hebraic approach gives "priority to faith over sight."²⁴

He seeks to support his assertion by making two points. The first is that God, as "the overwhelming reality with whom we have to do"²⁵ is invisible. The second is that "whereas knowledge by sight depends on the see-er who must rely on himself, obedient hearing of the Word of

²³ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 22.

²⁴ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 1.

²⁵ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 1.

God gives rise to knowledge in which man does not rely on himself but on God.”²⁶ While his assertion of the invisibility of God may be unproblematic his implicit claim that seeing is fundamentally anthropocentric while hearing (the Word of God) is theocentric raises a raft of problems of which I will mention two.

Firstly, while there is a well established tradition of understanding the ‘Word of God’ as speech and/or ‘command’ in Judeo-Christian traditions this cannot be taken to mean, in any straight forward way, that God speaks ‘like an invisible person’. Although there are occasions in the Bible narrative when God is represented as having ‘spoken’ as an audible invisible presence (as if God were an ‘invisible person’) these are exceptional and not typical. In order to appropriate the meaning of the term ‘hearing God’ there is a need for a semantic extension of our ordinary use of such language.²⁷

Secondly, in any linking of the revelation of God to human language we must acknowledge an accommodation, on the part of God, to creaturely reality. God is not a Hebrew speaker who learned Greek in the 1st century! The reason we cannot see God is not because God isn’t ‘there’ but because God’s being is distinct from contingent creaturely being. But this distinction, which renders God invisible to creaturely being, renders God’s speech inaudible to us, also. If God is ‘heard’ it is because God has accommodated himself to human being and adopted the forms of audition and language used by those to whom God speaks.²⁸ The same might be said of ‘seeing God’. We cannot see God as he is in himself, but there is a ‘seeing’ of God (as well as a ‘hearing’ of God) insofar as he accommodates himself to creaturely form. This may be in the form of a burning bush, or some other exceptional manifestation, and it is, of course, the claim of the Christian tradition for the incarnation. In both cases – the auditory and the visual – it is in God’s condescension in taking creaturely form upon himself that the possibility of the ‘hearing’ and the ‘seeing’ of God is established.²⁹ At the heart of the Christian faith is the confession that the Word became flesh.³⁰ If this is so then the

²⁶ Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. 2.

²⁷ I will not attempt to explore *how* this is to be done in this paper due to lack of space. It is sufficient here to raise the problem.

²⁸ This is, undoubtedly the claim of the Judeo-Christian tradition and it is, to be sure, a distinctive and pervasive aspect within much of the biblical literature.

²⁹ As Karl Barth has emphasised – and as Torrance would echo – the knowledge of God which is established through this condescension is knowledge *of God* and not just of the creaturely form which God takes up. One implication of this is that the creaturely form is only revelatory insofar as God gives the eyes to see. God, by the Spirit, must establish the subjective as well as the objective conditions for such a revelation. To those with the eyes to see (and, of course, the ears to hear) Jesus was not only the Messiah, but the worthy recipient of his disciples’ worship; to others he was a rebel, a blasphemer and lawbreaker.

³⁰ “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”. John 14:9. NRSV

prioritising of audits or hearing, as Torrance does, serves only to confuse. Christ is heard, but he is also seen and, indeed, touched.³¹

It is, of course, appropriate to make a *distinction* between the seeing and hearing, images and audits. If Torrance is merely saying that there is, in the biblical literature as a whole, a greater emphasis on hearing than seeing, in relation to the knowledge of God, this might be conceded. But Torrance goes further than this in claiming a fundamental, theologically qualitative distinction between audits and images. In this I believe he not only overestimates the dangers associated with the sense of sight and the role of images in respect of the knowledge of God, he also underestimates the dangers associated with the sense of hearing and the use (or misuse) of language in respect of the knowledge of God – especially when this becomes an exclusive emphasis, as it threatens to do in Torrance’s theology. Torrance’s interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:7 “We live by faith, not by sight” as a condemnation of images and an exclusive affirmation of hearing, in respect of our knowledge of God, is contentious, to say the least.

So far I have only drawn from a few comments made by Torrance at the beginning of his essay “The Framework of Belief”. But he does have more to say. It is fair to say that this is a recurrent (if not a major) theme in Torrance’s work and it is appropriate to consider his treatment of it in some of his other writings.

Imageless truth

In *Theological Science* Torrance asks, “What relation do images bear to God in theological knowledge?”³² In answering this question he reflects upon Austin Farrer’s engagement with the theme in his book *The Glass of Vision*. Farrer writes that “Faith discerns not the images, but what the images signify: and yet we cannot discern it except through the images.”³³ Torrance is content to affirm this statement but opposes Farrer when he goes on to say that “We cannot by-pass the images to seize an imageless truth.”³⁴ Torrance rejects this statement because, he says, it implies that the images do their signifying work by *imaging* the reality. This implies, according to Torrance, that reality is *by nature* imageable and that when we think of God we are limited to the use of image-truths. If this is the case, he asks, “Is this not essentially a form of idolatry?”³⁵

³¹ “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands.” 1 John 1:1. NRSV,

³² Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *Theological Science* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969). 19.

