



Pseudo Problems in Christian Theology: T. F. Torrance's View of Space as a Case Study

Dick Osita Eugenio

Wesleyan University, Philippines
doeugenio@wesleyan.edu.ph

Abstract

As a scientific theologian, Thomas F. Torrance advocated for an objective approach to theologizing. He was weary of approaching the contents of divine revelation out of a center in philosophy, culture, or the self. For him, an imposition to theology from without creates problems to theological content. This article focuses on his analysis of the Greek understanding of space that became the underlying—and unspoken—presupposition of early heretics that led them to advocate Christological profanity. Using qualitative content analysis as research design, the article scoured through Torrance's own writings and secondary literature to present Torrance's critique of philosophical theology and his own theological alternative. Greater emphasis, however, was given to primary sources so that Torrance's own position is faithfully presented. The study is sympathetic to Torrance's proposal that Christian theology may avoid doctrinal and theological problems if theologians interpret divine realities *kata physin*. Using the concept of space as an illustration, both in the past and the present, if both biblical and theological scholarships operate within cultural-philosophical categories and not from a center in the Gospel *datum* taken at face value, problems that are not supposed to be there surface. Theologizing becomes circularly self-collapsing once prevailing popular and cultural worldviews are uncritically assimilated and accepted.

Keywords: postmodern theology; contextual theology; Torrance; space; philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Thomas F. Torrance's general negative attitude towards philosophical theology, or any approach to theology derived from sources other than the objective and Self-authenticating Truth of

the Gospel, is well-expressed throughout his writings.¹ He was thoroughly consistent about this. Guided by a *kata physin* approach to theological formulation, he argued for a dogmatic theology in which the nature of the object under investigation

¹ Thomas F. Torrance, "Ecumenism and Rome," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37 (1984): 59-64; Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in*

Reconciliation: Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West (reprint; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997).

determines the appropriate methods and tools to produce real and objective knowledge. This *scientific theology*, based from the German term *Wissenschaft*, or “a rigorous and disciplined inquiry of the object according to its unique nature,” is not new in Christian theology.² The Alexandrian school of the early church espoused an *episteme dogmatike* which is an approach “to know things... in accordance with their truth or reality (*kat’ aletheian*) and thus to think and speak truly (*alethos*) of them.”³ Ethical epistemology requires this. By allowing the nature of reality being known to guide the knowing process, the knower exudes respect to the object by not devising improper investigative procedures that potentially lead to awkward conclusions.

For Torrance, the approaches espoused by contextual theologians, in which philosophical and cultural considerations are intentionally employed to understand and interpret divine revelation, poses many problems to the objectivity of truth.⁴ This article looks into this. It explains Torrance’s position by looking at how the dominant Greek understanding of space became the

philosophical reason for the Christological conflicts of the fourth century. Through this, readers hopefully consider critical realism as a better epistemological position over subjective foundationalism. With reference to Torrance’s theology, this paper aims to present an instance of the tension between Gospel-oriented and cultural-philosophical ways of thinking in understanding the God-world relation in Christ by looking at the concept of space. It will be made evident that in both the past and the present, these two approaches lead to different conclusions. Towards the conclusion of this paper, a way forward for Christian theology in general will be offered, considering the particular challenges and problems that are actually avoidable if Christian theology remains *theological*.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study is essentially descriptive in orientation. It employs content analysis, a qualitative research design that systematically analyses and interprets the content of written texts and documents.⁵ It is a structured and objective approach that

² Rodney D. Holder, “Thomas Torrance: Science, Theology, and the Contingent Universe,” *Participatio* 7 (2017): 27-48.

³ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 51.

⁴ See Eric Flett, Andrew Picard, and Myk Habets, “Christ and Culture: Toward a Contextual

Theology,” in *Evangelical Calvinists*, vol. 2, *Dogmatics and Devotion*, eds. Myk Habets and Bobby Grow (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 221-240.

