

# CHRIST AND THE COSMOS



By Richard Kirby  
Part 3 of 4

## SERMON FOR SUNDAY 23RD SEPTEMBER, 2007

**Place Written:** London, UK

**Theory:** Torrance develops the significance of relationality as being that it is fully understandable only in the context of personalistic thought. Reviewing what he calls the immense change in the orientation and character of human thought that the introduction of the concept of person brought about, he mentions the change from a basically impersonal mode of thinking to a personal mode, and from an impersonal to a personal conception of reality. This can be traced solely, Torrance thinks, to the Christian religion, and in particular to the doctrine of the Incarnation and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

The addition of the concept of person to ontology has important consequences. Torrance describes these. It is personal relations which best describe the structure of reality itself, therefore the model of the personal agent must be primary in our attempt to think intelligibly of God, rather than the impersonal model of the detached observer over against the object, with its unbridgeable gulf between subject and object, which has returned to exercise so much influence in our Western thought since Descartes. In contrast, the effect of Christianity is to replace the impersonal *Id* with the intensely personal *Ego Sum* of the living God, but this brings the Christian faith into intense conflict with the ancient impersonalism which still exercises considerable, if inertial force, in sensitive areas of our culture and way of life.

**Purpose:** God's personal self-communication strikes into the innermost centre of human being. When it does so, it has the result of personalizing it, for God is the "one personalizing Person". God is the "creative source of all our personal relations with him and among ourselves"

## Part 2

### Section 2: CHRIST AND THE SCIENCE OF BEING: THE ONTOLOGY OF T.F. TORRANCE

It is in the *Person of Christ* that T.F. Torrance finds the living link between the order which characterizes ultimate reality, and the nature of being. As God's Act and Being are one (GGT, pp. 151ff.),<sup>1</sup> so in Him Being and Order are likewise unified. In the cosmos, participating as it does in the (contingent) order of creation, there is a derivative intelligibility which reflects the contingency of the cosmos upon God, and – bearing the mark or impress of the Creator – displays a comparably profound integration of order and being. The cosmic order has an ontological dimension, and ontology must address itself to the order of being, the order characterizing the contingent nature of the creation.

It is in the Person of Christ, the Person characterized by the *hypostatic union*, that Torrance finds the key to divine and cosmic order and the relation between them. The incarnation of the Son or Word constitutes the epistemological centre in all our knowledge of God, with a centre in our world of space and time and a centre in God himself at the same time (GGT, p. 165). Similarly, Christ is the ontological centre of the divine and the cosmic reality. Section I of this chapter has dealt with Torrance's ideas about the order of the cosmos; this second part addresses the complementary subject of ontology. The partnership of these two topics can provide basic materials for a basic theological description of the cosmos from the viewpoint of the Christian faith.

#### 2.1 Ontology in relation to cosmology

T.F. Torrance has written of the profound recovery of ontology in the wake of Einstein's achievement. Christian theology, contributing to the resultant dialogue with science on the nature of being, has its own contribution to make on the subject of ontology. Torrance's concern has been to define this in terms of *relational* ontology.

To describe contemporary relational ontology is to enter deeply into specifically Christian rather than philosophical ontology. The *fons et origo* of the whole area of contemporary ontology is of course – or should be – the Christian doctrine of God, for the relationally triune Being of God is the source, the Trinitarian essence and theologically speaking the truth about the nature of Being.

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<sup>1</sup> The key to these abbreviations can be found [here](#).

To attempt to describe relational ontology is to trace a theological movement from the Christian doctrine of God, the doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity, into the web of theological concepts which make up the dogmatic structure of contemporary systematics. Torrance, even when studying the meaning of scientific cosmology, does not lose sight of these roots of ontology in the Christian doctrine of God (GGT, chapter 6, pp. 146ff.).

We are, however, in this chapter not only discussing the systematic theology of the Holy Trinity; we are also considering issues within the doctrine of Creation, or at its margins. One of these issues is the need for the development of theological doctrine in the contemporary understanding of the *relationality of disorder*, as in the case of sin and suffering (cf. chapter 5 herein) as part of the elucidation of cosmic disorder theologically defined.<sup>2</sup>

Many theologians have been working on the Christian development of ontology in recent years, but the research presented in this study has focused on the work of T.F. Torrance, and it is his contribution to which this report is essentially restricted. One of Torrance's central instruments of thought in presenting his concept of relational ontology is the development of the concept of the person.<sup>3</sup> This is of great importance in the theological definition of the contingent nature of the (human and non-human creation), and requires a thorough exposition.

## **2.2 The concept of the Person in Christian ontology**

One of his Torrance's most recent presentations of this subject is to be found deeply embedded in the climax of the argument of his major text, Reality and Scientific Theology (1985). This well-known book is one of the more recent contributions to the series edited by T.F. Torrance himself, "Theology and Science at the Frontiers of Knowledge". The final chapter presents the Torrance position on the "Trinitarian Structure of Theology".

Although this begins with an account of Einstein's conception of physical science, it moves on to a discussion of the knowledge of the Trinity. It is here, in a comparison of the thought on this subject of Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, that the significance of *onto-relational thought* (RST, p. 168) is asserted by Torrance.

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<sup>2</sup> We shall, however, return to a more detailed study of Torrance's development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the last chapter, where it is shown to be the summit, though also the foundation, of his doctrine of God and therefore of his attempt at theological cosmology.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Zizioulas, "The Doctrine of the Trinity: The Cappadocian Contribution", in Trinitarian Theology Today, ed. C.E. Gunton & C. Schwoebel (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), on the concept of the person.

