Preface

The various issues of the Reformed Review usually have a theme. Rarely are they devoted to individuals unless they are venerable church “fathers” such as Luther or Calvin. The only exceptions have been a special issue dedicated to a retiring professor from Western Seminary and an issue on contemporary Dutch theology with a focus on the theology of the late A. A. Van Ruler (Winter, 1973).

This issue represents another exception, for it is devoted to a living theologian, the Rev. Dr. Thomas F. Torrance, emeritus professor of Christian dogmatics at New College, the theological faculty of the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. The reasons for this are four-fold: Professor Torrance is the leading Reformed theologian today in the Anglo-Saxon world and is one of the most brilliant and seminal thinkers of our time. In addition to all of his contributions to patristic and Reformation studies as well as many theological works, he is making a unique contribution to the important question of the relation of theological science to the natural sciences.

Secondly, his relation to Western Seminary is a special one in that two of our professors studied under him while doing their doctoral studies at the University of Edinburgh, namely Professors Donald J. Bruggink and Christopher B. Kaiser, the latter having also taught at New College after receiving his doctorate.

Another of Professor Torrance’s highly esteemed former students is Dr. Robert J. Palma, professor of Christian theology at Hope College. Dr. Palma has spent his recent sabbatical year as a visiting scholar at Western Seminary and spent part of that time writing the essay which is the focal piece in this issue. It is probably the most thorough discussion of Torrance’s theology yet written.

A fourth reason for this special issue is the fact that Professor Torrance spent a week on Western’s and Hope’s campuses in March, 1981, and agreed to do a special interview with President John Hesselink, a friend of his for many years. Professor Torrance indicated that he had never done an interview of this kind before, so this represents a unique contribution to living theological history. (Recently he himself edited the typed version of this interview, so it has been updated in a few places.)

The interview also serves as an illuminating introduction to the life, work, and vision of Professor Torrance. For those who are not familiar with Torrance’s voluminous writings this should prove helpful, for Torrance is admittedly a theological heavyweight even among his peers in the theological academy.

Torrance’s accomplishments are legion and his honors many, including being elected Moderator of the Church of Scotland in 1976-77. Only one more honor need be mentioned in order to give some indication of his international stature. In 1978 he was awarded the Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion, the equivalent of the Nobel Prize in the religion field!
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A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ—
An Interview With T. F. Torrance

By I. John Hesselink

IJH: I was impressed by the fact, Professor Torrance, that you were born in China of missionary parents. This was particularly interesting to me because of my own previous experience as a missionary in Japan over a span of twenty years. I know that our children, the older three having lived in Japan almost all of their childhood years until they were seventeen or eighteen, are somewhat different because they were born and reared in Japan. In your case, I understand that you lived in China for your first fourteen years. Do you feel that colors your thinking, or has it made an influence on your personality and outlook in any way?

TFT: Well, it's not something I have reflected very much about, but at least I think I can say two things: It has left me with a decidedly missionary and an evangelical outlook. I look upon my life as dedicated to the spreading of the gospel, evangelizing in different areas of human life and thought, and I think that is undoubtedly derived from my parents and from my upbringing. It was my own great desire from as early as I can remember to be a missionary in Tibet; however, that never came off. But I claim in some ways still to be a missionary in other ways.

There is another way in which I think my upbringing had its impact on me: it made me a person less stereotyped in patterns of any particular culture, so that I think I'm freer to think across national boundaries, across cultural boundaries, than I would be otherwise. And I've always felt myself in this kind of way to have a kind of spontaneity and freedom, which perhaps someone brought up in one particular culture does not have.

IJH: I notice that there are six children in your family. I don't know if the others were born in China or not. But I read in one of the journals that we received from Scotland at the time you were moderator that your other two brothers are also in the ministry or in professional theological work and that your three sisters all married clergymen and/or scholars as well. So I would presume from this that your parents must have made quite an impact upon the whole family. I have not heard you speak much about your parents although you did mention that your mother died about a year ago. I would gather that they were not only missionaries but very godly people who must have left a very positive impression upon the children. Would you tell us a little more about your parents and their impact on you?

TFT: Yes, there is no doubt about this. I think I dedicated an early book to my parents who were my first and best teachers in theology and that still remains true. My father came from a strong evangelical Church of Scotland piety of a disciplined kind. He had certain problems with anything like hyper-Calvinism, and I suppose I do also. My mother was an Anglican trained to be a missionary; and in many respects she was the theologian of the family. I think through the years she left a deeper theological imprint on us all, but that is partly due to the fact that when we came home from China in 1927 (a furlough year), my father went back to China for seven more years, while my mother stayed with us. Our parents were very worried about the fact that many missionaries' children, bereft of their
parents, grew up rather wild and strange; so they were determined that we wouldn’t be left alone like that. And it was certainly a great cost in separation, my parents separated from one another for seven years. This meant that we came under the strong imprint of my mother who was really a woman of the greatest spiritual depth, prayer life, and theological insight. She was never trained at the university, but only in a missionary college; yet her theological and biblical insight and her sheer holiness left an immense impact on the members of our family.

Yes, my two brothers and I are all ministers of the Church of Scotland. My sisters married clergymen (one was also a doctor of medicine): two of them went as missionaries to what were called in those days Nyasaland and Rhodesia. The third one, my oldest sister, married an Edinburgh man, Ronald S. Wallace, who became a Calvin scholar and a professor of biblical theology in the States [at Columbia Seminary; now retired and back in Scotland, Ed.]. So we have all been deeply indebted to our parents. I’ve often said that in our family we had seven ministers—including sons and brothers-in-laws—but the best preacher was my mother.