⁵ Philipp Mayring, *Qualitative Content Analysis: Theoretical Foundation, Basic Procedures and Software Solutions* (Austria: Klagenfurt, 2014).

examines and understands the characteristics, themes, patterns, and meanings within available data.⁶ In humanities, interpretative and qualitative content analysis are preferred over basic content analysis because the former studies both context and latent content.⁷ The advantages of content analysis are its objectivity and reliability, since categories and themes naturally emerge during analysis. Second, content analysis is perfect for analyzing a large amount of data. Third, writers have more flexibility especially in choosing excluded and included data in the presentation. This study employs a qualitative content analysis and follows a deductive procedure in presenting data.⁸

In this study, the primary source of content are the writings of Reformed theologian Thomas F. Torrance (1913-2007). Given that he died two decades ago, most of the sources in this study have been published in the second half of the twentieth century. However, this is unavoidable, since to truly represent his original thoughts require allusions to his own writings. Although secondary writings are important and have been consulted, the researcher

prioritized Torrance's own views over interpretations of his views.⁹

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Torrance discerns two forms, strong and weak, of impositions to theology that need to be rejected for theology to be truly *theo-logical*. In its strong form, the theologian espouses a Procrustean theological bed through which theological formulations, statements, and conclusions are thereby consciously or unconsciously molded. Like his mentor Karl Barth, Torrance is anxious that theology has become diluted due to theologians' careless decisions in allowing external sources—particularly secular philosophy and culture—with their inherent rationality and logic, to assume control in theological formulation. When the familiar dictates theological formulation, theology loses its evangelical and revelatory function. Torrance referred to this as mythological thinking, or “thinking from a subjective centre in ourselves, in which we project our fabricated patterns and ideas upon the divine Reality and will accept only what we can conceive in terms of what we already

⁶ Mariette Bengtsson, “How to Plan and Perform a Qualitative Study Using Content Analysis,” *NursingPlus Open* 2 (2016): 8-14.

⁷ James W. Drisko, Tina Maschi, *Content Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2016), viii.

⁸ Drisko and Maschi, *Content Analysis*, ix; Ulla

H. Graneheim, Britt-Marie Lindgren, Berit Lundman, “Methodological Challenges in Qualitative Content Analysis: A Discussion Paper,” *Nurse Education Today* 56 (2017): 29-34.

⁹ Drisko and Maschi, *Content Analysis*, ix-x.

know or what fits in with our own prior self-understanding.”¹⁰ This way of thinking has a lengthy history, and it may be related to Platonic epistemology. For Plato, knowing is not so much learning new truths previously unknown by the student. Rather, knowing involves an *anamnesis*, or remembering truths forgotten by the soul when it transmigrated to the physical body and which lies dormant until re-discovered. In the words of Kierkegaard, there is an assumed “Socratic religiousness” in humanity. The truth is not from without, but is all the while, within. Truth is not received; it is achieved. Truth therefore should not be received in shock and anxiety.

Where the controlling center is not given to any philosophical or cultural framework, in its weak form, a so-called Archimedean point is assumed, supposedly to ensure objectivity by starting from a detached position. This is equally problematic. To suppose that a neutral arbiter of genuine knowledge exists to validate truth claims is a modernistic ideology that truth can be verified

objectively by an independent, unaffiliated body free of any agenda or commitments to any existing body of knowledge. No respectable intellectual in any field of study, especially in the natural and social sciences, will agree to this. Postmodern and postliberal thinkers like George Lindbeck would argue that all knowledge and interpretations are community-based.¹¹ One has to belong to a community, with its existing hermeneutical principles and practices, before genuine knowledge of a thing may happen. Philosopher of science Michael Polanyi successfully argued that knowledge is always personal, which means that subjective engagement is unavoidable.¹² In short, knowing cannot happen in absolute detachment from the object known. Torrance’s distinction between subjectivism and subjectivity is important in this discussion. Subjectivism, which finds its philosophical basis in Cartesian epistemology, argues that realities may be known only because of existing presuppositions held by the knowing agent, like that of Kantian a priorism. As a critical realist, Torrance

¹⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (reprint; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 46; Torrance, *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed AD 381* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1981), 114-117.