³³ Quoted in Torrance, *Theological Science*. 19.

³⁴ Quoted in Torrance, *Theological Science*. 19.

³⁵ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 19.

Torrance takes Farrer to task for ‘for thinking only with his eyes’. In this context Torrance explicitly affirms *a* use of images. He writes, “images have and must have a place in our knowledge of God”³⁶, but their ‘place’ is to function as tools “pointing to a reality which they do not describe, and therefore making themselves in a real sense dispensable as they do their work and we apprehend the reality through them”³⁷.

Torrance suggests, in following patristic theology, that “images have to be taken, not in a descriptive but in a *paradigmatic* sense, that is, as aids to our human weakness in apprehending the indescribable God, to point Him out to us in such a way that we may have some hold in our thought upon His objective reality but without actually imaging Him.”³⁸ In this way Torrance allows a positive but limited function for images in relation to our knowledge of God. They cannot ‘picture’ God, but they may in some sense (and temporarily) point us in the right direction. He concedes that this stance which he adopts is problematic: “It must be admitted that the notion of images that do not actually image while pointing to and signifying a reality is a difficult one.”³⁹

This rather begrudging concession is made by Torrance in the light of the considerable emphasis placed upon images in the Bible, but his reservations are clear enough. Having affirmed that in biblical revelation images ‘set the stage’ he goes on to write, “where God is revealed through His Word [it is] in such a way as to be *entirely* distinguished from the images employed.”⁴⁰ He insists that in the biblical tradition images always belong *with* words, ‘and it is through the *word* that the images are made to signify or indicate that to which they point.’⁴¹

Of course, one must distinguish between an image and that which the image represents. The two are distinct. The description of the function of the image in this context as ‘paradigmatic’ is a helpful one⁴². I also agree that images can work *with* words. But the problems come, *both* with Torrance’s deep uncertainty about the sufficiency of images *and* his high confidence in imageless concepts. It seems that for Torrance where images fall short, concepts prevail and allow our thinking to penetrate the divine reality, and that when this is achieved the need for images is removed and they can be discarded. He writes, “It is this powerful element of word that makes us look through the images and hear past them to what God has to say, and to apprehend Him in

³⁶ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 19.

³⁷ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 19.

³⁸ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 20.

³⁹ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 20.

⁴⁰ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 20. My emphasis.

⁴¹ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 20. Torrance’s emphasis.

⁴² This is a term adopted by Garrett Green in a book addressing this theme. See Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989).

such a way that we do not have and are not allowed to have any imaginative or pictorial representation of Him in our thought.”⁴³

Torrance’s confidence in the word, over against his scepticism of image, appears to be posited on the conviction that, in respect of the divine reality, words can refer while images cannot. He writes “It is through this word that we are able ... to point away from the image to the reality it signifies”.⁴⁴ But I would contend that *both* word and image play an important role and that they have complementary, if not an equal, role to play.

Images and imagination

In *God and Rationality* Torrance states “the Word of God seizes our minds, sets up within their conceiving the force of its own rationality, and thus opens them to conceptual understanding of God.”⁴⁵ One can agree with Torrance here and affirm that our concepts might appropriately be conceived as malleable and responsive to the presence and power of God in human experience. But might not images operate responsively, also?

Torrance understands that what can be conceived does not necessarily correspond to a picture, and it would, indeed, be an error to hold that a thing is conceivable only if it is ‘picturable’. But this leads to the conclusion that images have no role – or a limited and dispensable role – *only if this is all that images can do*. The role of images includes that of ‘picturing’ but that does not exhaust the possibilities. One of the problems with Torrance’s engagement with this topic is that he does appear to work with an extremely narrow and wooden understanding of images. In responding to this it is important to make a distinction between images and imagination and to consider the kinds of relationship that might exist between them.

The power of imagination involves much more than the holding of mental pictures. Imaginative activity makes use of images – which may be understood as pictures – but while images may condition the function of the imagination they do not determine that function. It may be a problem if an image is particularly clear, or if it is fixed as in the case, for example, with icons. One of the important features of an image, if it is to function as an epistemological aid for penetrating reality, is that it is adaptable. This is because imagination is not really about images but those things to which images point.

Images may be adapted as the imagination does its work, and new images may be adopted. For example, a multiplicity of images may be

⁴³ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 20.

⁴⁴ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 20.

⁴⁵ Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). 22f.

used to 'pick out' various aspects of a reality. An obvious and particularly pertinent example is the multiplicity of images which are found in the Bible to depict God (father, warrior; shepherd, mother, etc.). The point is not that these images 'picture' God, but that they are suggestive of the characteristics of the God's being as he has made himself known. Nor need we take them to be projections of human ideas upon God. Rather, they are images, operative within the sphere of imaginative action, which are both adopted and adapted under the pressure of God as he reveals himself.