I think your parents’ concerns about missionary children were well founded, for sometimes children of missionaries have grown up to be rebellious not only against their parents but also against the faith.

You mention that your mother was an Anglican and I understand that you also married an Anglican. I know that you have spoken more than once about how in your person, therefore, you bring together the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. Would this be one of the factors in your ecumenical interests and concerns? At the same time you are known as a Reformed theologian and you have never compromised in that regard, even though you are very ecumenical in your outlook. Would you comment on that.

TFT: One of my earliest memories—I don’t know how old I was, perhaps about four or five—was of my mother and father in China having an argument about bishops and my father got the worst of the argument. He went out into the garden and I could see he was a bit crestfallen. I went out after him and I slipped my hand into his as he went out. He looked down upon me and shook and his head and said, “Your mother and her bishops!” But my mother has never been a hard line Anglican of any kind and for many years she was a member of the Church of Scotland. My wife also is still a member of both the Church of England and the Church of Scotland; and we have tried to be really ecumenical in living out the relations between the two churches. Two of my children have been confirmed in both churches; and quite frankly one even thought of being ordained in both churches. Present circumstances haven’t favored that, but it might yet be the case. I concede that there are certain ambiguities in these issues, but I believe we must try to bridge that gap.

As far as Reformed tradition is concerned, Calvin did believe in bishops, but Beza didn’t—that’s where the problem comes. Calvin wrote, for example, to the King of Poland recommending that they have metropolitans and archbishops. He recommended to the Earl of Somerset in England that they continue with their bishops, and so on. He saw that it was impossible to translate the church order in little Geneva, which numbered about 15,000 to 20,000 people, to a whole nation where a rather more expansive type of order was needed.
Although he did not adopt that kind of episcopacy in Geneva, he gave to John Knox John à Lasco’s *Forma Ac Ratio* which envisaged superintendents or bishops. John Knox and his colleagues had some difficulty in putting that into effect, but within a few years Presbyterian Bishops were established in the Church of Scotland. And that is really the tradition, the Reformed/Episcopal tradition, which I inherited in Scotland itself.

IJH: Now, to move on to your later years as a boy, I must confess I know nothing of what we would call your high school days, whereas I know that you did your undergraduate work at the University of Edinburgh. I wish you would fill in that gap, because we know little about that period from your fourteenth year in China until the time you entered the university and did your divinity work.

TFT: Well, I went to a Canadian school in China, a mission school run by the Ontario school board. We had 100-120 children gathered from quite a wide area, but mostly from Chengtu where we lived for most of the year. In some respects that was quite a good thing, but so far as Scottish standards are concerned our schooling was very deficient. I think the only thing I was really proficient in was geometry and that has always been one of my great loves.

When I came back to Scotland to school, I had a lot to do to catch up with others in Latin and Greek. I was very much behind in these languages, so I had to concentrate on them, much to the regret of my master in mathematics because he thought that was my most proficient area, and certainly something of which I was very fond. It took me about three years, actually, of hard work before I could catch up on the rest of the class. When we came home in 1927, it was the worst period of unemployment and housing and an uncle of my father’s, who was the manager of a steel works in Bellshill in Lanarkshire, offered a house to us. We went there even though it was about the worst possible place one could go. We had three years of very, very difficult life. I don’t look back upon it at all with pleasure. But the schooling was the main thing; we had hard discipline there. By the time we ended that, I had become what we call a Dux, a senior scholar in Latin and Greek, and hence moved on to university a year earlier than I ought to have. But we were very keen to switch then from Bellshill to Edinburgh. The whole family moved then to Edinburgh in 1931, and two of us went immediately to university.

IJH: Moving on to your later student years as a university student, I gather that you went to the University of Edinburgh and then moved directly on to New College at the university for your theological training as well. Would you first tell us a little bit about the nature of your studies at the University of Edinburgh and then some of the professors at New College who most influenced you. I know I’ve seen you quote from H. R. Mackintosh a number of times, so I know he was one of the people at New College at that time who obviously had some impact upon you.

TFT: At Edinburgh University I went up to read for the M.A. and I concentrated in the classics, Latin and Greek, and philosophy. I took a three year course; I ought to have taken a four-year course and would like to have done that, but owing to our financial circumstances in the family (a missionary family doesn’t get much income and we had to have two houses running), I moved on as soon as I could. In the university I was able to get a fairly good training both in Latin and Greek as well as philosophy; and I was fortunate in having
two of the greatest modern philosophers as my teachers—Norman Kemp Smith, the great Kant expert who had translated Kant and wrote the famed commentary on Kant and who was also, and still is, I think, the greatest authority on David Hume. I also had A. E. Taylor, who was a moral philosopher and the supreme authority on Plato; he was really quite unforgettable. So from both of them on different sides I had a very powerful training in philosophy.

After three years, then, I moved on to the divinity faculty and concentrated on systematic theology, although the first two years we devoted to a large extent to Greek and Hebrew and the Old and New Testaments. The professor who certainly influenced me most in New College was H. R. Mackintosh. I'll never forget his lectures on Christology and soteriology which I had in my second year in New College. During that period I sat examinations for the John Stuart Blackie Fellowship which I gained; this was in all phases of Greek: classical Greek, septuagintal Greek, New Testament Greek, patristic Greek, and modern Greek. This carried me into studies in the Middle East, and I chose to spend three months in the Holy Land and the Arab countries and three months in Greece. It was when I was in Syria, actually, that news came to me that H. R. Mackintosh had died, which was a great tragedy for me. The one real year I had from him certainly left a great impact, and I of course had been really familiar with him. It so happened that later on I was minister at the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen where he had been the first minister, so I had another close tie with Mackintosh before coming back to take over his chair of Christian Dogmatics in Edinburgh.

