



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The problem of history in Thomas Torrance and Bernard Lonergan

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Abstract

The essay compares the problem of history in the theological methods of the Reformed theologian Thomas Torrance and the Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan. Lonergan works to incorporate historical science into theology, while Torrance argues for a revision of historical science. Lonergan's method is a synthesis of Catholic theology and history, but it is one constructed at the expense of eschatology and the full significance of Christ's resurrection. Torrance's method, on the contrary, includes a dogmatic understanding of history that is grounded solidly on the 'Word-Act' of God – the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. It gives full weight to eschatology but elides the contingencies of history.

Keywords: eschatology; Bernard Lonergan; resurrection; Thomas Torrance; transcendental method

Born just years apart on opposing continents and into opposing ecclesiastical traditions, the Reformed theologian Thomas Torrance (1913–2007) and the Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan (1904–84) were two theological titans of the Anglosphere in the twentieth century. Yet despite the ecclesiastical gulf separating them, we find striking similarities between them when we examine their intellectual work. Both were theologically conservative, yet both were bold, innovative thinkers who were deeply concerned with the way theology should be done in their day. Out of this concern, both found an ally in modern, empirical science in the development of their theological methods. Both published their defining works in this field about the same time. Torrance's *Theological Science* came out in 1969, while Lonergan's *Method in Theology* came to light in 1972.

Neither Lonergan nor Torrance, however, advocated the integration of theology and natural science (à la Teilhard de Chardin). Lonergan sought a 'third way' for theology, which will be a way between theology as an 'art' and theology as a 'science'; while Torrance insisted on treating theology as a 'unique science', although he believed there was only one scientific way of thinking, that being 'the rigorous extension of our basic rationality'.¹

¹Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 4; Thomas Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: OUP, 1969), p. 107.

Although there is no evidence that Torrance and Lonergan ever met, we can assume that Torrance studied Lonergan's theological method, because he published a critical essay on it in 1975: 'The Function of the Inner and Outer Word in Lonergan's Theological Method'.² In it, Torrance faults Lonergan for his 'epistemological and cosmological dualism' and for the 'subjectivist turn' in his theology that he thinks stems from this.³

In this essay I wish to draw attention to a subject that Torrance only alludes to in his paper but one that was quite important to both of them. This is the subject of history. Both Torrance and Lonergan saw natural science presenting opportunities and challenges for theology. They also felt the same about the new science of history that had arisen in the nineteenth century. The paper examines the problem of history in the theological methods of Torrance and Lonergan. Taking a comparative approach, we find that Lonergan seeks to incorporate historical science into theology, while Torrance argues for a revision of historical science. Lonergan's method is a synthesis of Catholic theology and history, but it is one constructed at the expense of eschatology and the full significance of Christ's resurrection. Torrance's method, on the contrary, includes a dogmatic understanding of history that is grounded solidly on the 'Word-Act' of God – the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. It gives full weight to eschatology but elides the contingencies of history.

History and theology

The subject of history does not dominate theology today as it did in the last century. Back then, there was almost an obsession with history, judging by the cascade of literature on the subject.⁴ Interest began in the 1800s, which has been aptly called the 'century of history'. This is when history becomes a distinct academic discipline, when it evolved into 'historical science'. This is when in Germany a nuanced distinction is first made between *Geschichte* and *Historie*, which will have far-reaching ramifications for theology. Although the latter term refers simply to the sequence of events in history, the former now connotes 'historic' or significant events. But the most troubling notion for theology to emerge from this era is 'historicism'. It suggests that every feature of human culture, including religion, is largely determined by history.

The 'century of history' caused decades of crises for Christianity. The so-called 'quest of the historical Jesus' opened a gulf between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith' that looked unbridgeable. Moreover, historicism cast doubt on the uniqueness and universal significance of Christianity, because it was now understood as a product of contingent historical circumstances instead as the fruit of divine revelation. Historicism had spawned historical relativism.

Historicism provoked the rise within continental Protestantism of 'dialectical theology' in the twentieth century. Dialectical theologians sought a safe harbour for God's revelation from the dangers of historicism by focussing on the preaching and

²Thomas F. Torrance, 'The Function of Inner and Outer Word in Lonergan's Theological Method', in Patrick Corcoran (ed.), *Looking at Lonergan's Method* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1975), pp. 101–26.

³*Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴Some notable examples include John Macmurray, *The Clue to History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939); Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: OUP, 1946); Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950); Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956); Henrikus Berkof, *Christ the Meaning of History* (London: SCM, 1966); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Revelation as History* (New York: Macmillan, 1968 [1961]).

hearing of the Word of God. The ‘real Christ is the Christ who is preached’ was the motto of this theology.⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, the most radical dialectical theologian, found a solution in the concept of *Geschichte*. For him it stood for the inner or subjective history. This was the only history that should matter for Christians, because it was the one that provided meaning. *Historie* shows us the ‘Jesus of history’, but only *Geschichte* brings us the ‘Christ of faith’.