It is important to appreciate that Torrance does not believe that, in our conceptual understanding, we can fully grasp God. In the context of a discussion in which he distinguishes between *apprehending* and *comprehending* he writes: "In apprehending God we do not just grasp part of Him, for He is one and indivisible, but this does not mean that we can bring the totality of God within the compass of our comprehension. Apprehension is a grasping of God which does not exhaust His transcendent reality and mystery; but it is no less conceptual for that reason, since it is the form of conception rationally appropriate to His divine nature and majesty. Hence it does not follow from the fact that we are unable to give a precise conceptual definition of the reality of God that it cannot be conceptually grasped but may only be envisaged in some indefinite, non-conceptual way."⁴⁶

Despite the human limitation (in which we can assert our genuine apprehension of God while acknowledging our inability to comprehend him) Torrance's confidence in conceptual knowledge and deprecation of non-conceptual knowledge is in evidence. But it must be said his claim that conceptual apprehension of God 'is the form of conception rationally appropriate to His divine nature and majesty' is an assertion which can be challenged. Firstly, Torrance understands that the concepts derived from the apprehension of God are formed by the mind 'seized' by the presence of God in his self-revelation. But, while we seek to be true to God we undertake the task as fallible human agents working within the constraints of human language. This is a process which, presumably, yields conceptual formulations which not only fall short of full comprehension of God (which they must) but also reflect some degree of misapprehension in which the concepts fall short of authentic representation of the reality of God. The second point to be made is that, despite the negative tone which Torrance adopts in respect of non-conceptual 'envisionings', it may be that the non-conceptual has an important and authentic role to play in the knowledge of God and, consequently, this form of knowing may be a responsive participation in the reality of God. As such these 'non-conceptual ways' may be appropriate to God's divine nature and majesty and, rather than being 'indefinite' may be appropriately

⁴⁶ Torrance, *God and Rationality*. 22.

correlated to the experience of God's presence. This is, indeed, a point which I will seek to develop later in the paper.

It is noteworthy that Torrance, in an attempt to demonstrate the importance of concepts being 'open' rather than 'closed' (and therefore constantly open to revision under the pressure from the reality with which they are concerned), draws upon the figure of Christ as it is often portrayed in Byzantine art.⁴⁷ The point which Torrance draws from this image is focussed specifically upon the point at which its representational nature breaks down. It is the juxtaposing of the representational and the non-representational which provides the potential for the image to convey its theological point with such power. There is 'metaphorical' aspect at work here and this is something I will pursue in the final section of the paper.

Torrance's approach may be represented (only slightly unfairly) as 'word, good; image, bad'. At various junctures in his writings, he represents himself as being pitted against a powerful and aggressive theological foe which is determined to establish a theology built upon 'pictures' of God. Toward the end of *Theological Science* he writes, "we have to *struggle hard* against making perceptibility the criterion of truth, not least in our knowing and thinking about God. This is why theological knowledge which comes through hearing and is constructed on the basis of the Word is not at all easy for those who find themselves thinking *only* in pictorial images or plastic ideas."⁴⁸

But, one wonders, who does find themselves thinking of God *only* in pictorial images or plastic ideas? It is difficult to disagree with Torrance if his objection is only to this extreme case. But it seems that Torrance's concerns about the use of images in theology are much wider. I would contend that one of the main problems with Torrance's argument here is his failure to adequately appreciate the diversity of ways in which images function in the imagination.

Torrance's concern about images is indicative of a particular trait which has predominated with the Reformed tradition. This is the fear that images which in any way represent God may usurp God and become idols. What Torrance, and this tradition, does not take on board sufficiently is the metaphorical operation of images. Garrett Green insists that the religious imagination "does not 'image' God (i.e., construct some kind of picture of God) but *imagines* God (i.e., thinks of God according to a paradigm). The paradigmatic imagination

⁴⁷ See Torrance, *Theological Science*. 15. Torrance writes, "Frequently in Byzantine art the figure of Christ is portrayed standing on a dais which is so depicted that its lines are not made slightly to converge as the laws of perspective demand, but are, on the contrary, made to diverge so that when produced even to infinity they could never meet. The background is filled with gold, for it is only in this open perspective reaching out to a golden eternity that Christ may be truly conceived; He cannot be brought within a perspective in which the lines when produced meet at a point of finitude."

⁴⁸ Torrance, *Theological Science*. 279. My emphasis.

is not mimetic but analogical; it shows us not what God is but what God is like.”⁴⁹ Paradigmatic is a word that Torrance has used but it seems that he has not grasped its potential to resolve the problem which he regards as a great danger to faith and theology.

3. Knowledge in Science and the Arts

Having engaged with Torrance’s concerns about images I now want to broaden the discussion. Torrance has given his best efforts to constructing a *scientific* theology. In this section I will suggest that, while Torrance’s emphasis upon theology as science has its merits, it ought not to be emphasised to the exclusion of what might be called an *artistic* theology. I will suggest that what theology needs is an approach in which both scientific and artistic approaches are served. My complaint in this section of the paper will be that Torrance’s emphasis is too exclusively scientific in hue and that this overemphasis is organically related to his reluctance to embrace the authentic place of images in theology.

In this section of the paper I will draw on Roger J. Newell’s unpublished doctoral thesis⁵⁰ in which he compares and contrast the epistemological approaches of T. F. Torrance and C. S. Lewis, as representatives of approaches to theology which are ‘scientific’ and ‘artistic’ respectively.