IJH: Was it during your university days that you began thinking in terms of graduate school and teaching theology, or was that a later development? I know that very soon you went to Europe and I gather you did some study in Germany and eventually ended up at the University of Basel. So could you relate what it was that moved you eventually to Basel and to working with Karl Barth where you started your graduate work and your study prior to the war.

TFT: It was undoubtedly through the influence of H. R. Mackintosh that I became deeply interested in Karl Barth, and I had read the first volume of his Church Dogmatics, one that had been translated by G. T. Thomson at that time. As I left New College I won a scholarship that was able to pay for three years of postgraduate study. However, my intention had still been to go to the mission field and during my second year at New College I organized a big meeting with students in which I brought Robert Wilder from the United States, one of the founders of the Student Volunteer Movement, and we had a missionary conference trying to recruit students for the mission field. Many years later, after I became Moderator of the Church of Scotland, someone wrote to me to say that one day he overheard Mackintosh and Wilder talking and Wilder had said how nice that Tom Torrance is going to be a missionary, and Mackintosh turned to him and said, "No, he's not; he's going to come and succeed me here." Now I had no indication, of course, or no intention of anything like that; but he certainly proved a kind of prophet. However, through Mackintosh's influence I got deeply interested in Barth. I had no German, so I went off to Berlin to study at the Hegelhaus where German as well as foreign languages were taught. I arrived too late for the course so they gave me a private tutor which was quite a good thing because
it hurried on my education in German. After a month in Berlin, the situation was getting tricky: Mussolini was coming to Berlin and I was already, I think, under suspicion one way or another. So I went to Marburg for another month and there continued my German studies. It was then I first met Bultmann. Then I went to Basel, visiting a few other places like Heidelberg on my way.

Now my interest in Barth was also combined with my interest in scientific thought, because in reading the Dogmatics I found that I thought that here one could really get at a scientific theology. In my undergraduate days, before I came up to New College, I had studied for a while Schleiermacher's Christian Faith, and I was astonished at the architectonic beauty of the whole thing; and yet I could see that the whole thing was wrong, quite wrong. In order to get at a scientific and orderly and structured theology, one had to dig very much deeper. In reading Karl Barth's Dogmatics, particularly the section on the Trinity, and trying to understand the communio quaedam consubstantialis between the Father and the Son, I felt that here we had the fundamental principles on which we could base the whole structure of dogmatics. So, when I went to Basel I proposed to Barth that I would like to work on this.

One of the other points that had made a big influence on me was the doctrine of grace which I had learned from my teachers in New College, not least Mackintosh and a retired professor called H. A. A. Kennedy. One day when I was in Athens I was reading Kennedy's Epistles of Saint Paul, and his understanding of grace made an enormous impact on me. So it was the concept of grace together with the internal structure of the Trinity and Christology which I felt would give me the grasp of theology in its inner scientific relations. That was what I put to Barth. He thought that the subject was too big for me at that stage and finally persuaded me to write a thesis on grace in the second century, which eventually became limited to the Apostolic Fathers. But it was a very useful exercise.

IJH: This came out earlier in a conversation we had, I think a couple of days ago at lunch, namely, that you had this interest in science, first of all theological science, and then the broader understanding of scientific inquiry, at a very early stage. That corrected a misunderstanding of mine, because I thought this was a later development, that is, something within the last ten or twenty years or so, because you have published so much in that realm recently. But it appears that this was an interest of yours very early on.

Then I think people will be surprised—at least I was—to learn that you began your academic career in the United States and not in Scotland or Great Britain. Would you explain how that came to be and then what took you back to Scotland? Had it not been for World War II, I gather, you might have become an American professor of theology rather than Scotland's most famous professor of theology.

TFT: Well, when I came back from Basel at the end of my first two semesters in 1938, John Baillie asked me whether I would go to his old chair in Auburn Seminary—Auburn was then an independent seminary in upstate New York—and I was a bit reluctant because I had already embarked on my dissertation and I wanted to go back to Basel to finish this. But he persuaded me and so off I went to Auburn. John Bennett had succeeded John Baillie and many problems had arisen, so when Bennett left for the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley they needed a man desperately. So I went to Auburn on fairly short
notice. It was a difficult task because I had to write my lectures every day for the next day and I had a lot to do—I had at least two classes to cope with. But this made me think through the whole body of dogmatic theology pretty thoroughly, except the doctrine of the church and the sacraments. I used to work right on late into the night, sometimes until three and four in the morning, writing up these lectures for the next day. It was a very, very enjoyable year and something I shall always be very grateful for. I gained many friends there who lasted over the years.

It was during that period, towards the end of it, that other places suggested I might look to them: McCormick Seminary asked me to go there and I went to see what it was like but I didn't feel very happy about that. Then Princeton University asked me to consider going there—they were just starting their Department of Religion. This was the first Department of Religion in any university in the United States. I'm not quite sure how it all began, but Emil Brunner had been brought over by John Mackay to lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary and he may have provided a stimulus in raising the whole question about the possibility of a Department of Religion in the university. At any rate, perhaps at the suggestion of Brunner or Mackay, I was invited to Princeton and interviewed for such a post. Would you like me to tell you about that?

LH: Please!