The ‘century of history’ caused a commotion in the Catholic Church as well, where historicism was seen as a symptom of a dangerous ‘modernism’. In 1907, Pope Pius X condemned the ‘doctrines of the modernists’, including the division between the ‘Christ of history’ and the ‘Christ of faith’, who, according to the ‘Modernists’, never really existed.⁶ To ensure the Catholic Church conformed to his anti-Modernist stance, the pope instituted the Oath against Modernism in 1910, which was enforced on all Catholic clergy and seminary professors until 1967, when it was withdrawn.⁷ This emphatic Catholic anti-modernism was the environment that Bernard Lonergan was born into, in which he became a Jesuit priest, and within which he had to construct his philosophy and theology.

Lonergan and the problem of history

Lonergan’s entire oeuvre is now being understood – especially since the discovery of his unpublished papers – as a response to the problems caused by the ‘century of history’.⁸ Frederick Crowe, co-founder of the Lonergan Research Institute, makes the astounding claim that history is the ‘essential’ Lonergan, ‘that the need to understand history, basic history, the history that happens, is *the chief dynamic element* in his academic work: not insight, not method, not economics, not emergent probability, but history’.⁹ It is also reported that Lonergan himself confessed, near the end of his career, that all his work had been about ‘introducing history into Catholic theology’.¹⁰

He would have had a daunting task. The Vatican denunciation of historicism happened just a few years before he was born, but it was renewed a few generations later in the encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950). And it was not only that he had to deal with Vatican strictures; the scholastic neo-Thomism that he was force-fed in the seminary would not have furnished much help, either, because its exponents did not see ‘historical studies’ as an avenue to truth.¹¹

In Lonergan’s 800-page magnum opus, *Insight* (1957), there are only a few scattered references to history. The only clue to its importance is an endnote in the last chapter,

⁵Martin Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, ed. and tr. Carl Braaten (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 66.

⁶The Holy See, ‘Pascendi Dominici Gregis’ (Encyclical of Pope Pius X on the Doctrines of The Modernists), https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis.html, 30–31.

⁷Papal Encyclicals Online, ‘The Oath against Modernism’, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10moath.htm>.

⁸See Bernard Lonergan, *Early Papers on History*, vol. 25 of *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

⁹Frederick E. Crowe S.J., *Christ and History: The Christology of Bernard Lonergan from 1935 to 1982* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 168 (emphasis added).

¹⁰J. Martin O’Hara, Gerald MacGuigan, and Charlotte Tansey (eds), *Curiosity at the Centre of One’s Life: Statements and Questions of R. Eric O’Connor* (Montreal: Thomas Moore Institute, 1984), p. 427.

¹¹Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 2.

informing us that the material of the chapter was originally titled ‘The Structure of History’.¹² When one turns to *Method in Theology* (1972), Lonergan’s other masterpiece, we find history in the foreground. *Method* builds upon *Insight*, but Lonergan apparently had to master the German historical school before he was able to complete the second work.¹³ Even the use of ‘method’ in the title points to the transformative influence of history on Lonergan, because he tells us in another place that ‘method’ is an adaption to the ‘movement’ we find in the world, in contrast to older theologies (Scholastic and Neo-Scholastic) that are patterned on ‘logic’.¹⁴

History, we quickly learn, is one of the eight ‘functional specialities’ in theology, and it, along with research, interpretation and dialectic constitutes the ‘first phase’ of theology, which is about understanding *what is behind us*, namely scripture and tradition. *Method in Theology*, in stark contrast to the Catholic Church’s condemnation of ‘modernism’ less than a century earlier, eagerly embraces everything modern when it speaks about the ‘various tasks’ that theologians have to perform. ‘A contemporary method would conceive those tasks in the context of modern science, modern scholarship, modern philosophy, of historicity’.¹⁵ We should bear in mind, though, that Lonergan published *Method* after the reforms of Vatican II, and after the Catholic Church withdrew the Oath against Modernism.

For Lonergan, the recognition of our historical nature, or our historicity, is what defines modernity. Historical consciousness, he says, is ‘the nucleus’ of modernity.¹⁶ This historical consciousness has caused a ‘Copernican revolution’ in the study of history that we all need to acknowledge. We must now put aside the old ‘scissors-and-paste’ approach to history based on ‘memory, testimony, credibility’, and renounce the notion that the historian’s job is simply to gather the facts and let them speak for themselves.¹⁷ In place of this ‘empty head’ way of doing history, we now have a method that is ‘critical and constructive’.¹⁸ But Lonergan thinks historians today need more in their head. They need also a ‘satisfactory cognitional theory’.¹⁹

This brings us to what for many is the secret to understanding Lonergan’s theology and philosophy: the ‘transcendental method’. This method is defined as the ‘basic pattern of operations employed in every cognitional enterprise’, which include being ‘attentive’, being ‘intelligent’, being ‘reasonable’ and being ‘responsible’.²⁰ The subject in his/her ‘conscious and intentional operations’ then is the ‘rock’ upon which Lonergan builds his method.²¹ And this ‘transcendental method’ is the general method of all natural and human sciences, of which theology is just one.