‘Faith not sight’ or ‘touch and see’?

It is not surprising, given his view of images and pictures, that Torrance has little use for the parabolic teaching of Jesus found in the Gospels. It is indicative of his approach that he emphasises the biblical text ‘We walk by faith not by sight’⁵¹ rather than the text ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’⁵². In contrast to Torrance’s approach is that of C. S. Lewis. Newell writes, “The great appeal of Lewis’ writing, like the Medieval poets he praises, is in no small part due to the steadfast focus of his *eyes and ears* upon his subject matter. This emphasis is certainly appropriate for theological epistemology for the sensuous imagery of Scripture invites us to ‘taste and see’ God as well as hear true concepts. Images deepen our knowing into a whole which involves the child and poet as well as the philosopher and scientist.”⁵³

Newell, in proposing a complementary role for images and imageless concepts, claims that *both* “have the paradigmatic function to point

⁴⁹ Green, *Imagining God*. 93.

⁵⁰ Roger J. Newell, “Participatory Knowledge: Theology as Art and Science in C. S. Lewis and T. F. Torrance” (University of Aberdeen, 1983).

⁵¹ See 2 Corinthians 5:7.

⁵² Psalm 34:8.

⁵³ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 221. Newell’s emphasis.

away from themselves always to Christ, the Word made flesh.”⁵⁴ In drawing from the works of Torrance and Lewis Newell writes, “Conceptual maps such as the *homoousios* or the Trinity, or cognitive symbols such as Aslan⁵⁵ all in their respective ways, serve the truth. They are not ends in themselves. Audits and images are servants only. Neither symbol nor audit was the chosen vehicle by which God revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth.”⁵⁶ Newell offers a reminder that mathematical numerals, metaphors, images and imageless relations are all symbols which, in differing ways, refer thought to its object.⁵⁷ While it is important to be aware of the differences in the ways that these things function, the strong qualitative distinction which emerges in Torrance’s treatment of the theme must be questioned.

There are concepts which are imageless. Part of their utility is that they establish an analytical or mathematical precision which is unique to their function. This has a role – indeed a crucial role to play – in our thinking and knowledge of God. But Newell picks up Lewis’ understanding of the epistemological role of the imagination as providing the antecedent condition for truth and falsity. One does not establish a *definition* of an object through the operation of the imagination, “you rather get to know it as you get to know a smell or a taste, the atmosphere of a family or a village, or the personality of an individual”.⁵⁸ This has resonances with Polanyi’s understanding of tacit knowledge. It is *knowledge!* Lewis complains that philosophers and theologians will too often go on “explaining a thing, without knowing what it is”⁵⁹. The point here is that they have not established an imaginative grasp through an engagement with the concrete reality before wading into abstract analysis. Newell writes, “Abstract concepts rigorously define, but imaginative symbols fill in the outlines with qualitative and experiential attributes of the object which transcend formalization and are essential for communication.”⁶⁰

While image-less concepts can perform operations which images cannot, such image-less concepts can be articulated and developed to analytical precision only in the context established by an antecedent (tacit) imaginative engagement with that object.

The desire to understand the meaning of the words of Christ by the intellect alone is, according to Lewis, “like trying to bottle a sunbeam”.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 222.

⁵⁵ Aslan is the Christ-like lion character in Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*.

⁵⁶ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 222.

⁵⁷ See Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 222.

⁵⁸ C. S. Lewis quoted in Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 224.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 224.

⁶⁰ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 224. Lewis’ suggests a position very much in harmony with Polanyi’s understanding of the trans-logical role of the imagination as it draws upon tacit knowledge in establishing a tacit integration.

⁶¹ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 229.

Emotion and knowledge

In comparison with our imageless conceptual understandings our imaginative engagement with reality has great power to engage our emotions. Our emotions are not engaged by request or command but by provocation of the imagination. This is an important aspect of Jesus' parabolic teaching. The parables engage the hearer with an implicit invitation to participate, imaginatively, in the story that is being told. The hearer is not being asked to weigh propositions or evaluate concepts. It does not matter whether or not the story recounts actual events; what counts is its power to engage the imagination of the hearer in the story that it tells. It is not that the intellect is 'left behind' in the emotional engagement but that the intellectual response is prohibited from becoming detached from the emotional response. It is important that feeling, as well as thought, is properly co-ordinated with reality. Part of the genius of the parable is its capacity to sustain this co-ordination.

The precision of the *homoousion* as a conceptual statement cannot be matched by an image or sequence of images. The parable of the Prodigal Son, which makes a strongly related point, does not do so with the same precision but it does make its point with a greater potential to engage the emotions because it makes a fuller appeal to the imagination. Newell suggests, "To taste the Trinity in the prodigal son parable makes the formal doctrine a celebration."⁶² The point is not the superiority or inferiority of one with respect to the other but the complementarity of concept and image. "Both in their own way bear witness to reality as transparent mediums, pointing mind and heart to Christ."⁶³ Both images and concepts *point* to a reality. They point in different and complementary ways.