¹¹ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

¹² S. Haack, “Personal or Impersonal Knowledge? *Journal of Philosophical*

Investigations 13 (2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3503068>; T. Dillern, “The Act of Knowing: Michael Polanyi Meets Contemporary Natural Science.” *Foundations of Science* 25 (2020): 573-585; R. Gimple, “Contact with Reality: Michael Polanyi’s Realism and Why It Matters,” *Evangelical Quarterly: An International Review of Bible and Theology* 92 (2021): 92-94

rejects this.¹³ Subjectivity, on the other hand, maintains the extrinsic nature of the object of knowledge¹⁴ while affirming that a personal element is always involved in the act knowing. The difference between subjectivism and subjectivity is that the former emphasizes a subjective starting point while the latter underscores subjective participation. For Torrance, what is crucial is the active engagement of the knower with the object known, not existing pre-conceptions that effectively manipulate knowledge creation. After all, Torrance writes:

It must not be forgotten that only a person is capable of self-criticism and of distinguishing what he knows from his subjective states, and therefore of appreciating the bearing of human thought upon experience. In fact, it is only a person who can engage truly in objective and scientific operations . . . any scientific inquiry pursued in a detached, impersonal, formalistic way isolates itself from man's higher faculties and thereby restricts its range and power of insight and understanding.¹⁵

Torrance notes that this single-problem-with-two-manifestations, is not new in Christian theology, and has plagued even the early church. The only difference between the early church and the church today is the former's theological triumph and the latter's defeat.¹⁶ To help the church to victory, the church then needs to recover the scientific character of theology, in which dogmatic and doctrinal formulations are guided by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or by "the logic of grace."¹⁷ In light of this, Torrance admits in an interview with John I. Hesselink that his whole work embodies an inherent concern "to evangelize the foundations, so to speak, of scientific culture, so that a dogmatics can take root in that kind of structure."¹⁸ His desire, in short, is a similar Christianization of Hellenism that was accomplished by the early church fathers. This is important, Torrance asserts, because the calling of theologians, then and now, is to be "evangelists of culture...resisting secularization."¹⁹

¹³ Travis M. Stevick, "The Function of Scientific Theology in the Thought of T. F. Torrance," *Participatio* 7 (2017): 60-68.

¹⁴ See Alexander J. D. Irving, "What Does Athens Have to Do with Edinburgh? Can an Immanent-Realist View of Universals Help Us Understand T. F. Torrance's Conception of Reality?" *Participatio* 7 (2017): 71-98.

¹⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Belfast: Christian Journals, 1980), 61-62.

¹⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Transformation & Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge* (Grand

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), vi.

¹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 37-41; Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1969), 128-133.

¹⁸ John I. Hesselink, "A Pilgrimage in the School of Faith: An Interview with T. F. Torrance," *Reformed Review* 38 (1984): 60.

¹⁹ Michael Bauman, "Thomas F. Torrance," in *Roundtable: Discussions with European Theologians*, edited by Michael Bauman (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 114.

Greek Cosmological and Spatial Perspectives

The early church fathers, Torrance writes, theologized in a world where the prevailing worldview was dualistic.²⁰ In fact, cosmological dualism is probably the single perception that different early Greek philosophical traditions have in common. For instance, amidst the differences in the abstract and metaphysical philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoic philosophers, they all espoused the separation between the intelligible realm and the sensible realm, although they expressed it in different ways or arrived to it from different vantage points. Plato's metaphysics, in speculating on the origin and nature of physical existence, distinguished between eternal forms and material appearances, and while this distinction is a matter of ontology in one level, on another it assumed a spatial *chorismos* between the *kosmos noetos* and the *kosmos aisthetos*, where the forms and appearances dwell, respectively. Then, although Aristotle reversed the ontological primacy from Plato's forms to concrete individual entities, there still remained in his philosophy the distinction between the sensible world of experience and the timeless intelligible world that provides the

basis of the rationality and intelligibility of the universe. In general, then, Greek philosophy is trapped within this cosmological dualistic framework.

Along with the radical cosmological and ontological dualism in Greek philosophy, the whole of Greek thought yielded a receptacle or container notion of space.²¹ In as early as Pythagoras (ca. 500 BC), space is already identified as a sphere, different from matter, as that in which movement, activity, and existence occur. Space is regarded as possessing both metaphysical and physical properties. Firstly, space is perceived as something like an infinite void. Secondly, apart from this metaphysical property, space has the physical property of setting limits to realities, especially those with tangible materiality. Space thus possesses a constraining power over entities ensconced within. To be in space is to be limited. This conception is probably most evident in Plato. When he made the distinction between the intelligible world of being and the sensible world of becoming, or between the eternal model (forms) and the created copy (appearances), it became necessary to account for the possibility of becoming, so he postulated a passive medium in which generation takes place: "a receptacle and a

²⁰ Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 47.

²¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T

Clark, 1995), 290; Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation* (reprint; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 4.

nurse of all becoming.”²² This “receptacle” has in itself no shape, and its function is only to provide a *situation* for whatever comes into being.²³ In a sense, space is that which bridges the chasm between the intelligible and sensible worlds, because it is through this “birthing clinic” that appearances are conceived from the eternal forms.

Aristotle's view of space is slightly different from Plato's, although similar characteristics are evident. Because Aristotle stressed the primacy of concrete individual existence, he postulated his view of space in light of the concrete existence and movements of bodies. Essentially, in addition to Plato's view of space as a container of entities, Aristotle added that space actually exercises a certain force or causal activity. He then distinguished between *space* and *place*: space is “the continuous quantitative whole filled with matter, but that limited part of it which is occupied by a body is said to be its place, or its position in space.”²⁴ This is a receptacle notion of space in which there is a relation of interdependence between the container and its contents—something that is alien to Plato. In the end, however, Aristotle's overall view of space is no different from Plato's receptacle or container view.

The Stoic view of space is an improvement from Plato's and Aristotle's views. Torrance assesses the Stoic view to be somewhat near the Hebraic principle, where the notion of space is thought of not from the side of the container but from the side of the body contained.²⁵ This is in line with the Stoic view of bodies as the active principle of the universe and the source of motion and activity, so that space has to be thought out as the function of body in its movement and activity. Torrance writes: “Space was thus conceived not in terms of the limits of a receptacle but in terms of body as an agency creating room for itself and extending through itself, thus making the cosmos a sphere of operation and place.”²⁶ It would have been great if the Stoics stopped speculating here. But because the Stoics distinguished between three different spaces: void (*kenon*), place (*topos*), and room (*chora*) – building from Aristotle's distinction between *space* and *place* – the receptacle notion of space still lurked. This is particularly the case when the Stoics defined the *void* as “that which is capable of being occupied by an existent but is not so occupied” and the *room* as “an interval partly occupied by body and partly unoccupied.”²⁷

²² Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 293.

²³ Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 295.

²⁴ Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 296.

²⁵ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 9.

²⁶ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 9.

²⁷ Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 302.

The Christian Theological Response

It was in this philosophical-cultural framework that the early church articulated the relationship between God and the world in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Before the conciliar declarations of the early church, there were already attempts by heretics to make sense of the God-world relation. In particular, the incarnation and the Pentecost, as the coming of God in his own Being, acting in space and time, naturally led different thinkers to speculate. The problem, however, is that their doctrinal formulations were guided by what Athanasius calls a “mythological thinking.”²⁸ In contrast to what Torrance refers to as a “scientific *theological* thinking,” or thinking out of a center in God, “popular mythological thinking” is thinking “from a subjective centre in ourselves, in which we project our fabricated patterns and ideas upon the divine Reality and will accept only what we can conceive in terms of what we already know or what fits in with our own prior self-understanding.”²⁹ In short, there is a difference between a way of thinking that is grounded in cultural-philosophical categories and a way of thinking that is guided by faith-theological categories. As

is expected, the conclusions of each way of thinking are different from each other.

The effects of assimilating philosophical categories as *a priori* presuppositions in theologizing are illustrated in the different heresies faced by the early church. What we have in mind here are cosmological dualism and the receptacle notion of space only. The inferential relations could be portrayed as:

Premise 1 (*p1*): Space is an infinite receptacle that contains bodies.

Premise 2 (*p2*): God in Christ and the Holy Spirit are in space.

Question (*q*): How could God in Christ and the Holy Spirit be in space?

Conclusion (*c*): ?

For *cultural* thinkers (I am reluctant to call them *Christian* theologians), responses to the question above vary from one to another, but the general tenor is that *p2* is only possible if “slight” revisions were made concerning the *actuality* of the *presence* of God in space. The primary issue here is the principle of *control*. Put in question form: “Should *p1* or *p2* take the controlling position?” or “Which should be considered an absolute?” Essentially, heretical propositions make *p1* the controlling principle. There are only two destinations when this path is taken. Firstly, since God is Spirit and is Infinite, he cannot be limited or contained within space. *Parousia*, or the “presence of *ousia* (being)

²⁸ Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 245.