Torrance's analysis of St. Augustine's teaching leads him to offer both appreciation and criticism of this teaching. In the appreciation, he declares that the basic problem, as seen by St. Augustine, was how to distinguish the terms "Father", "Son" and "Holy Spirit" from their pretheological use, and therefore how to interpret them without being ensnared in the primitive images associated with those terms in our everyday life and thought. That is to say, he had to carry through a theological refinement of the basic concepts "Father", "Son" and "Spirit" while remaining within the frame of experience of God which demanded their employment. His other problem was how to conceive the unity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit without detracting from the distinctive reality of the three Persons who are mutually and coeternally interrelated in the Trinity, while all the time giving utmost respect to the transcendent, ineffable mystery of God which cuts off any possibility of an abstract-essentialist or a logico-analytical approach to an understanding of the Holy Trinity.<sup>4</sup>

According to Torrance's interpretation, St. Augustine attempted to meet his problems, in part at least, with the Nicene principle of "consubstantiality". This allowed him not only to hold that there is a relation of indivisible oneness in being between what God is toward us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and what he is eternally in himself, and vice versa, but also to hold that the Father *is* the property of being "father", the Son *is* the property of being "son" and the Holy Spirit *is* the property of being "spirit". That is to say, says Torrance, the so-called "attributes" of "father", "son" and "spirit" predicated of God as his properties are fundamentally rethought in *onto-relational* terms.<sup>5</sup>

Later in this chapter, Torrance goes on to develop the significance of relationality as being that it is fully understandable only in the context of personalistic thought. Reviewing what he calls the immense change in the orientation and character of human thought that the introduction of the concept of person brought about, he mentions the change from a basically impersonal mode of thinking to a personal mode, and from an impersonal to a personal conception of reality. This can be traced solely, Torrance thinks, to the Christian religion, and in particular to the doctrine of the Incarnation and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. All italics in the original.

The addition of the concept of person to ontology has important consequences. Torrance describes these. It is personal relations which best describe the structure of reality itself, therefore the model of the personal agent must be primary in our attempt to think intelligibly of God, rather than the impersonal model of the detached observer over against the object, with its unbridgeable gulf between subject and object, which has returned to exercise so much influence in our Western thought since Descartes.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the effect of Christianity is to replace the impersonal *Id* with the intensely personal *Ego Sum* of the living God, but this brings the Christian faith into intense conflict with the ancient impersonalism which still exercises considerable, if inertial, force in sensitive areas of our culture and way of life.

But be that as it may, the concept of the person, and of personal relations in God, Torrance asserts, demands of us fuller consideration than we have given it hitherto. God's personal self-communication strikes into the innermost centre of human being. When it does so, it has the result of personalizing it,<sup>7</sup> for God is the "one personalizing Person". God is the "creative source of all our personal relations with him and among ourselves" (RST, p.174).<sup>8</sup>

This line of thought, says Torrance, was not taken by St. Augustine, for "he had the habit of interiorizing his thought so that it became turned in upon itself thereby damaging its transcendental function in relation to the triune God. St. Augustine's rather psychological interiorizing approach to the truth involved looking for it in the depths of his own spiritual being." This has the result that St. Augustine needed to "fall back upon some sort of ontologistic participation by the light of the human mind in the Light of God".<sup>9</sup> This was the "theory of illumination". It evoked the critical reaction of St. Thomas.

We are warned by Torrance of the dangers of an inadequate concept of the person. If we are to continue to develop Christian ontology as a matter of personal relations constituting being, it is clearly important to consider some of the dimensions of the concept of person. For in this way we can not only identify the present strengths of the concept, but also see desirable future developments in the concept of the person.

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<sup>6</sup> It may be that an approach from the thought-world of quantum physics rather than, essentially from that of relativity theory would give a very different starting-point for the problem of the observer. Cf. J.C. Polkinghorne, The Quantum World.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to inquire what it would mean to personalize scientists.

<sup>8</sup> This raises the question of the kind of cosmology which does Justice to the theological reality of Person-al Cosmos look like? A Cosmos of or for Persons, to be defined theologically, would require the foundation of a Trinitarian cosmology. See chapters 6-7 below.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

For example, it was according to Boethius, in the sixth century, that “person is the individual substance of rational nature.” This is a concept of person which was logically derived, according to Torrance, from the notion of universal substance. What are the problems of this concept of person? It is, Torrance says, particular and restrictive, for the person is characterised as the isolated individual, the “atom”, so to speak, of rational being or nature. For this reason Boethius’s concept of person is an impersonal one! (RST, p. 175). Further, when one adds to it, as indeed happened in the history of thought, the idea of an individual centre of consciousness, and of self-consciousness, not to speak of self-expression and self-fulfilment and similar ideas, many problems naturally result.

This is because “the person” is defined here in terms of its own separate self. Though such a definition would be delusory, in theological terms, it leads to a (false) concept of the person in terms of what Torrance terms “its cut-off particularity and private individuality.” The theology of personhood substitutes onto-relational concepts, some of them still under development,<sup>10</sup> for these atomistic ideas of particularity and individuality. Torrance asserts that an approach to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity upon these lines could only have the effect, and did actually have the effect, of throwing into a hard logical form, the typically Western and Latin doctrine which started from one divine essence or substance. This distanced it even further from the Greek patristic approach. The latter had as its starting-point the doctrine of God the Father and the coeternal and consubstantial communion of Persons as the ineffable Trinity. Apart from that, however, he tells us, the restrictive concept of person thus reached is very difficult to apply to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in their wholly interpenetrating or “perichoretic” relations.

#### [Part 4](#)

**Sermon Word Total:** 1,834

**Meditation Seed Thought:** God is the “creative source of all our personal relations with him and among ourselves”

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. C. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 71.