



Jason R. Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers: A Reformed, Evangelical, and Ecumenical Reconstruction of the Patristic Tradition* (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2014), pp. xx + 228, ISBN 978-1625646033. £18.00

Radcliff's book is a well-researched analysis of T. F. Torrance's use of the Fathers and a timely appraisal of his understanding of the patristic tradition over against those found in historical Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions, in modern scholarship, and in the post-1950 Protestant evangelical tradition. The book's aims of setting Torrance in context (through an informative overview of historical and modern patristics), providing a detailed account of Torrance's creative integration of patristic insights into Reformed theology, and offering a constructive critique of his approach are all admirably fulfilled. Throughout the book, Radcliff's impressive scholarship throws up much in the way of instructive, illuminating analysis, references and valuable footnotes.

After a fine foreword by Thomas Noble and a brief but comprehensive outline of the book's argument, the various chapters are: 1) *The Consensus Patrum: An Historical Overview*; 2) Protestant Evangelical "Discoveries" of the Fathers; 3) T. F. Torrance's *Consensus Patrum: Catholic Themes*; 4) T. F. Torrance's *Consensus Patrum: Catholic Streams*; and 5) *The Ecumenical Relevance of T. F. Torrance's Consensus Patrum*. The book ends with a final evaluation, 'Conclusion: An Assessment and Proposed Adoption of Torrance', then, in reverse order, a comprehensive index of patristic writers, a full bibliography, and a voluminous index of patristic citations in *The Trinitarian Faith* (authors, works, numbers of citations).

The first two chapters are an excellent analysis of the way in which the '*Consensus Patrum*' (the consensual core tradition of the Fathers) has been very differently interpreted, with the major theological traditions of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant each working with their own distinctive lens of understanding (containing within it varying emphases) regarded as most faithful to the Fathers. By the time of Torrance, the general Protestant view, including that of his own evangelical Reformed tradition, tended to be either liberal denial of the Fathers' importance or biblicist avoidance of them, but since

then there has been a remarkable if very eclectic, often untheological, evangelical ‘discovery’ of them.

Radcliff is at his best in his analysis of Torrance’s theology. While focussing on *The Trinitarian Faith*, Torrance’s great monograph on the evangelical patristic faith, Radcliff ranges impressively through the whole range of Torrance’s publications. He argues that his patristic-Reformed theology, as yet under-appreciated and insufficiently grasped, often critiqued or ignored, is a ground-breaking achievement of profound ecumenical significance. With his knowledge of Torrance, Radcliff is well placed to assess critiques and see that while many do not understand Torrance or what he is doing, others do raise valid questions.

Radcliff argues that Torrance is not a patrologist proper, or a simple historian of the Fathers, and nor is he a normal Reformed evangelical theologian. He is dogmatician, concerned to listen to the Fathers and think out with them the evangelical faith. He looks through their eyes to know the same realities of God and faith as he sees through Reformed eyes. In looking through their eyes he is at the same time looking through Reformed eyes and allowing each to inform the other. The result is a mutual deepening of patristic and Reformed theological understanding, each in the light of the other, in a new reconstructed patristic-Reformed theology. The result is also, as critics have not been slow to point out, that Athanasius, for example, begins to sound like Torrance and that he is reading his own thought into Athanasius. It is certainly true that it can be hard on occasion to know where one ends and the other begins. At the same time the depth and range of Torrance’s knowledge of the Fathers may mean that much of what we customarily think of as Torrance may in fact be culled by him from the great Fathers, albeit in the light of Reformed insight.

In the two chapters unfolding Torrance theology, Radcliff details first how extensively Torrance referenced from the Fathers his key ‘Catholic themes’: *homoousion*, hypostatic union, incarnation, atonement, vicarious humanity, *kataphysic* (realist/scientific) theology, godly piety; and his thinking on Christology, Trinity and pneumatology, creation, church and sacraments. Then in the chapter on ‘Catholic streams’, Radcliff discusses how Torrance links major figures together into different ‘streams’ or traditions of theology,

e.g. Nicene-Evangelical, Athanasian-Cyrilean (Athanasius, Cyril, Nazianzen, Hilary, Anselm, Calvin, certain Scottish figures, Barth), Cappadocian-Byzantine, and Augustinian. This chapter is a fascinating account of the various streams, the nuances of overlap between them, their differences, and the distinctive themes and lines of thinking characteristic of each.

In Chapter Three Radcliff judges, ‘The theme of the vicarious humanity is perhaps Torrance’s greatest contribution to patristic and theological scholarship’ (p. 92). In Chapter Five, he discusses and assesses Torrance’s lifelong ‘vast ecumenical work’ (p. 162) in similarly positive terms. ‘Torrance’s reconstruction of patristic theology in the light of the evangelical perspective of the Reformation into a Torrancien *Consensus Patrum* is of great ecclesiastical and ecumenical importance’ (p. 160). His knowledge of the Fathers was the catalyst for his ‘immense and unique ecumenical work’ enabling dialogue with other traditions and the initiation of a far-reaching Reformed-Orthodox dialogue culminating in historic agreement.

Radcliff’s respect for Torrance does not blind him to any criticisms of him – quite the reverse. Throughout the book he endeavours to judge critiques as fairly as he can. His general conclusion is that, weaknesses aside, there is a great deal for every tradition to learn from Torrance and much to be gained from building on his legacy. In doing so, however, he mentions two main points at which Torrance’s theology was heavily contextual, in its critique of dualism and of the neopalmites and Federal theology. He suggests that Torrance has successfully dealt with these problems in his day (!) and that perhaps his views on these points can be left behind as theology moves forward – surely an over-optimism.

If Radcliff’s book can be critiqued itself, it may be principally that in his concern to tread the thin line between over-estimation and over-criticism, of being fair to Torrance and his critics, his careful summing up of his argument, stage-by-stage as it develops, feels somewhat repetitive. That does not detract, however, from the fact that there is a great deal in this book to instruct, to stimulate, to pose questions and to repay further study.

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