Newell makes the interesting suggestion that "The images are the building blocks; the theological concepts are the invisible grammatical mortar which holds the meaning together. The *homoousios* is the 'physical concept' which inherently indwells Father, Son and Spirit images."⁶⁴

Newell observes that there is a wealth of rich and sensuous imagery which is attached to the person of Christ in the New Testament ('bread of life', 'vine', 'bridegroom', 'the light of the world', 'living water', etc.) He asks, "Why are Biblical images so richly sensuous and varied when theology is normally content to discuss formulas which are rather limited and repetitive? Why are there so many sensuous images yet so few theoretical formulas to be believed?"⁶⁵ The answer is that no one

⁶² Newell, "Participatory Knowledge". 234.

⁶³ Newell, "Participatory Knowledge". 233.

⁶⁴ Newell, "Participatory Knowledge". 243.

⁶⁵ Newell, "Participatory Knowledge". 242. I do question whether Newell has this right. It seems the conceptual, doctrinal and credal statement abound.

image can be enough. Newell quotes Lewis who says of Christ that we are given “a dozen changing images correcting and relieving each other, lest the joy of his presence be too exclusively understood in a narrow, poor experience of personal love”.⁶⁶ Theological concepts are necessarily fewer because their function is to reveal the inner logic of the Gospel events with simplicity and clarity. Both seek to penetrate reality by placing themselves at the disposal of that reality. They work in their different ways but they both point away from themselves as they serve their purpose. Thus, in harmony with Torrance’s deepest convictions, we can embrace C. S. Lewis’ aphorism: ‘all reality is iconoclastic’.⁶⁷

Newell suggests that one way of distinguishing between concept and image in their complementary roles is to say that the former aids interpretation while the latter facilitates enjoyment. He writes, “The Church must both enjoy and interpret.”⁶⁸ The danger of an approach which denies due place to images in its pursuit of the knowledge of God – and this is certainly true of the Reformed church of which Torrance is a representative – is that its exposition of doctrine, while appealing to the intellect, fails to adequately engage the emotions. The consequences of this can be severe because, Newell claims, “It creates the psychological grounds for an existentialist revolt whereby man tries to fill his heart and mind with a self-understanding or a self-consciousness, which he substitutes for the truth which has been bottled and packaged into precise theological formula, but which has inadvertently been forbidden to taste, represent and celebrate.”⁶⁹ It is not surprising, given the proclivity of the Reformed church to place emphasis upon concept rather than image, that its central concern in worship is preaching as an interpretation of true doctrine. As a consequence the role of ritual, liturgy and the arts in worship has been a marginal one, if these things have been given any place at all. In such circumstances worship can be aridly word-based and head-centred and can be weak in fostering worship in which the whole person is involved.

In the precision of conceptual statements there is little or no capacity to attend to, address or facilitate an engagement with the sensuous and the emotional aspects of human life. Indeed one might say that, unaccompanied by images, such concepts can be profoundly detached from the experience of life. To speak of ‘our Father in heaven’ means something very concrete, while to speak of ‘a supreme being transcending space and time’ is what Newell calls “a dextrous use of counters.”⁷⁰ He also avers that “the symbolic, anthropomorphic ‘God is moved with bowels of compassion’ is epistemologically more

⁶⁶ Quoted in Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 243.

⁶⁷ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 253.

⁶⁸ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 245.

⁶⁹ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 245.

⁷⁰ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 245.

valuable than ‘God is an absolute being to which human attributes are inapplicable.’⁷¹

In a critical evaluation Newell asserts that “Torrance’s emphasis on imageless relations and cognitively precise theological concepts must be yoked with an equal emphasis on participation in the Biblical images and the reality to which they point, that is, imaginative participation by retelling, remembering and enjoying the Gospel events.”⁷²

Newell writes, “Theology must avoid any glimmer of the Hegelian conceit whereby the picture thinking of religion suitable for pupils in the primary stages is replaced by a pure imageless philosophy as the final truth to which we may progress.”⁷³ It is not clear that Torrance does so.

For Torrance the natural sciences (with a predominant emphasis upon physics) and the philosophy of science, as it has developed over the past century, provide a rich source of inspiration for the expression of his realist theology. As we have seen, he sustains a deep engagement with Polanyi’s thought but his books are also littered with references to Einstein (in particular), Clerk Maxwell, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, Eddington, von Weizsäcker, Popper, Kuhn, Toulmin, et al.⁷⁴ He writes, “It is natural that the dogmatic science of theology, in spite of the highly distinctive nature of its own subject-matter, should find somewhat congenial the altering framework of thought in the scientific world today”.⁷⁵ It is significant that the aspect of thought which he highlights – and which he believes has especial significance for theology – is what he claims to be its rejection of mental pictures. He asserts that modern science “works with thought-structures of a non-perceptual kind, demanding ... the exclusion of *all* mental pictures as distorting irrelevances.”⁷⁶ He continues, “It is through thought-structures of this kind derived from the biblical tradition that the Judaeo-Christian theology penetrates behind man’s childish fancies and observational abstractions to a knowledge of the indescribable and ineffable God.”⁷⁷

⁷¹ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 259.

⁷² Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 246.

⁷³ Newell, “Participatory Knowledge”. 247.