TFT: Well, I can remember part of it quite vividly. There were three people on the interviewing committee: the Dean (I think he was an Anglican); someone else who may have been the President of the University; and Theodore Green, the distinguished professor of philosophy—he'd been a pupil of Kemp Smith, my old teacher (actually Kemp Smith had earlier been a professor at Princeton before he came back to Edinburgh). Theodore Green had come and taken his Ph.D. with Kemp Smith in Edinburgh... Well, Theodore Green, I recall, said something like this to me: "This is quite a new venture and we want someone here to teach theology as one of the liberal arts in a disinterested and detached way, as any of the liberal arts would be taught. If you came here, you would have as your students Roman Catholics as well as Protestants, people of all different churches, unbelievers, and believers, agnostics, atheists, and Jews; and therefore you'd have to teach it in a way that wouldn't offend anyone and in quite a disinterested and detached kind of way. And," he added, "there must be no proselytising. What do you think of that?" he asked. "How would you like to undertake that?" I replied, "Well, I'd rather teach theology as a science." He was rather astonished and said, "What do you mean?" So I explained. "In a science, you don't think in a detached, disinterested way; you think as you are compelled to think by the evidential grounds upon which you work. It's a much more rigorous way of thinking, but it is a much more objective way of thinking because all your thinking is controlled by the realities you are inquiring into." He asked me to explain that further, which I did, and then I added that because we think in this way I could not guarantee if I came and taught theology in the scientific way that no one would be converted! He took that quite happily and then, to my astonishment, they asked me to come. I had a few days to think about it. After breakfast one morning at the seminary, Brunner and I went for a walk along past the Institute of Advanced Studies down by the woods. Both of us had been reading the newspapers. The situation was clearly ominous in Europe and particularly so
that morning. As we were discussing the situation, I asked Brunner what he thought I should do. Then as we weighed the pros and cons, he turned around to me and said, "In view of the situation (or something like that) I think you and I both ought to get back to Europe before the submarines start." So my mind was made up at once and I told the authorities at the university that I could not accept the appointment after all, for I felt I had to go back home to Europe. And that was that.

IJH: Was this the spring of 1939? Wasn't it in September of that year that war did break out in Europe?

TFT: I am not very sure. I think it was what we would call the summer term. It was well after Easter, but it was not long after that, actually, that I returned to Scotland.

IJH: I know you served in the chaplaincy during the war. As I recall, prior to that you had a parish experience and then one afterwards as well. Would you clarify that, please.

TFT: When I returned to Edinburgh I thought of offering to serve as a chaplain in the Army. However, I found there was a two-year waiting list. Since I didn't feel I could hang about that long I spoke to one or two of my former professors, one of them being Norman Porteus, and suggested that this would give me an opportunity to finish my thesis for Basel. So he proposed that I should go to Oriel. There was a Scots Provost there, a very famous philosopher, W. D. Ross (Sir William Ross), and Marcus Todd, the Vice-Provost, who was a very great Greek scholar. Oriel agreed to take me, and so I went there and worked hard in Oxford that year, completing the basic work for my thesis. Marcus Niebuhr Todd also gave me some help with criticizing Greek terms I was coming up against. Officially, I was supposed to be writing a thesis for W. D. Ross on the problem of Weltanschauung and metaphysics with relation to the philosophy of Karl Jaspers. They hadn't heard of Karl Jaspers in Oxford, but I thought I could use this as an opportunity to get at something that I had once read in the writing of T. E. Hulme's, Speculations, where the problem of Weltanschauung and critical metaphysics were related to one another. Hulme showed that the philosopher, for all his logical metaphysical apparatus, finally is found to be expressing a Weltanschauung he had already chosen. I wanted to test out that thesis with regard to Jaspers. However, I didn't do much work in that field because I spent most of my time doing my dissertation for Barth. Then, toward the end of the year—actually before the term session was ended—the Church of Scotland pressed me to go to a parish, and under great pressure I did. I found myself being called to the parish of Alyth. Alyth was a little country town of about three thousand people but with a large country area around about. The parish was divided into two, which two ministers served together. I must say that was one of the happiest times of my life in the ministry, i.e., from 1940-43, which was the early part of the war.

Then, in 1943, I considered joining the Royal Army Chaplains Department, but when I went to Edinburgh for that purpose, Dr. Charles Warr, who was a minister of St. Giles and convened the Church of Scotland's Huts and Canteens Committee, said to me, "By the way, we need someone very badly in the Church of Scotland Huts in the Middle East." And I said, "Oh, I've always wanted to go there again," for I had fallen in love with Palestine in 1930. So he said, "Well, if you go as a Church of Scotland minister with the 'Huts and Canteens,' instead of the Army Chaplaincy, you can go at once." Within a very
few days I said goodbye to Alyth for a while. A brother-in-law of mine, Kenneth McKenzie, the husband of my sister Margaret, the youngest of my three sisters, took over the parish for that period. He was home as a missionary from Rhodesia. So I went off to the Holy Land. Although I was in the Church of Scotland Huts and Canteens, I found myself doing the work of a regular army chaplain as well as a chaplain with the Church of Scotland Huts and Canteens at the same time. I found myself in the Holy Land first of all in the Combined Operations Unit, and was sent on some duties in the western desert. After six months, I joined an Indian Division and spent the rest of the war in Italy as a Church of Scotland chaplain to one of the battalions, mostly an English battalion—King's Own Royal Rifles—while also acting in the capacity of the Church of Scotland Huts and Canteens chaplain.

That took me until the end of the war. A few days after V-E Day (Victory in Europe Day), I received word from Edinburgh calling me back to Scotland. I resigned from my army duties at once, but it took me several weeks to get back to Scotland.

I noticed in an article in the *Life and Work* magazine of 1976, which featured you at the time you were becoming Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, that someone named Lewis Cameron had done a history of some sort and there it refers to the fact that you appear as an entrepreneur of almost Armenian ingenuity in various good causes during the Italian campaign. Then he adds, "And more important as a pastor with a care of souls and a record of 'magnificent service,' not least in holding up the cross of Christ to wounded and dying men." I found that an interesting part of your career of which I had little knowledge before.