History is one of the interrelated ‘functional specialities’ that are tied to the various tasks performed by theologians. But these functional specialties reflect the different cognitive operations undertaken by the one human mind that performs them, and so the

¹²Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, eds. Frederick Crowe S.J. and Robert Doran S.J. (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 805.

¹³Crowe, *Christ and History*, p. 90.

¹⁴Bernard Lonergan, ‘Philosophy and Religious Phenomenon’, p. 4 (Bernard Lonergan Archive, Marquette University), <https://bernardlonergan.com/archive/26250dte070>.

¹⁵Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. xi.

¹⁶Crowe, *Christ and History*, p. 90.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 175.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 4, 14.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

thinking subject is the basis for the interrelation of the functional specialities and of the multitude of tasks that theologians must carry out. The study of history – of historical agents and the effects of their actions – is another human science, and one therefore that must be governed by the transcendental method and its basic operations.

In fact, Lonergan insists that the study of history, along with hermeneutics, is 'basic to all human sciences', because they are indispensable to the discovery of 'meaning' that is the product of 'human intersubjectivity'.²² Our world is one that is 'mediated by meaning' and even constructed by acts of meaning.²³ The Christian revelation is actually about God 'entering into the world of human meaning'.²⁴ Yet since meaning varies from age to age, and from place to place, the science of history along with the science of interpretation are needed to identify human meaning.²⁵ Although interpretation ascertains the meaning of historical data, history looks for 'meanings incarnate in deeds and movements'.²⁶

Historians of course aim at 'objective historical knowledge' about the past. This requires a sensitivity to the meaning of language, actions, symbols, customs and events of a particular cultural and temporal context. It is not enough anymore either to satisfy von Ranke's famous criteria for good history: *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (to know 'what really happened'). A modern historian's ultimate goal should be to find out 'what was going forward in a social group at particular places and times', to see the bigger picture, which is something that people in a social group at that time are unable to do. This means the historian has to take an interpretive approach as well as a critical one. This will entail 'historical understanding' and a 'historical judging'.

Determining what was 'going forward' in a social group in the past is a necessary step in building a 'general' history that would offer a 'total view' of the world. This is constructive history and it is the last stage in the work of an historian. In theology, a general history would finally try to construct the place of Christianity in world history. This would involve a study of Christianity's relations with other religions as well as knowledge of humanity's religious development through time. Lonergan accepts the Catholic position that people have a natural desire for God; that, in his words, God is signified in 'our questioning': 'There lies within his horizon a region for the divine, a shrine for ultimate holiness'.²⁷ The longing for God is implicit in our drive towards 'self-transcendence' and in our use of a transcendental method.

However, humanity's religious development, just as its general history, is marked by conflict – hence the need for the functional speciality of 'dialectic'. Dialectic can mean different things. With Lonergan the meaning has a Hegelian hue, because it refers to the 'concrete, the dynamic and the contradictory', all of which characterise, he feels, the history of Christianity. The goal of this speciality is a 'comprehensive viewpoint', where the conflicts within Christianity can be understood as 'complementary', as part of a 'larger whole', where differences are seen as 'successive stages in a single process of development'.²⁸ Regarding humanity's religious development, the struggle is between the 'self as transcending and the self as transcended'.²⁹

²²Ibid., p. 57.

²³Ibid., pp. 76, 78.

²⁴Crowe, *Christ and History*, p. 137.

²⁵Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 81.

²⁶Ibid., p. 355.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 103, 105.

²⁸Ibid., p. 129.

²⁹Ibid., p. 111.

Loneragan proposes a challenging programme for historians working in the field of religion. He is sure that the dialectical religious development of 'man' is not just an *a priori* assumption but also something that can be discovered *a posteriori* through an investigation of the history of religions. But it would be difficult to ascertain a dialectical religious development where the various religious experiences through history and across cultures invite a categorisation as experiences of God as a transcendent being and as a God of love. He even admits there is a lack of 'clear-cut evidence', but rests his case on a universalist assumption: 'the fact that God is good and gives to all men sufficient grace for salvation'.³⁰