⁷⁴ I would make the suggestion that, in addition to the intrinsic methodological and epistemological issues which emerge in this context, Torrance also has an eye to the prestigious place the natural sciences occupy in the contemporary Western world, not least in popular opinion. He must be aware, no doubt at a number of levels, that his aspiration to establish theology as *science* is, in part, a desire to bolster the credibility of the discipline. I am not contending that this is illegitimate, only that this should be taken into account in a critical evaluation of his work.

⁷⁵ Torrance, *God and Rationality*. 102.

⁷⁶ Torrance, *God and Rationality*. 102. My emphasis. This is a most peculiar view of physics. It may well betray Torrance’s lack of engagement with, and knowledge of, the life of physics as a discipline rooted in physical reality.

⁷⁷ Torrance, *God and Rationality*. 102.

While it is undoubtedly the case the scientist believes the mathematical formula and not the picture, nevertheless the picture *does* have a crucial role for the scientist. Elsewhere, when his focus is upon the boundaries of science and discovery, Torrance approvingly quotes the words of de Broglie that "... some theoretical *picture* is always necessary for the clear statement of the results of an experiment".⁷⁸ Newell recalls that "Einstein consistently emphasizes the importance of idealized experiments for scientific discovery. Repeatedly he calls upon scientists to imagine and to worry later about verification."⁷⁹ This resonates with Polanyi's insight that it is the scientist's antecedent knowledge of the world, gained through sense and experience, which both facilitates and motivates scientific inquiry. In rejecting mental pictures as 'distorting irrelevances' in science Torrance overstates his case and makes an error in the sphere of the natural sciences which parallels the error he makes in theology: the rejection of the legitimate, life-engaging role of images.

It is in the combining of a scientific and artistic approach that theology will find its most authentic and robust articulation. As Newell observes, "Theology is a science, seeking to penetrate into the intrinsic rationality which inheres its object; equally, theology is an art which enjoys and communicates the affectional reality of the truth, goodness and beauty which inheres its Lord."⁸⁰

4. Metaphor, Art and Integration

In this final section of the paper I wish to look at the significance for the theme of the paper of Michael Polanyi's work, published in *Meaning*⁸¹, in which he explores the significance of his understanding of tacit integration for metaphor and an understanding of art.⁸² This development of Polanyi's earlier work demonstrates the ways in which meanings are established in the use of metaphor and this analysis is then extended to consider the establishment of meaning in art.

In Polanyi's earlier work he shows how the focal knowledge we achieve – the things of which we have an explicit awareness – is established through an integration of things that are known to us but of which we have only a tacit awareness.⁸³ This integration – even in what might

⁷⁸ Quoted in Torrance, *Theological Science*. 291. My emphasis.

⁷⁹ Newell, "Participatory Knowledge". 249.

⁸⁰ Newell, "Participatory Knowledge". 546.

⁸¹ Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*.

⁸² It might be noted that in the later chapters of *Meaning* Polanyi yet further extends his analysis to embrace the themes of myth and religion. It is my conviction that a number of problems attend this development although I do not have space here to state my criticisms. It is sufficient to note that the analysis in the earlier parts of *Meaning* contain insights which, I will argue, illuminate the limitations of Torrance's view of the place for images in theology.

⁸³ As Polanyi frequently points out, this knowledge may in some cases be rendered focal or explicit. The point is that in its function as a clue to what is focally known the knowledge of the 'clues' must be part of subsidiary awareness.

be regarded as cases of ‘simple perception’ – is an *imaginative* and *personal* act, the achievement of which cannot be reduced to strictly specifiable, logical operations. Of course, this ubiquitous integrative process requires vastly differing degrees of imagination in differing circumstances. For example, the imaginative co-efficient entailed in the recognition of an automobile can scarcely be compared with that involved in a significant invention, or scientific discovery. But, for Polanyi “*all* meaningful integrations (including those achieved in science) exhibit a triadic structure consisting of the subsidiary, the focal, and the person, and are thus inescapably *personal*.”⁸⁴ What this insight represents, in Polanyi’s opinion, is a movement to bridge the gulf that has been thought to separate scientific and humanistic knowledge and methods. He writes, “We now see that not only do the scientific and the humanistic both involve personal participation; we see that both also involve an active use of the imagination.”⁸⁵ Polanyi believes his analysis demands a major epistemological shift in which the active function of imagination is both recognised and acknowledged as a universal phenomenon. “That the various humanities are heavily entangled with the imagination has always been very clear to almost everyone; but that imagination has an essential role to play in science as well has rarely even been glimpsed.”⁸⁶

It is important to recognise that the theory which Polanyi is developing in his treatment of metaphor is an extension of his earlier work on the integrative process in human knowledge and is organically related to the fundamental contours of his epistemology. The exposition of Polanyi’s argument which I will offer here is an abbreviated one. Anyone interested in reading a fuller account is referred to the text.⁸⁷

The integrative imagination in metaphor

I want to turn my attention now to Polanyi’s understanding of metaphor and, in particular, the way in which he sees metaphor draws upon the life-context of those who use them. Polanyi works toward his analysis of metaphor by way of comparing and contrasting it with two other uses of language: simple designation and symbol.