Now, finally, I guess you can get back to your dissertation and your completing your work in Basel. The war is over, Karl Barth is back in Basel, although I believe somewhere in there he went back to Bonn for a brief period; but this was the time that you did finally finish your long-interrupted doctoral work at the University of Basel. You had encountered Barth before, I guess, when you started your work prior to the war. How did your relationship deepen with him at this point, because you had a long and close relationship with Barth, even though I gather that your personal contacts have not been that extended apart from your graduate work.

TFT: Well, actually, in the three years I was a minister in Alyth, before I went away to the army, I managed to complete writing my thesis, cutting it down drastically, so that by the time I came back from the war, in 1945, all I needed then to do was to revise it a little and send it off to Basel. I think it was Karl Ludwig Schmidt, who was probably Dean at the time, who wrote to me about it, suggesting that I should cut it down further and have it printed. So, in 1946, I think it was, I completed it, had it printed, and asked permission to leave my parish in order to spend a semester in Basel, because I needed some time to refresh my German in order to meet the *rigorosum* (oral exam). Fortunately, they did not examine me in Hebrew (they did this apparently for people whom they thought were somewhat adequate). I went back to Basel and had a fearful *rigorosum*. I remember Karl Ludwig Schmidt put me through a terrible ordeal, partly because, if I may say so, his own son Martin was having a *rigorosum* at the same time, as was Christoph Barth (Karl Barth's son). And K. L. Schmidt was determined that his son Martin would do better than either of us! It was a rather amusing occasion. The old habit (you may remember) in Basel was for
the professor to take you out and say, "Well, we can't discuss the whole field, New Testament or Old Testament or what; we'll discuss so-and-so-and-so." Well, Karl Ludwig Schmidt took me out twice. I thought he was being very kind, as he hinted at what might be discussed. But when it came to the examination we discussed none of these things whatsoever! He asked me a question and if he saw I had no difficulty with it, he left it and went on to another one until he found one that was difficult, and then he bored into me. At the end of the hour, after playing with me like a cat with a mouse, he flung himself back and roared with laughter! Oscar Cullmann, who had become Dean, was presiding over the examination and was very upset. However, Christoph Barth and I were both awarded our degrees magna cum laude and Martin Schmidt with insigne cum laude. Karl Barth wrote me a letter from Bonn expressing his disappointment, saying, "If I'd been there you'd been given summa cum laude!" However, it was a very happy occasion. Incidentally, on my way to Basel I became engaged to be married, so that was the most important thing that I have ever done in my life. Dear Oscar Cullmann teased me about this and asked me whether getting the doctorate was a condition for the engagement being maintained, but of course there was nothing like that!

IJH: Did you return then to Scotland and take another parish? Earlier you mentioned succeeding H. R. Mackintosh, but there must have been someone in between because you said he had died already when you were a student at New College (University of Edinburgh).

TFT: Yes, I went back then from Basel to my previous church in Alyth, and Margaret and I were married soon afterwards. When I was at Alyth the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen became vacant. Various people were approached to suggest possibilities, and J. S. Stewart, who had been the former minister of Beechgrove, suggested they should come to me. I must say I was very reluctant to leave Alyth and go to a large city parish. But the fact that H. R. Mackintosh had been the first minister and A. J. Gossip and J. S. Stewart had all been ministers there, made it a rather attractive proposition. Eventually I agreed and Margaret and I, now with our son Thomas, moved to Aberdeen.

IJH: How long were you there and who was then teaching dogmatics at New College?

TFT: Well, perhaps I should say that I went to Aberdeen where I was extremely busy, for three years. Toward the end of the third year, the Church History chair in Edinburgh became vacant when Professor Hugh Watt was made Moderator of the Church. Then pressure came upon me to go there—I had already published The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers, and Calvin's Doctrine of Man; I had also started the Scottish Journal of Theology and founded the Scottish Church Theology Society. So I was now very heavily committed to theological training and theological renewal in Scotland. When I was urged by friends to let my name be put forward for this chair, I argued that Church History was not my field. They replied, "Well, you can also teach Reformation Theology." I found myself elected and we moved to Edinburgh. By now we had a family, for our second son was born in Aberdeen.

In Edinburgh I taught Church History for two years, having as my senior colleague John Burleigh. The person who had taken over dogmatics from H. R. Mackintosh was G. T. Thomson. When I went to Edinburgh as Professor of Church History I had hoped that in
due course I would be able to switch to dogmatics. That happened sooner than I had expected, for Thomson became unwell and had to retire earlier than he anticipated. In fact, he retired at the end of my second year when I went then to John Baillie (I think John Baillie was Principal and Dean of New College at that time) and asked to be transferred to the Chair of Dogmatics. I don't think John Baillie was too pleased with that! However, he didn't object and so I was allowed to change over to the Chair of Dogmatics in 1952, which I held until my own retirement in 1979.

IJH: Did you teach anything other than dogmatics, or did you cover the whole gamut of the theological field? Or did you share some of those things with John Baillie? Did you do any other teaching in any other fields? I ask that because I'm surprised sometimes at European professors and the fact that they teach not only dogmatics, for example, but sometimes church history and even pastoral theology on the side, so to speak. I know Emil Brunner did that in Zurich and I'm impressed with the breadth of things that Hendrikus Berkhof has taught at Leiden.