Christology and history in Lonergan

As the title suggests, *Method in Theology* is about how theology should be done. It is not about the contents of theology. It doesn't treat the subject of Christology or even the implications of historical science for Christology. Yet we can distil some christological implications from Lonergan's method. In all human sciences, including theology, the goal of historical research is objective knowledge, but to reach this goal, history must become 'critical research'. According to Lonergan, critical history builds upon 'precritical history', which contributes to a community's identity through narrative and the use of mythological and apocalyptic language. By this definition, the history in the Bible is a form of pre-critical history. Even the Gospel writer Luke, who is probably the best historian in the Bible, was doing pre-critical history. He had 'a naive view' of history, it seems, in terms of 'memory, testimony' and 'credibility'.³¹ He was blind also, as were the other evangelists, to where the Christian community was headed, to its 'going forward'. Yet we can't blame Luke for his blindness, for his way of thinking, and we should not discount what he wrote. As with us (and all people) he lived in a world mediated by meaning. The big difference is that while Luke inhabited a world of 'common-sense' we moderns inhabit a world of 'theory'.³²

Although some church historians bemoan the development of christological dogmas in the fourth and fifth centuries, Lonergan believes these dogmas were signs of a salutary growth in us of 'intentionality' and the 'differentiation of consciousness'. Christological dogmas reflect the natural human desire to understand and judge what one has experienced. They point to the emergence of a 'world mediated by systematic meaning' alongside the older world that is mediated by 'common-sense meaning'.³³ Systematic meaning is actually a form of symbolic meaning that points to the 'objectification of the contents of consciousness', which for Lonergan is a necessary step on the way towards the emergence of the 'transcendental method'.³⁴

Loneragan never published a Christology, but it is a subject that he expounded on over the course of his career as a university and seminary professor. Frederick Crowe has described Lonergan's Christology as one of 'the great might-have-beens' of his 'unfinished business'.³⁵ Crowe tries to show what might-have-been in his book *Christ and History*, although it is not a systematic presentation of Lonergan's Christology but rather a genetic history of it. Crowe not only insists that history – the history

³⁰Ibid., p. 109.

³¹Ibid., p. 205.

³²Ibid., p. 93.

³³Ibid., pp. 259, 265.

³⁴Ibid., p. 8.

³⁵Crowe, *Christ and History*, p. 11.

'that happens' – is 'the key' to the unity of Lonergan's Christology; he goes as far as to suggest that Christ and history are 'coextensive' for him, and possibly even 'interchangeable topics', although it is not clear how they are or what is the import of that.³⁶

In a book called *Christ and History* one might expect some treatment of the split between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith', but there is none. Rather, we learn about the historical influence of Jesus Christ. Crowe contends that the genesis of Lonergan's Christology is to be found in a 1935 essay, '*pantōn anakephalaiōsis*', which was intended as an outline for 'a metaphysic of human solidarity'.³⁷ It is quite a philosophical paper and one infused with neo-Thomistic language and ideas, but Lonergan finds this metaphysic 'implicit in the epistles of St. Paul', giving preference to Ephesians 1:10, which tells us that it is the will of God the Father to gather up and unite all things in Christ. 'History, then, and historical causality', writes Crowe, 'belong to the context in which Lonergan worked out his Christology'.³⁸ This is not obvious in the '*pantōn*' essay, where the only reference to the historical causality of Christ is two questions: 'What would human history have been without Christ? Europe without the Faith?'

The historical causality of Christ (*via motionis*), of course, is only made possible because of the Son of God's entry into the world (*via receptionis*). Christ does not exert influence alone but by means of his church. Lonergan distinguishes two spheres of historical influence: culture and religion. And it's the job of theology, we learn in *Method*, to bring these spheres together.³⁹

Lonergan cites the broad influence of Christ on Europe, especially in the first 1500 years of the Church's history:

[T]he fact of the matter is that the ancient Church set about transforming Greek and Roman culture, that the medieval Church was a principal agent in the formation of medieval culture, that the Renaissance Church was scandalously involved in Renaissance culture.⁴⁰

In the sphere of religion, the historical influence of Christ can be summed up as the communication of divinity to humanity, which starts with incarnation and presses forward through his church, 'the community that results from the outer communication of Christ's message and from the inner gift of God's love'.⁴¹

Communication is the eighth and last functional speciality for Lonergan. It is where 'theological reflection bears fruit' on the historical plane.⁴² The gospel of Christ, of course, has to be communicated to all nations. The gift of the Holy Spirit can be in all places at all times but this is not the case with the gospel. It can reach the whole world only through 'human mediation'.

More generally, the impact of Christ in the religious sphere is apparent in the church's cultivation of the 'realm of transcendence' through its liturgies, celibate clergy,

³⁶Ibid., p. 166.

³⁷Bernard Lonergan, '*Pantōn anakephalaiōsis*' (Bernard Lonergan Archive, Marquette University), <https://bernardlonergan.com/archive/71303dte030>.