²⁹ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 46.

in se” is not possible. Consequently, the presence of Christ in space and time is not the presence of God in the fullness of his Being, but a presence-through-illusion: a hologram (Gnosticism and Docetism). This approach neglects the finite in favour of the infinite. Secondly, it is possible that a genuine historical figure called Jesus Christ has really walked and interacted within space, but that figure could not be the Infinite God. Thus Jesus is considered as a mere good human being, endowed with supernatural moral and intellectual understanding (Ebionism and Apollinarianism). At best, Jesus is a superior being, the first-born of creation, but could not be God (Arianism). This psilanthropic approach neglects the infinite in favour of the finite. In actually, therefore, in both, the primary conclusion (c) is that for God in his Being to be in space is impossible.³⁰

In contrast to these approaches, the Nicene fathers developed their understanding of space with a different controlling principle. Going back to the inferential equation above, the Nicene fathers took *p2* as the controlling principle, submitting their minds to the Gospel narrative that God in Christ is *Immanuel*,

and granting this event absolute status. From this controlling principle, they moved to examine *p1*, asking whether the prevailing cultural-philosophical notion of space is in line with the facts of revelation. In question form: If God in Christ and the Holy Spirit are really God in himself in space and time, then what is “space?” Does the infinite receptacle notion of space fit with a thinking grounded in God’s Being and Act?

The first hint towards the Nicene fathers’ response is the doctrine of creation out of nothing. Creation *ex nihilo*, if taken seriously, asserts “the absolute priority of God over all time and space, for the latter arise only in and with created existence and must be conceived as relations within the created order.”³¹ Thus, the idea of an infinite eternal space is outrightly rejected. Space is not self-existent or self-caused, nor is it a neutral zone whose being-in-existence coincides with the eternal God. There is no pre-creation space. Space is created along with the rest of creation. “For Christian theology,” Torrance writes,

God is the Self-existent, infinite and eternal, the Maker of heaven and earth, so that all things, visible and invisible, must be understood through reference to His creative and all-embracing wisdom and power. Hence instead of thinking of

³⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology: A Fresh and Challenging Approach to Christian Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 9, 16.

³¹ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 11; Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (reprint; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 3-4.

God in accordance with the determinate features of the finite cosmos the theologians of the early church thought of Him as the transcendent source of all rationality who, by maintaining the universe as the object of His creative knowledge and power, structures and limits it, making it determinate and comprehensible. It was within this context that they approached the questions of space and time.³²

Furthermore, the relationship between God and space is inverted. Instead of eternal space containing God, God actually contains the entire universe, not in the manner of a physical container, but by his creative and sustaining Activity. This means, therefore, that space should be understood dynamically. In contrast to the Aristotelian view of space as taken from the view of absolute rest and immobility, the theological view of space is grounded in the dynamic, creative, and interacting Being and Activity of God.³³ This is why Torrance rejected the Aristotelian concept of God as the Unmoved Mover. Torrance wrote:

The contrast between the immutability of God the Unmoved Mover or of the Moved Unmover and the immutability of the mighty living God of revelation could not

be greater... [God] is the *Self-moved God* who is transcendentally and majestically free to become one of us in our creaturely existence and even to enter into the depths of our misery and alienation, while remaining he who he always is as the mighty living God, and who is therefore perfectly free and able to redeem and save us from our bondage and degradation.”³⁴

This Subject-oriented view of space is, to a certain degree, similar to the Stoic principle, but the receptacle-container element is rejected because the transcendence and sovereignty of God is given priority. Space is here “a predicate of the Occupant, and is determined by his agency, and is to be understood in accordance with his nature,” not the other way around.³⁵ The incarnation, therefore, is taken at a face value and is considered as an ultimate biblical fact. The questions of possibility and impossibility are regarded as irrelevant. Because space is the arena of God’s activity and is determined by God as the active agent, then the incarnation “is not to be thought of as an intrusion into the creation or as an abrogation of its space-time structure, but as the chosen form of

³² Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 23.

³³ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1985), 62; Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: The U. Press of Virginia, 1981), 147; Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 62-64; Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 73-74; Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 48-55. For a critique of Torrance’s view of space, see Alister McGrath, “Place, History, and Incarnation: On the Subjective

Aspects of Christology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75 (2022): 137-147.

³⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 239.

³⁵ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 15; Sang Hoon Lee, “The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity in T. F. Torrance’s Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23 (2021): 198-214.

God's interaction with nature in which He establishes an intimate relation between creaturely human being and Himself."³⁶ Concepts and laws of created reality cannot be applied in an *a priori* and necessary manner in our understanding of God's actual presence in the world. Cultural, naturalistic and philosophical categories cannot be the essential variables in formulating biblical doctrines.

It is out of these considerations that the early fathers developed a *relational view of space*, in which space is seen as the God-created sphere of relationship with creation.³⁷ In light of this, it seems fair to conclude that even the act of creation is a Communion-constituting Act of the Fellowshiping God. In a sense, by default, by being in the scope of God's creative and sustaining activity, or just by the fact of existing, one is encompassed within the sphere of God's space. God, Torrance writes, "leaves nothing void of Himself, and who orders and holds the entire universe together by binding it into such a relation to God that it is preserved from breaking up into nothingness or dropping out of existence."³⁸ The concept of

perichoresis is also helpful. An often neglected aspect of *perichoresis* is its essential spatial meaning, evident from its etymological root *chora*, "space" or "room," or *chorein*, "to contain" or "to make room." Thus, although *perichoresis* primarily highlights the *onto-relations* in God (i.e. mutual indwelling and co-inherence), it also implies that the Triune God in His innermost Being is a Room-giving God.³⁹ The Three Persons are both Room-giving and Room-receiving simultaneously.⁴⁰ The Father opens himself for the Son and the Holy Spirit; the Son opens himself for the Father and the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit opens himself for the Father and the Son. The Three Persons of the Trinity, Torrance writes, "wholly dwell in each other and who each have room fully for the others in the one God."⁴¹ Consequentially, if God in his Being *in se* is Room-giving, then his interaction with creation as God-for-others is characterized by an expanding space of relations out of a center in God.⁴²

³⁶ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 24, 67.

³⁷ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 123-124.

³⁸ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 14.

³⁹ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 102-103; Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 99; Torrance, *Reality and Scientific*

Theology (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), 171-178.

⁴⁰ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 16.

⁴¹ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, 16.

⁴² Jan Muis, "Our Spatial Reality and God," *HTS Theologies Studies* 77 (2021), at <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6890>.

The Modern Problem

As was shown above, problems in Christian theology emerged in the early church when the philosophical notion of space was employed to explain the reality of God's interaction with the created order. Such impositions of *a priori* categories to theologizing, whereby logical deductions are guided by abstract metaphysical principles, could only result to a *pseudo*-theological, Procrustean bed into which God is shaped to fit. In contrast to this, the Nicene fathers prioritized the self-authenticating Truth of the Gospel that in Christ, God really interacted with the world in space and time, and from there proceeded to recast "space" from a *Christian* perspective. As such, Adolf von Harnack's evaluation of Nicene theology as the Hellenization of Christianity is a misjudgement. Along with Torrance, it could be concluded that Nicene theology actually evidences the Christianization of Hellenism.⁴³

But now we make a huge jump to the modern theological situation, with the agenda of a call to introspection in light of the theological developments in the Nicene

era. I will focus primarily on Christology, since it is the same issue which the early fathers dealt with. But this jump does not mean that we are assuming that there were no culture-theology tension between the fifth and twenty-first century. Augustine's uncritical acceptance of Platonic philosophy in general, and the distinction between the *mundus intelligibilis* and the *mundus sensibilis* in particular, is but an early example – an early example at that.⁴⁴ Nor do I argue that Torrance's assessment of the Christianization of Hellenism is completely accurate. In fact, his assessment could be considered over-optimistic and should be qualified by Robert W. Jenson's assertion that the Christianization project was incomplete.⁴⁵ The tension between culture and Gospel occupying the seat of control still remained after Nicea and Constantinople.

In doctrinal theology, the modern Christological dilemma is best pictured in the publication of several important works, such as *The Truth of God Incarnate* (1977), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), *Incarnation and Myth* (1977), and *Incarnation: Myth or Fact* (1991).⁴⁶ In these publications, the old Nicene and

⁴³ A. I. C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Thought* (reprint; Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1985), 73-76.

⁴⁴ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 78; Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 138-139, 223-225; Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 122-130.