TFT: My teaching responsibilities were fairly restricted. In the early period when John Baillie was Professor of Divinity (that was the Philosophy of Religion Department or as I preferred to call it, Philosophy of Theology) and I had the Dogmatics Department, there was some overlap in our lecturing. He liked to take a course in Christology, but otherwise in those early years I taught practically the whole round of systematic theology. As the student numbers increased we had to have additional lecturers and then we divided up the courses. In the school of postgraduate theology, however, we were able to teach what we liked and so to postgraduate students I taught courses beyond strict dogmatics. I taught ecumenical and historical theology and also offered courses in epistemology and in what later turned out to be what I called the Philosophy of Theology, or the Philosophy of the Science of Theology. I was concerned to show how positive theology must be pursued without the loss of dogmatic or evangelical substance, within the context of "the scientific world."

IJH: Although you spent the rest of your career at the University of Edinburgh until your retirement in 1979, I know that you have done a lot of lecturing both in Great Britain and abroad. You have lectured in the United States many times, and I know you have lectured occasionally in Germany as well as for various academic societies. Could you just give us a sampling of some of the places where you have lectured and some of the series of lectures you have given? I know that these lectures and commitments have taken you around the world and that you also served in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

TFT: During the earlier part of my career in Edinburgh, from 1950 to 1959, I didn't lecture abroad very much. I gave some lectures in McGill University in Montreal during that period and I came over here to the United States in 1954 for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and for the World Council of Churches meeting in Evanston. I had also given some lectures in various places on the continent, in Sweden, for example, and Norway, Switzerland, France, and Germany. Through my involvement with the Faith and Order Commission from Lund (1952) on, I was heavily engaged in theological dialogue every year, under the auspices of the World Council. Most of my extra time for nearly ten
years was taken up with work for Faith and Order. After ten years I felt that I had given enough time to the WCC Faith and Order Commission and hence I withdrew so that I could get on with some of my other work. By this time, of course, John Baillie had retired and I had taken on more responsibilities at New College and was now lecturing a good deal on what I call the Philosophy of the Science of Theology. My concerns in these areas also were carrying me across to the States. I was asked to give the Hewitt Lectures in Union Seminary, New York, and at Andover-Newton Seminary in 1959. Those were the lectures which were later written up and published in Theological Science. I also came over for about six months at that time with my wife and family when we stayed in Princeton and I lectured in various seminaries and universities before going back.

Since that time I have been over to the States every year or every other year, sometimes even twice a year. I've lectured in Princeton, Yale, Harvard, Boston; in the South in Atlanta, Chattanooga, in Texas, Nashville; and in California. And of course in Canada: in Toronto and in Montreal from time to time.

Later on I became heavily involved with a number of continental theologians. This began, actually, during the Vatican Council. I was pressed to go to the Vatican Council which I was very loathe to do because I had too many commitments—both writing and lecturing commitments—so I declined. But I did get involved with some of the Vatican theologians in the interim period in the summer when we discussed some of the very basic issues that later led to the Lumen Gentium. In a way I had a hand in one or two of the basic ideas they had there. At that time I was also brought in to the International Academy of Religious Sciences. The president of the academy was Gerard Phillips, the Belgian dogmatician who had actually written the final form of the Lumen Gentium or the Constitutio de ecclesia for the Second Vatican Council. After two or three years he died and they insisted on my taking his place, so I have been president of the International Academy now for nine or ten years, and in that connection I have been involved in a good deal of international work, seminars, and discussions. Also, in connection with that, I was brought on to the sister academy, the International Academy of the Philosophy of Sciences. It is not mainly an academy of philosophers but an academy of scientists, mathematicians, and physicists, people concerned with biology and thermodynamics; we also had one psychologist. Thus I became steadily more involved with international scientific work on both sides of the Atlantic. In one way and another, then, I have been pretty heavily committed in the last few years to this kind of international work, mostly in Europe; but it's had its offspill over here on this side of the Atlantic.

I should add that the particular round of lectures that brings Professor Torrance to the United States at this time is, first of all, the Warfield Lectures which you have just completed at Princeton Seminary; and you go from here to seminaries in Memphis and Austin, and from there to Fuller Seminary for the Payton Lectures. Many lectures of this sort have become books, and other books of yours represent collections of lectures given at various places. I would hazard the guess that you have come out with a book almost annually for the last decade or so, because according to our rather rough count there must be somewhere between eighteen and twenty books that you published individually, not to mention things that you have edited. This includes editing the Calvin New Testament.
Commentaries along with your brother, and also your important work with Geoffrey Bromiley and others on the English translation of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Those have all been monumental efforts which have made a tremendous contribution to the English-speaking theological world.

Would you say a word about books that are in the works now, because you have alluded to a number of things, including a three-volume work on hermeneutics and some other lectures that are coming out. I am also curious about what your plans are now that you are at least retired in a technical sense, although certainly not as far as activities are concerned. And many of your students and friends around the world have been asking when you are going to come out with something more systematic, especially whether a dogmatics may not be in the offing, hopefully in the near future.

TFT: Well, as a matter of fact I haven't produced books every year. There have been several years when I haven't produced any, although they've been maturing and cooking up, so to speak. And then several will get produced in the same year. That's the kind of thing that happens. Normally, I seem to have had several books on the go at once, as different interests dragged me from one to the other. My main interest has been to clear the ground for a dogmatics in the modern era, because the kind of dogmatics we have learned from Calvin and Barth needs to be thought out and expressed more succinctly within the rigorous scientific context in which we work and which will undoubtedly dominate the whole future. At the same time, this is my evangelistic interest, for I am concerned to evangelize the foundations, so to speak, of scientific culture, so that a dogmatics can take root in that kind of structure. That is a big task, I know, but it's a task which I've learned from Greek patristic theology above all and to which in some measure I would like to contribute in our own day.