In the case of simple designations the word which we use – ‘chair’, for example – indicates an object. Of course more could be said about this but the point which Polanyi makes, utilizing the categories of his epistemology, is that the word ‘chair’ functions as a subsidiary which bears on the focal object. When we use the word we do not think about the word but that which is indicated by the word. The point that Polanyi makes is that the word itself is of no intrinsic interest, it

⁸⁴ Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*. 64.

⁸⁵ Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*. 64.

⁸⁶ Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*. 64.

⁸⁷ See Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*. 66-107.

merely indicates that which is – the chair. Polanyi calls this a ‘self-centred’ integration since the integrative act moves from the self, which is at the centre of the process, to the object of the integration.

This is Polanyi’s first case. His second case is symbolism, and here the integrative process works in a significantly different way. In the case of a symbol the subsidiary clues *are* of intrinsic interest and do more than simply point to something else. Take, as Polanyi does, the example of a national flag. The flag can stimulate thoughts about place, belonging, national pride. In this case the flag, upon which we focus, has no intrinsic interest (it is just coloured cloth), but it calls to awareness a vast range of thoughts and feelings which embody what it means to us to belong to a nation. Polanyi writes, “this means that the meaning of the flag (the object of our focal attention) is what it is because we have put our whole existence into it. We have surrendered ourselves to that “piece of cloth” (which would be all the flag could be perceived to be were we to try to view it in the *indication* way of recognizing meaning).”⁸⁸. The symbol draws us in, and picks us up. Polanyi says that it ‘carries us away’.

The distinction between indication and symbol prepares us for Polanyi’s analysis of metaphor. Polanyi introduces some terminology to distinguish the two elements of the metaphor. He speaks of the ‘tenor’ and the ‘vehicle’. For example, in the metaphor ‘his mind was a raging sea’ the tenor is ‘his mind’ and the vehicle is ‘a raging sea’. The power or effectiveness of the metaphor is in the bringing together of two disparate elements. The tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor are both intrinsically interesting and the ‘work’ of the metaphor is in the interaction of the two elements as they are juxtaposed and brought into creative tension in the imagination. The potential of this interaction derives from the fact that both elements are rich with associated thoughts and feelings. Polanyi explains that “As in the symbol, so in the metaphor: the subsidiary clues – consisting of all those inchoate experiences in our own lives that are related to the two parts of the metaphor – are integrated into the meaning of a tenor and a vehicle as they are related to each other in a focal object (the metaphor). The result is that a metaphor, like a symbol, carries us away, embodies us in itself, and moves us deeply as we surrender ourselves to it.”⁸⁹

It is not possible to say exactly what the metaphor ‘means’ because its ‘meaning’ is an imaginative integration which draws upon a myriad of subsidiary clues. Nevertheless they do have the power to disclose something new or bring to greater clarity something already known. As Janet Soskice observes, “The interesting thing about metaphor , or at least about some metaphors, is that they are used not to redescribe

⁸⁸ Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*. 72f.

⁸⁹ Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*. 78f.

but to disclose for the first time. The metaphor has to be used because something new is being talked about.”⁹⁰

Jeremy Begbie suggests that “for Polanyi it is clear that metaphors are quite capable of being vehicles of cognitive content, means by which we gain epistemic access to the world.”⁹¹ He also quotes the words of Richard Boyd who describes metaphor as one of the many devices “to accomplish the task of the accommodation of language to the causal structure of the world.”⁹²

What is abundantly clear is that a metaphor is rooted, albeit tacitly, in the forms of life in which the interpreter of the metaphor participates. This implies that it can gain ‘purchase’ on reality by virtue of being used in the context which is appropriate to it. The meaning of a metaphor clearly cannot be abstracted from all those inchoate experiences in which it is rooted. It is the tacit knowledge of these things which provides the very possibility for an imaginative tacit integration – which is the meaning of the metaphor.

Integrative possibilities of art

Having followed Polanyi along the path he has chosen to explicate the function of metaphor I will continue to follow him as he moves on to expand and develop his epistemological understanding of imaginative, tacit integration in the field of art. What becomes apparent in this development is that Polanyi sees something very like the imaginative, integrative processes which work in metaphor (which is normally associated with language) operating in art.

Polanyi’s study of art includes painting, sculpture, stagecraft and poetry. He starts by asking why it might be possible to speak of ‘truth’ in art when it is obvious that the stories that it tells us are not ‘true’. So, for example, when on the stage we witness a murder our reaction is not at all the same as it would have been had we experienced a murder on the street outside the theatre. Polanyi suggests that there is a parallel, here, with what is happening in a metaphor. In a metaphor we say one thing while meaning something else. Similarly, we know that what is depicted as a murder on the stage is not in fact a murder. We know this because the event happens on the stage in a theatre. Polanyi employs the argument of I. A. Richards in suggesting that the stage (as with the frame of a painting) ‘brackets-off’ the event from ordinary experience. We do not say ‘this is only a pretence of murder so it should be discarded’ (as we do not reject the painting of flowers in a vase because we discern that they are not ‘real’), but seek to establish the meaning of what has happened. The ‘frame’ is one of

⁹⁰ Quoted in Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991). 238

⁹¹ Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise*. 238.