⁴⁵ C. E. Braaten, E. W. Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics* (Fortress, 1984); Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 21-23, 60.

⁴⁶ M. Green, *The Truth of God Incarnate* (Eerdmans, 1977); John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977); M. D. Goulder, *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*

already solved question concerning the reality, possibility, and historicity of God becoming human in space and time is revived. But there is a fundamental change in attitude. Going back to the equation above, whereas the early heretics at least regarded *p1* and *p2* as equally true at the beginning of their speculations, and only concluded that *p2* needs to be revised by virtue of *p1* as the controlling variable, in the modern reconstruction agenda, *p2* is outrightly considered questionable even before the discussion begins by virtue of the absoluteness of *p1*. In short, *p1* is both the only accepted absolute *fact* and important *factor*. The cultural-philosophical completely dominated the scene, and the biblical narrative became nothing but a lab rat subject to lower and higher criticisms.

There are many contributive factors leading to this attitude, but we are not going to deal with each one here. Suffice it to say, by a selective enumeration with epigrammatic comments, that the propositions of Descartes' "return to the subject" philosophy, Hume's empiricism, Kant's transcendental *a priori*ism, and Lessing's historical criticism were uncritically assimilated in both biblical and dogmatic theologies. This assimilation led

to various theological questions and problems, such as is evident in Schleiermacher's subjective hermeneutic and theology. But in Christology in particular, Alasdair I. C. Heron writes, it produced "a bewildering variety of 'reconstructions' of Jesus' personality and history, having for the most part only one thing in common—the conviction that whatever the truth about him might be, it was not the traditional Christian picture of him."⁴⁷ This is what Alan Torrance calls the "Eurocentricization of Christianity."⁴⁸

The concept of space (and time) is of course inevitably included in the philosophies of Hume, Kant, and Lessing because of their emphasis on historicity. Their understanding of space, however, is but an appropriation of the scientific discoveries of their time. In fact, the most systematic presentation of space in their time could be found in Isaac Newton's physics. Newton regarded space and time, in Kantian terms, as "transcendentals." Unlike Kant, however, who regarded space and time primarily as *concepts* located in the intellect to supply the framework of knowledge, or as *internal transcendentals*, Newton regarded space and time as an *external transcendental*, existential

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); Oskar Skarsaune, *Incarnation: Myth or Fact* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991).

⁴⁷ Heron, *A Century of Protestant Thought*, 19.

⁴⁸ Christoph Seitz, *Nicene Christianity: The Future of a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 50.

categories that are located beyond the human. For Newton, geometry (space and time) and physics (worldly existence) are related, but only externally. This is a dualism between absolute mathematical space and time and bodies in motion.⁴⁹ He then proceeds to explain that space and time are mathematical givens, with their inherent laws, rationality and order (or laws of nature) that govern physical existence. In a nutshell, we are contained within space and time. This manner of speaking about space, although approached from a scientific standpoint, is discernibly similar to the receptacle view of space found in early Greek philosophy. Like Aristotle, space is regarded as the absolute immobile sphere that limits bodies that are contained within it. Like Plato, space is given an infinite property where events take place.

In theology, the immediate effect of Newton's mathematical view of space is deism, where the personal presence of God in the world is rejected.⁵⁰ While divine creation is acknowledged, it is viewed that God ordered the world in space in such a way that it is filled with rigid and mathematical geometrical laws that govern the physical bodies within in.⁵¹ The world is but a vast machine with inbuilt order and patterns. Consequently, from a wide

biblical angle, miracles, defined as "cases of divine, supernatural interference with the laws of nature,"⁵² were regarded as theologically inappropriate and scientifically impossible. Even theologians who defended the idea of God's continuous activity in the world, while accepting the conventional understanding of miracle as a supernatural interference with the natural order of things, by default, already mistakenly approved that the universe is a machine run by causal laws, and that a miracle is a temporary suspension of these laws. When the issue is narrowed down to the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, the effects of assimilating the Newtonian system in theology are devastating. How could the Son of God be within space and time? In line with the cultural-scientific-philosophical approach, the only possible Jesus is not the Jesus of the Gospels, but the Arian Jesus arrived through an inversed Marcionite canon. This, of course, was precisely what Rudolph Bultmann did in his demythologization of the Gospels. In the name of scholarship and a misguided vision for intellectual freedom, the old heresies are revived, then sanctified by the bishops of secularism.