At the moment I have undertaken to edit a series of books on theology and scientific culture; this comes out under the aegis of the Templeton Foundation and I have published the first volume of that which will shortly be published by the Oxford Press in New York. This is called *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*. At the moment we have about twenty or twenty-five volumes planned in that series.

IJH: In addition to your various publishing ventures, we would also like to know about future plans.

TFT: Well, I've just given the Warfield lectures in Princeton Seminary on the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. They will be published as soon as I can get the time to prepare them—probably the end of the summer. I'm shortly to give the Payton lectures in Fuller Seminary in Pasadena; they are all written and more or less ready for publication [published in 1982 by Westminster Press: *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, Ed.]. Their theme is the realist basis of evangelical theology. I start by discussing what genuine theology is in this world of space and time; in the next two chapters I deal with hermeneutical issues; and in the last chapter I take up the problem of truth and the canon of truth. In all of these lectures I am concerned to establish a realist basis in evangelical theology in contrast with the nominalism that prevails so widely among so-called "evangelicals!"

Then I have another book which I must try and get ready before very long. These are the Harris lectures I gave in Dundee (Scotland) on "God and the Universe." They are more
philosophical than scientific but they try to clarify the basic epistemological structure for scientific reality in theology. In this book I take up the question of how far in a non-dualist outlook what used to be called natural theology and Christian theology can come together. I have also said a bit about that in anticipation in *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (University of Virginia Press, 1980).

Then I have coming out three books on hermeneutics and epistemology: one is the *Hermeneutics of the Fathers*; the second volume, *Hermeneutics of the Medievals and Reformers*; and the third volume, *Hermeneutics of the Moderns*, from Spinoza down to our present day. Quite a lot of this has seen publication in the form of long articles for various journals, but there are certain sections which I want to rewrite—on Augustine, for example, in volume one. Volume two is more or less ready; and volume three requires some more writing, especially in view of my work on scientific hermeneutics, interpretation of nature and natural science, because this has an important bearing on the whole question. My intention in these volumes is really, quite frankly, to collapse modern biblical interpretation from behind—for I think it is basically wrong—and try and build up a much more firm basis for a realist hermeneutic in which God’s self-revelation can come through to us on its own ground and in its own integrity in the kind of way that will allow us to keep up our dialogue and discussion with the scientists.

By that time, then, I hope to have cleared the ground, so to speak, for my *Dogmatics*. I project a three-volume dogmatics, roughly trinitarian, on the doctrines of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These come out of my lectures in Edinburgh which have been rewritten frequently [see, e.g., earlier works such as *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eerdmans, 1965); and *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Eerdmans, 1976). The former is on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the latter deals with the resurrection, ascension and the *parousia* of Christ, Ed.] I’m sure I shall rewrite them all pretty thoroughly when I come to publication, but I hope succinctly as well because it is my intention to produce finally a three-volume dogmatics which can be used in teaching.

I have attempted many, many times to write a handbook on Christian theology, a brief scientific account of the basic structure of theology which is simple enough for the first-year student or the intelligent layman to read. Although I have worked at that often I have not yet produced anything satisfactory; but maybe one day it will turn out in the way that I would like.

I would also like to write a history of Scottish theology. This has never been done properly. I have a collection, indeed a very valuable collection, of theology literature—fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries—and have had good students writing dissertations on certain aspects of this so that they could help clear the ground. My brother James is also deeply interested in this and I had hoped at one time that he and I might write this together. More probably this is something that my younger son Iain may do in due course.

Also, I would very much like to write one or two theological commentaries, a theological commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians and a theological commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. When I was an undergraduate in Edinburgh I did write a theological commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians. That’s before I went to New College. I
destroyed that later on, but it was an immensely valuable exercise. Ever since then I have felt the urge to write a theological commentary. After having worked through so many of Calvin's commentaries, I felt that I would like at least to have a hand at trying to do some doctrinal exposition to show how theological interpretation of a book of the New Testament can be done without betraying either the biblical exegesis or retreating from high theology.

IJH: I noted in preparing for this interview that you apparently experience good health. We hope and pray that will continue to be so because good health makes a big difference in productivity. I know Karl Barth commented on that often in his latter years, that he was grateful for the ability to keep writing in his late 60s and even after he was 70. So we hope that this will also be true for you because you have some very ambitious projects. Even given your capability to turn out a remarkable amount of work in a short time and with your vast background in all this prolegomena you've done, it will still require this kind of health and vigor to be able to complete all those tasks.

Another question I have wanted to ask you for a long time—and I know there are others who have raised this question—is how is it that as a theologian, even granted your broad interests from your youth, you seem as familiar with Einstein as with Augustine and with Niels Bohr (a physicist) and Michael Polanyi (scientist-philosopher) as with Calvin and Karl Barth. How in the world did you ever acquire this vast knowledge in the scientific field so that today you find you're getting readier recognition sometimes from scientists than from theologians who are hostile to your basic viewpoint?