⁹² Quoted in Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise*. 238f.

the subsidiary clues in determining this meaning, the other is (whether a play, a painting or a sculpture) the representative element within it. And the murder *does* have a meaning as part of the plot of the play as it is enacted on the stage (quite distinct from the meaning which might attach to witnessing a real murder). These subsidiaries of 'frame' and representation are fused into a meaning by an imaginative integration in a way that parallels the imaginative integration of tenor and vehicle in metaphor. It is also important to say that art, like metaphor, is not just another way of saying something; it can be a new way of saying something that has not hitherto been said, and/or presenting something which has not yet been seen.

Like the elements of a metaphor the work of art draws from the rich stores of the diffuse inchoate experiences and emotions of our life. So, as we seek to appreciate the work of art, we juxtapose ourselves (and our experience of life in all its complex diversity) with that which is offered to us by the artist. We surrender ourselves to the work of art as we do to the symbol or the metaphor.

In art – as for metaphor and symbol – the task of imaginative integration necessarily draws upon the rich and diverse resources drawn from our experience of life with all of its complexity in thought and its feeling. Consequently it is not just the words but the people involved in the writing and reading of the words who establish the meaning of the metaphor. Similarly it is not the works of art that have meaning; the meaning must be connected to the lives of those who have created them and the lives of those enjoy – and extend and enrich their engagement and participation in life through them.

Art and the Reformed Tradition

This account of the creation, function and appreciation of art is not, to say the least, one which would resonate with the tone and inclinations of the Reformed tradition of the Christian church. Begbie makes the tart comment that "It is all too easy to castigate totalitarian regimes for their repressive attitude to the arts, and forget that some Christians have scored no better by insisting that beyond the confines of the liturgy, only a kind of artistic evangelical propaganda could ever qualify for divine approval."⁹³ He goes on to make a point about the relationship of art to truth when he writes, "in the Protestant West, the representative arts are frequently seen as a kind of ornament, a decorative substitute for what can be plainly stated, a colourful wrapping to attract peoples' attention, dispensable when the 'real' truth appears elsewhere in the service (usually in the sermon)."⁹⁴

⁹³ Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*. 248.

⁹⁴ Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*. 248.

One of the things which emerges in Polanyi's analysis of the arts is a point which I have been trying to make throughout this paper. A work of art, a sculpture, or a play may have a representative component; indeed, it may have a particularly strong representative quality to it but, while this is important – while it represents a crucial subsidiary component – its meaning cannot be reduced to this representative component without disregarding what it is supposed to be *as a work of art*.

Returning to the theme of images, it is clear from the argument which has been set forth in this section of the paper, that there is every reason to suppose that the function of images in Christian life and theology can be a creative one which can be used in the service of a clearer and surer vision and grasp of the invisible God. There is no reason to suppose that that the function of an image of God is to project upon God a fixed vision of what must be rooted in – and limited to – the ideas, shapes and forms of our own human devising.

Conclusions

In the first section of this paper I attempted to show something of Torrance's very considerable interaction with the thought of Michael Polanyi. Torrance finds in Polanyi an ally in science from whom he can borrow and adapt important and distinctive epistemological insights which extend and enhance his critically realistic theology. I am not aware of any other theologian whose engagement with Polanyi is as full as Torrance's and there is much for theologians to learn from this.

In the second and third sections of the paper I raised some concerns about Torrance, both in the way in which he contrasts the roles of images and concepts and in his exclusive focus on (what he regards as) *scientific* theology. One of the weaknesses of his approach is its failure to give due place to what I have called an *artistic* theology in which the place of emotion in human knowledge is afforded adequate recognition.

Torrance places epistemic priority on hearing over seeing (or, indeed, touching, tasting and smelling) because he runs with the idea that words are able to 'make contact' with the invisible God in a unique way. He thinks that in our hearing of God's word our concept forming functions are seized by God and shaped according to their true Object. This seems to imply a knowledge of God which essentially bypasses our humanity, notwithstanding the need for concepts to be expressed in human language.

In response to this I show – through an exposition of Polanyi's understanding of tacit integration in metaphor, and his extension of this in his discussion of meaning in art – that in all of these

integrations, including the linguistic and the artistic, we draw upon the rich and diverse sources of tacit knowledge embedded in our life-contexts – our ways of life and practice.

In view of this I would make two final concluding points. Firstly, Torrance's 'one-dimensional' view of images as things which simply 'picture' is inadequate. It must be recognised that images are adopted, adapted and maybe discarded in the dynamic process of the human imagination. The imagination can, of course, function in such a way as to project an ideal reality (which is a danger for theology), but it can also work responsively and in faithfulness to the reality with which it seeks to grapple. Secondly, I would challenge Torrance's view that concepts, because they are word-based, can legitimately refer to God while images cannot. The epistemic function of images and concepts is not as fundamentally distinct as Torrance supposes. All human knowledge derives from human ways of knowing. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation should make anyone who embraces it cautious of any approach to theology which privileges any one sense over the others.

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