³⁸Crowe, *Christ and History*, p. 30.

³⁹Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. xi.

⁴⁰Crowe, *Christ and History*, p. 181.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 184.

⁴²Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 355.

religious orders and even through its art and architecture.⁴³ And it is there, in this realm of transcendence, that humans find ‘the experience of the mystery of love and awe’.⁴⁴ However, the Christianisation of culture and religion has not been without conflict. This is where ‘dialectic’ comes into play. The overall pattern of history, involving culture and religion, is not a straightforward ascent but is one of ‘progress and decline’ terminating in ‘redemption’. The pattern is not exactly Christ-centred, although decline is a result of the ‘dialectic of sin’ and of resistance to ‘the promptings of the Spirit’ in people.⁴⁵

Torrance and the problem of history

Although Lonergan struggled to bring modern historical methods into theology, Torrance struggled to curb their influence. At the same time, there is no blanket condemnation of modern historical science from him, but only of those aspects which he judged to be based on flawed presuppositions. What is distinctive about Torrance’s view of history is his firm belief that our whole conception of it must be revised in accordance with the historical event of Jesus’ resurrection, because this event, in his view, signifies that Jesus Christ is the Lord of history and Lord of time.

As a student of Karl Barth at the University of Basel, Torrance was undoubtedly influenced by the kerygmatic theology, or theology of the Word, which was a reaction to the corrosive effects of historicism on Christianity. Although Bultmann was guilty of dividing revelation and history, Barth, too, was criticised for attenuating the relationship between them, and a number of theologians sought to correct this weakness in his theology. Torrance was among them, although he does not go as far as Wolfhart Pannenberg, who has been reproached for fusing theology and history.⁴⁶

Torrance says far less about history than Lonergan, but what he does say is penetrating and profound. His most valuable discourse on the subject is found in *Theological Science* (1969), which he calls an essay in ‘philosophical theology’.⁴⁷ For Torrance, the rock upon which theologians must build is the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, not the cognitive operations of the human subject. However, we cannot speak about the Word of God without the cognitive operations of the human subject, because knowledge of the incarnate Word involves a ‘personal relation’.⁴⁸

The knowing subject by itself cannot (*pace* Lonergan) be the rock upon which we can build our theology, because it is subject to distorted ways of thinking and false presuppositions that derive from our sinful nature. Knowledge depends on a subject–object relation, but a pure relation can only be established when we refrain from projecting our presuppositions into the object field and instead allow our thoughts to be transformed by the object. If this is done, our mind is more open to the truth and inherent intelligibility of the object of our knowing – in this case, the Word of God incarnate.

In *Theological Science* Torrance identifies an analogy between theological science and natural sciences, although it would seem that the human sciences have more in common with theology. Theology and physics, for example, are vastly different, but

⁴³Ibid., p. 114; Crowe, *Christ and History*, p. 186.

⁴⁴Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 114.

⁴⁵Crowe, *Christ and History*, pp. 174, 219.

⁴⁶Alasdair Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1980), p. 112.

⁴⁷Torrance, *Theological Science*, p. xviii.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 210.

when studied properly there is a common respect for their objects of enquiry. 'Utter respect for objectivity is the *sine qua non* of scientific activity'.⁴⁹

This principle of respect for objectivity ought to apply in 'historical science' as well. Although Torrance prefers to draw parallels between the study of nature and the study of God, 'historical science' and 'theological science' are not without a common ground. There is an 'overlap' at a fundamental level between them, just as there is between theological and natural science. The Son of God, the Logos, cannot be understood outside the 'space-time structures of human existence', which is where history happens and where natural science takes place.⁵⁰

It is the duty of historical science to approach Jesus like any other figure in history, to determine the 'facts' about him, to know what really happened in his life. Yet this is more complicated than discovering the facts of nature, because historical science relies on the 'subjectivities' of others. It must, therefore, separate the objectively factual from the pseudo-factual, which is the product of distorted subjectivities. In doing this, though, the historian must avoid the temptation to reduce history to nature, so that contingent events are swallowed up by necessary laws. Modern historical science arose only after history was freed from its entanglement with nature. Still, Torrance thinks that historical science to its detriment remains modelled too closely after natural science.⁵¹

Indeed, Torrance feels that this tendency of historical science is symptomatic of the Greek influence on western thought. He argues that the acquisition of truth for the Greeks depended for the most part on *seeing*, and therefore they had a propensity to think in pictures, and to posit a mimetic relationship between language and reality.⁵² This explains why the first step in the empirical method of science is still 'observation'. This method has produced tremendous discoveries, but Torrance believes it has had a deleterious effect on our understanding of theological language and history. There is the false assumption, he says, that theological language 'is essentially descriptive, that the relation between a sign and a thing signified is a mimetic relation'.⁵³ This only opens the door to 'idolatry', he argues. By contrast, the Bible is the product of the Hebraic way of thinking, so that its language about God is 'signitive', not 'descriptive'.⁵⁴ The relation between language and reality in this case is an 'acoustic' one, not mimetic.⁵⁵ It is the Word that connects the sign to that which is signified by the sign.