⁴⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), ix.

⁵⁰ Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 47, 273.

⁵¹ Torrance, *Divine and Continent Order*, 5-10.

⁵² Heron, *A Century of Protestant Thought*, 7.

CONCLUSIONS

As shown above, using the concept of space as an illustration, both in the past and the present, if both biblical and theological scholarships operate within cultural-philosophical categories and not from a center in the Gospel *datum* taken at face value, problems that are not supposed to be there surface.⁵³ This is the reason why I refer to them as *pseudo*-problems.⁵⁴ Once prevailing popular and cultural worldviews are uncritically assimilated and accepted, theologizing becomes circularly self-collapsing. It is comforting that to a certain degree, Barth's scientific theology has effected some changes in theological procedure, but many have not yet caught up with the profound revolution in thought which he inaugurated.⁵⁵ Barth's clarion call is still unheard in many places, or is just plainly ignored as fideistic and "too Christian" to be intellectually compelling. The majority of theological traditions or schools, with their representative *cultural* thinkers still fight their battles within the philosophical dome. Because of this, real problems result from *pseudo*-problems.

It seems then that the way forward is to look backwards. The doxological approach of the early fathers, in contrast to the impious subjugation of God to human categories and cultural worldviews and self-fabricated conceptions, should be recovered. The process of projecting patterns and ideas upon the divine Reality and accepting only what is conceivable in terms of what is already known or what fits in with our prior self-understanding should be abandoned. A shift from *mythology* to *theology*⁵⁶ or from *mythological-cultural thinking* to *scientific-theological thinking* is necessary.⁵⁷ The Nicene theologians theologized by thinking out of center in the givenness of God, an attitude that is echoed by A. E. Taylor's call for the process of locating *control* and *authority* not in individualism or institutionalism but "in a reality that is wholly given and trans-subjective, and simply and absolutely authoritative through its givenness."⁵⁸ This is the Nicene and *Christian* way of

⁵³ Gary W. Deddo, "T. F. Torrance on the Realist Reconfiguration of Theological and Biblical Studies to be Co-servants of the Word of God," *Participatio* 8 (2020): 1-30.

⁵⁴ For another example of problematic theology emerging from decentered theologizing from God, see Gary W. Deddo, "Resisting Reductionism: Why We Need a Truly Theological Anthropology to

counter the Dehumanization of God's Humanity," *Participatio* 9 (2021): 95-128.

⁵⁵ Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 22.

⁵⁶ Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 245.

⁵⁷ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 46; Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 47.

⁵⁸ Torrance, *Theological Science*, viii.

thinking, which Torrance also calls “the science of God.”⁵⁹

Perhaps one of the issues of today is *confidence* or *belief*. Too many biblical scholars and dogmatic theologians seemed to have lost their confident belief in the ultimate truthfulness of the Gospel that recourse to cultural-social-philosophical tools of investigation, experimentation and verification is considered essential. In an attempt to be accepted and be relevant to modern scholarship, an underlying presupposition that conformity to secular patterns of thought provides (in modest term) the necessary intellectual credibility. There is a suspicion of a strictly Christian way of thinking as either fideism or fundamentalism. But it is precisely the recovery of the Christian mindset, evident in the Nicene church, that is the antidote to *pseudo*-theologies and the irrelevance of Christian scholarship in the Church today. What is needed is a *metanoia*, a radical rethinking of everything before the face of Jesus Christ. Torrance writes: “Divine revelation conflicts sharply with the structure of our natural reason, with the secular patterns of thought that have already become established in our minds through the twist of our ingrained mental alienation from God. We cannot become

true theologians without the agonizing experience of profound change in the mental structure of our innermost being.”⁶⁰ This is why Torrance argues that even the alienated mind (the mind is not a neutral human faculty) is in need to redemption.⁶¹ At the whole level then, “evangelical theology is an evangelizing theology, for it is concerned with the winning and transforming of the human mind through conformity to the mind of Christ—not simply the minds of individual human beings but the mind of human society and culture in which individual human beings exist.”⁶²

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⁵⁹ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*.

⁶⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: Person and Work of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton

Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 443.

⁶¹ Torrance, *Atonement*, 443.

⁶² Torrance, *Atonement*, 444.

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