TFT: Well, I spent some twenty years at that, largely on my own, in hard study and wrestling with books. I now regret in many ways that I didn't pursue my mathematics much more at an earlier period. But I have relatives who are scientists, like Sir Bernard Lovell, a cousin of my wife's. It was when we talked about scientific method and theology and science, and he asked me what my scientific method was, that I found I had to get a profounder and fuller grasp of science in order even to talk to him and to communicate with him over the interrelations of science and theology. It so happens that these and other contacts with scientists which I greatly enjoy have carried me into further fields. At the moment, for example, I've been carried into the field of legal science, because in Britain we have a positivist notion of law which has been written into the constitution. We don't have the realist notions of law, for example, which you have in your Constitution and in the documents of American independence. I actually dared to preach about this in Westminster Abbey when as Moderator (of the Church of Scotland) I was asked to preach a sermon when we Britons celebrated with you the second centenary of American independence. I challenged the British Establishment on this issue and was told I would be packed off to the Tower! But from that moment I was determined really to think this out, and eventually produced a document about it. People on both sides of the Atlantic, including lawyers who had read some of the things I've said, have asked me to do this. In response I wrote an essay about what juridical law can learn from physical law. Just as in science we have moved from a positivist to a realist understanding of natural law, so in juridical law we've got to move from conventionalism and positivism in ethics and law to a realist position. For us in Britain this involves a much bigger upturn in some respects because it calls for
radical change in constitutional matters. At the moment there are a dozen people in British politics who have been studying this paper of mine. It's not yet published, but it will be published as a small book by the Scottish Academic Press. I feel sure that it is going to drag me into a lot more discussion! I believe that theologians must contribute to the foundations of society, and this involves rethinking the basis of law, not simply natural law but also physical law. I hope and pray that I won't be dragged too much into this so that I will have time left to work on my main love, which is Christian dogmatics.

IJH: Time is running short but I did want to ask also whether an impression I gain in some of your recent books is one that you might want to elaborate on and that is that after a period of discouragement, if not despair, about the trend of theology in the 1960s (I think both in Great Britain and the United States we experienced a lot of "pop" theologies or as some people dubbed it, lightweight "playboy" theologies of one sort or another), now the theological scene seems to be more settled and you seem to be rather positive and optimistic about a whole new outlook that may be developing because of the opening up of a new world view, thanks both to the physicists in particular and a new appreciation on the part of theologians, a movement which you are spearheading. Are you indeed more optimistic now as you look into the 1980s concerning the whole theological enterprise and the future of the church?

TFT: Well, I think I'm optimistic along two lines. For one thing, the whole world hungers for the gospel. Although in different countries people have a lot of criticisms to make about the institutional church—and there is much despair there—there is no despair as far as I can see over Jesus Christ. It is Christ himself that they want to know and the churches have to learn to put Christ before the institutional church. Now the very fact that there is this enormous hunger for the gospel and for Christ is to me a sign of immense hope. Then there is the point that you mentioned about current world views. While superficial phenomenology and obsolescent sociology have dominated thought in the last two decades, they are now so radically undermined that I cannot see that state of affairs lasting very long although, quite frankly, most of our colleagues in the theological faculties throughout the world are still tied to this obsolete framework of thought. Some of them deliberately climbed on the bandwagon of phenomenology or the sociology of religion, only to find it hurtling down to the bottom of the hill and crashing. I hope this will involve a very radical catharsis in the church's understanding of the gospel and in the way it has formulated its doctrine. The cleansing effect, I think, of rigorous scientific activity will open up the field and clear the ground again for a much deeper understanding of divine revelation.

At the same time, however, on both sides of the Atlantic I find there is a widespread reversion to a kind of fundamentalism. The motivation behind all that is, I think, a desire to conserve the gospel and to conserve the eternal verities of the faith, although often unfortunately it is done in a rationalistic and nominalistic way that is counterproductive. If we can direct that proper desire onto a realist foundation, then we may envisage a much better future ahead. But this means that all of us—and all the churches—must be very critical of all our presuppositions and preconceptions in the light of the gospel. We all look through traditional spectacles, Reformed spectacles or Episcopalian spectacles or Lutheran specta-
cles; and some of our spectacles are thicker than others. Only if we take these spectacles off will we be able to serve the gospel in the way appropriate to it and serve theology in a way appropriate to it. Or perhaps I can express it another way. I recall that Calvin spoke of Holy Scripture as the spectacles that God gives us through which we apprehend the truth of God. This means that we look through the Holy Scriptures. That’s just the way that we develop our scientific theories. They are transparent “disclosure-models” through which we allow the truth in the creation as it has come from God to shine through to us.

Now this kind of approach allows us again to take seriously God’s self-revelation in the Bible and the self-evidencing force of the truth it mediates to us. If we can serve the gospel and serve Christian theology in that kind of way, then I think that there is great hope for the future.

IJH: We must close this interview but I would like to conclude personally by saying how much it has meant to us to be able to have you here in Western Michigan: first of all for Western Seminary and Hope College, but also for our friends from Calvin Seminary with whom you met briefly and who will be with us tomorrow. I must also confess that this week-long encounter has shattered a myth which is prevalent in some theological circles. I had only known you before through some very pleasant personal encounters but never heard you lecture, nor had I seen you in a theological debate or anything of that sort. What I had heard was that you were a fierce theological infighter and were not only a professor of dogmatics but were known also for being dogmatic and that you intimidated and demolished your opponents, and so forth. Well, either you have grown more genial with age or perhaps this has been only a myth perpetuated by certain theological opponents. Our impressions, in any case, appear to be confirmed in the article about you in Life and Work magazine on the occasion of your being elected Moderator of the Church of Scotland. The editor observes that your election could be attributed to many factors such as your international reputation and your being an active churchman as well as a “theologian’s theologian.” And then he added, “But there will also be a very human element of love and honour for this brilliant, unassuming, immensely likeable man.” We have found you to be just that: modest and very genial and warm. So all I can conclude is that either age has mellowed you as it certainly did Karl Barth (I only knew him as an older man and he was like a grandfather figure to me as well as my “Doktorvater” as he was to you) or that this myth was just that. Everyone has commented on your warmth, generosity, and openness and also on the genial and irenic way in which you handled the few people who have disagreed with you while you were here. One reason may be that you are in company that is basically sympathetic and very appreciative of what you stand for and the way in which you present it. So thank you very much.