Torrance contends that German historical science divorced the 'Jesus of history' from the 'Christ of faith' because it was 'dominated by the primacy of vision' and had therefore failed to appreciate the acoustic relationship between language and reality in the Bible.⁵⁶ Historical science needs to be empirical, but it must not permit observation to dominate in all cases. In the case of Jesus, hearing should be given pre-eminence, because the Gospels are based more on what Jesus said and what people had heard him say.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 312.

⁵¹The most infamous example of this approach is Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926–1928 [1918]).

⁵²Thomas Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), pp. 19–22. See also his *God and Rationality* (London: OUP, 1971), pp. 23–25.

⁵³Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 20.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 21.

As with creation and redemption, and with divine and human natures of Christ, history and nature must be distinguished without being separated. Torrance is always on guard against any sort of dualism that breaks the unity of reality – in this case, a dualism of nature and history. ‘Historical facticity’, he insists, ‘must be given an essential place in any genuine attempt to determine the meaning of the past’.⁵⁷ The *Historie-Geschichte* binary that Bultmann invented is one form of dualism, because it involves a detachment of historic events from the space–time matrix. Idealistic philosophies of history represent another form. He detects this form in Collingwood’s *Idea of History*, where the author is concerned with the ‘inside rather than the outside of events’ or, in other words, to that which is reducible to ideas.⁵⁸

In contrast to the tendency to split history and nature, Torrance stressed the underlying unity between them. That unity comes from ‘an inherent rationality’.⁵⁹ In fact, Torrance believes there is ‘only one rational order pervading the entire universe’, although it is expressed through different forms that are nonetheless ‘interlocked’.⁶⁰ So although the rationality in nature is represented in ‘number’, the rationality of history is represented as ‘logos’ or word.⁶¹

The history that is written is an obvious example of ‘word-rationality’, but not so the history that happens or that is written about. What stands out here in Torrance’s interpretation of history is the influence of the theology of the Word on it, as well as his strong preference for what he considers to be Hebraic or imageless thinking.

Rationality is embedded in history, because it is in the rational agents operating in time and space. True historical investigation is about probing into the ‘change or transition in events’ that are caused by the actions of these agents.⁶² What is required of historians, therefore, is an intensive study of the events and movements in the world to ‘lay bare the inner logic of the interaction between mind and nature that runs throughout them’.⁶³ This requires a scientific approach, one that subjects people and events to rigorous interrogative methods. The goal in historical science should be to bring out the ‘latent intentionality’ in the ‘word-events’ of history, to let these events ‘bear witness to themselves’, to ‘speak to us’ across time.⁶⁴

Torrance fails to recognise, though, that rational agents don’t always act rationally, that they rely on a perverse logic, and thus they obscure whatever rationality is ‘inherent’ in history. This failure stems from the fact Torrance thinks of Jesus of Nazareth as the model rational agent in history. He is this because he is without sin and can serve as the norm through which we must understand all history.

It is fair to ask how there can be historical movement if there is only an ‘inherent rationality’ in history. According to Berdyaev, there can be no history – only the presence of the Kingdom of God – if there is only a ‘divine principle’ in history.⁶⁵ History, in his view, therefore requires an ‘irrational principle’ to provide the dynamism and forward movement that characterise history. Torrance does have an explanation for these

⁵⁷Torrance, *Theological Science*, p. 317.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁶⁰Thomas Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), p. 25.

⁶¹Torrance, *Theological Science*, p. 321.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 319.

⁶⁴Torrance, *Theological Science*, p. 322.

⁶⁵Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1936), p. 36.

features of history, as we will see, although it will not be the existence of two equally opposing forces.

Christology and history in Torrance

Torrance's theology of history is by and large a polemical reaction to Bultmann's de-historised, existentialist theology. He calls for a Christian protest against this theology in the strongest terms. History, in his words, is the 'sphere of God's operation and the medium of divine Redemption'.⁶⁶ Christianity is a witness to the fact God has entered history, entered time, in Jesus Christ.

In one sense, the life of Jesus Christ is like other events in history, but in another sense, it is an absolutely unique event in history. It is the duty, Torrance feels, of historical science to acknowledge its uniqueness along with its ordinariness. It fails normally to acknowledge the former, because it lacks respect for the objective nature of Jesus Christ. If we take the incarnation seriously, if we do justice to its uniqueness, then we must recognise the Word of God in this event, that the 'Eternal Word of God' is also 'historical event'.⁶⁷ If we do this, our understanding of history will be fundamentally altered. We will undergo a paradigm shift. History then will no longer be understood on the basis of the laws of nature or in terms of our experiences of the present.

What makes the event of Christ unique is, first, the fact that it is a divine act in space and time – though not an event like the creation, which is also a divine act. In the event of Jesus Christ, God and his creation intersect. God takes on the highest creation, the human being, and unites it to himself in a unique way. God speaks to us directly through this one man, Jesus. And because this event is not one that happens and is finished, but is a living event owing to the resurrection, it still encounters people everywhere who will give ear to the word Jesus speaks.

The 'word-act of God' is not a mere 'dead fact of history', because it is the union of the divine and the human in Jesus.⁶⁸ It means the 'word and event coincide' in Jesus, so that this 'event' is neither a 'fact' without meaning nor a 'meaning' without a fact.⁶⁹ A truly scientific historical enquiry will acknowledge this unity in Jesus, that the word and act are 'one and inseparable' in him.⁷⁰ In short, this kind of historical investigation will need to be 'historico-theological' and 'theologico-historical' at the same time.⁷¹

Although the Logos has entered history, it has not been absorbed by history so that it becomes immanent in history. It is more accurate to say that history was taken up by the Logos. History has become eschatological. Historical investigation into Jesus cannot terminate at his death. It must treat his resurrection as an historical event, as '*a new kind of historical happening*', one that has 'burst through the structures and limitations of space and time as we know them'.⁷² As with the incarnation, the resurrection is a historico-theological/theologico-historical event. Yet historians will never understand this as long as they continue to operate within an out-dated, dualist framework that divides peremptorily the eternal and temporal, the spiritual and material, the theological and historical.

⁶⁶Thomas Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), p. 4.

⁶⁷Thomas F. Torrance, 'History and Reformation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4/3 (1951), p. 284.

⁶⁸Torrance, *Theological Science*, p. 325.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 333.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 326.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Thomas Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1976), p. 88.

The resurrection proves that Jesus is the Lord of history, that he is redeeming history, because the resurrection ‘flows against the stream of decaying time and dying history’.⁷³ He is now an ever-present reality, an everlasting event that never grows old and never falls into the dustbin of history. This means the Christ event is ‘more real and more historical than any other historical event’.⁷⁴ Although we have only traces of other historical events, the Christ event is ever living and ever present. We don’t need to strive to become contemporary with Jesus, to project ourselves back into his time, because he can be *present* to us wherever we are.

Torrance believes that we can only interpret the resurrection out of itself. This means in terms of the nature of Jesus Christ, who as man represents a continuity with history as we know it, but as Son of God represents the discontinuity of history as we know it. Eschatology points to this discontinuity.

In severing the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, Bultmann likewise severs eschatology from history.⁷⁵ The resurrection of Jesus turns into a purely eschatological event with no relation to history. Torrance could not accept this dualism. History and eschatology intersect in Jesus Christ, and he finds in the Book of Revelation a proof of this. Apocalyptic literature is where history becomes eschatology and eschatology becomes history. The Book of Revelation is ‘the unveiling of history already invaded and conquered by the Lamb of God’.⁷⁶ It is where we find a ‘clash of the divine pattern of history with the patterns of secular history’, where the Kingdom of God supplants the kingdoms of the world.⁷⁷ But here also we find that our old words fail, where language breaks down – like the old wineskins after being filled with new wine – and therefore numbers, symbols and bizarre images are used to signify the death of the old creation, the old time and the advent of the new creation, the new time.

Torrance agrees with Lonergan that we need to understand history in light of Ephesians 1:10, and to envision all things being gathered up under Christ, but he has a different view of how this is taking place. First, all the hopes of Israel and God’s promises to this nation are gathered up and come to fulfilment in this man from Nazareth, because he is the true Son of God as well as a true son of Israel. But he represents not only the hopes of Israel. The hopes of all humanity are gathered up in Christ, because the incarnation of the Word of God means the entire sinful human race is vicariously represented in his human nature.

Jesus’ vicarious and substitutionary death on the cross means that the sins of the whole world have been atoned for. Yet the whole world was not reconciled on the cross. This is the purpose of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, to complete the work of reconciling the world through his church and his Spirit. However, this reconciling activity does not happen apart from the cross. This is why Torrance was fond of saying that the ‘cross is still in the field’. It is still at work in the world and in history. This means the whole world is being judged, put to death and resurrected in Christ. Herein lies the secret to the dynamism of history. It comes from the world’s resistance to Christ’s Lordship over history and to being crucified and resurrected with him, not from an irrational principle in nature.

⁷³Ibid., p. 95.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵See Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019).

⁷⁶Thomas Torrance, *Apocalypse Today* (London: James Clark, 1960), p. 40.

⁷⁷Torrance, ‘History and Reformation’, p. 289.

Torrance lived through a bloody and terrifying period in world history; he witnessed the spread of atheistic communism, Second World War and the Holocaust. Still, none of these events dampened his belief that God's redemption was being actualised in history and mediated through history. Although the fire raged on earth – in attacks on the church and on the Jews – he saw Christ in the fire, exposing and judging the evil and the sin that was still in the world.

Summary, comparison and conclusion

The theologies of Lonergan and Torrance recall a period in recent history when 'history' was a pre-occupation for many Christian thinkers, when it was a 'problem'. History was a problem for both theologians, but it wasn't the same sort of problem for both. For Lonergan, the problem was that traditional Catholic theology was devoid of historical consciousness, historical science and the sense of historicity. He took it upon himself to rectify this problem. *Method in Theology*, including the very title, represents Lonergan's own *aggiornamento* of Catholic theology. His goal was to establish a Thomistic synthesis of history and theology, so that there is 'neither history without theology nor theology without history, but both'.⁷⁸

However, it cannot be a static synthesis, because the acceptance of history demands a recognition of change, of process. According to Lonergan's definition, theology 'mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix'.⁷⁹ A theology in union with history is one, then, that reckons with cultural developments and regressions. Theology will be an 'ongoing process', not a set of 'rules to be followed blindly'.⁸⁰ History refers to the rise and fall of cultures, but history is also a functional speciality in theology. Its main task, in conjunction with hermeneutics, is the uncovering of meaning in culture and religion. Meaning in culture evolves – from common-sense to theoretical, and then to the interior and the transcendent – as consciousness evolves, as it becomes specialised or 'differentiated'. The modern historian will be involved, then, in a journey of self-discovery, because this task, to be successful, depends on the use of a 'transcendental method'.

According to Frederick Crowe, history and Christology were coextensive for Lonergan, and perhaps even interchangeable subjects. So, to talk about history is to talk about Christology and vice versa. We can understand Christ through his transformative influence on culture and religion. So, even the growth in the 'differentiation of consciousness' that leads to transcendental notions and the transcendental method can be taken as signs of Christ's historical influence.

For Torrance the problem of history was that modern Protestant theology, in reaction to nineteenth-century historicism, had detached Christ from historical facts – such as the history of Israel and from Jesus' resurrection and ascension. This happened, he argues, because modern Protestantism has been dominated by an erroneous and fatal dualism that separated history from theology, creation from redemption and the act of God from the word of God. In Torrance's view, the solution is to follow a more advanced, scientific approach to history – analogous to the method of the new physics. Hence, it will be a unitary approach; one purged of false assumptions and radically subject to the intrinsic rationality of the Christ event.

⁷⁸Bernard Lonergan, 'Theology and Man's Future', 1960s, p. 2 (Bernard Lonergan Archive, Marquette University), <https://bernardlonergan.com/archive/71303dte030>.

⁷⁹Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. xi.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, pp. xi–xii.

Torrance maintains that there is only one rational order pervading the universe, even though the rationality in history is expressed in 'word'. The resurrection of Jesus Christ solves the deepest problem of history: the tragedy of it. History is death, the death of every present and every future. But the resurrection is a triumph over history understood as fallen time. The incarnate Word of God is past, present and future for us. The resurrection reminds us that the problem of history cannot be solved apart from eschatology, for Jesus Christ is both a historical and eschatological reality. We need to turn to the Apocalypse of John to appreciate Christ's dual nature, and to learn how all history is being redeemed and gathered together in him.

Although Lonergan attempts a synthesis of theology and history, Torrance instead strives to redefine history in light of the resurrection of Christ. History is given an eschatological orientation. History is not only the arena of God's redemption, but history itself, as the space-time framework, is redeemed through the resurrection.

Torrance would come down on Lonergan for not doing justice to the Christ event, for not allowing his thoughts to be moulded by the distinct, objective reality of the 'Word-Act'. Certainly, one has to ask whether Lonergan really appreciates the full significance of Jesus' history, because the resurrection, ascension and the Apocalypse seem to have no role in his philosophy of history. The history he attaches to theology, in short, is a history without an eschatology. He prefers in fact to transcend history by making history curve inwards to the transcending subject. It is there, as the experience of the gift of love, that all people – even those who are ignorant of the Jesus of history – can encounter God.

Lonergan wasn't familiar with Torrance's work, but he probably would have lumped Torrance in with Barth, whom he regarded as a fideist in need of an 'intellectual conversion!'⁸¹ Torrance would bristle at the charge of fideism, but it is obvious that his view of history is dominated by the 'theology of the word', to such an extent that all the contingencies of history have to be passed over. It is a dogmatic understanding of history, in contrast to Lonergan's more empirical view. This goes a long way towards explaining why it is hard to find anyone outside the church who does history the way Torrance thinks it should be done.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 318.