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Our Knowledge of God According to Karl Rahner

Professor Trembath contributed recently to our pages an essay entitled 'Biblical Inspiration and the believing Community: A New Look' (EQ 58:3, July 1986, 245-56). His latest contribution makes an interesting comparison between the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner and John Calvin.

Not long ago an article appeared in this journal concerning John Calvin's understanding of the knowledge of God as evidenced in the *Institutes*.¹ Because so much of my teaching and professional work is involved with Catholic theology I was struck with the similarities between Mr. Noble's conclusions about Calvin and my own about Karl Rahner. In the present article I would like to explore some of those similarities in an attempt to see whether Rahner's understanding of the knowledge of God (and its correlative, divine revelation) is as divergent from Calvin's as many believers, especially evangelicals, are inclined to believe. I will do this in two stages: first I shall summarily present his views on revelation and knowledge, and second I shall ask whether Rahner's conclusions may be taken by conservative Protestants as successful in accomplishing their ends.

I believe that the most salient of Mr. Noble's conclusions in his brief but explicit article is that the true *esse* of human nature is to know, or more accurately is the activity of knowing. He points out that Calvin defines the image of God not as a static or substantial quality or function of human nature but rather as the dynamic orientation of the human soul towards good and ultimately towards God: 'The image of God is thus for Calvin a *relational* concept which expresses the correlative nature of knowledge as expressed in the opening sentence of the *Institutes*: "Our wisdom . . . consists almost entirely of two parts; the knowledge of God

¹ T. A. Noble, 'Our Knowledge of God according to John Calvin', 54, 1 (1982), 2-13.

and of ourselves".² We might perhaps put this another way by saying that the most fundamental and distinctive constituent of human nature is its knowing, knowing not merely as an empirical reception of external data but more fundamentally as a dynamic moral orientation of humans towards the good and thus ultimately towards the God whose character is the ground of the possibility of the good. This, at any rate, is Rahner's beginning point.

Rahner and the Transcendental Nature of Knowledge. Mr. Noble notes that Calvin often refers to the knowledge received by revelation as an 'accommodation' of God to us because of both noetic and moral inadequacies (or 'perversities') on our part. The concept of accommodation in this context presupposes that one has begun the analysis of the knowledge of God with God, and then moved from the God who reveals such knowledge to the humans who receive it. This is surely characteristic of Calvin's age, and in fact is characteristic of similar inquiries until Kant.³ It is not, however, as legitimate an approach today precisely because it appears to beg the very point which grounds theology as a discipline, namely that we do *not* presently possess certain knowledge of the God who is (therefore) the object of inquiry of theology. That is, one cannot begin a critical inquiry into the nature of knowledge about God and of God's ways of conveying that knowledge to us upon the premise that we know precisely in what that knowledge consists and how God has conveyed it to us. In the present instance this means that we cannot presume to know the ways in which God's knowledge is superior to ours and thus the areas and ways in which that knowledge must be 'accommodated' to fit our own. All we do know for certain is that *our* knowledge is limited in various ways and areas. Recognition of and reflection upon this critical truth has caused a great deal of philosophical as well as religious anguish, to be sure, but such anguish has not seemed to diminish its persuasiveness. Rahner takes it for granted that proper theological inquiry begins from the perspective of the human subject because it is about that

² *Ibid.*, p. 7, emphasis original. The subheading of *Institutes* 1.1.1 in the Library of Christian Classics edition of 1960 is 'Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God', a thesis with which Rahner will concur entirely.

³ The critical and gradual absorption of Kant into Protestant theology would be reasonably well known to readers of this journal. For a complete yet readable discussion of the Catholic lineage from Kant to Rahner, see Otto Muck, S. J., *The Transcendental Method* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968).

subject that we are most familiar.⁴ He also takes it for granted, though, that humans can have knowledge about God which is real precisely because it is reception of divine revelation; knowledge is ultimately and fundamentally correlative to revelation.

For Rahner as for Calvin, human beings are constitutively oriented towards God. Unlike Calvin, though, Rahner does not (yet) identify this orientation as knowledge. Instead he sees the primal relationship between humans and God as 'permanent ground', 'unthematic', and 'original experience.' What all of these have in common is that they are prereflective and precognitive and for that very reason really operative grounds of our knowing activities.

This unthematic and ever-present experience . . . of God which we always have even when we are thinking of and concerned with anything but God, is the permanent ground from out of which that thematic knowledge of God emerges which we have in explicitly religious activity and in philosophical reflection. It is not in these latter that we discover God just as we discover a particular object of our experience within the world. Rather, both in this explicitly religious activity directed to God in prayer and in metaphysical reflection we are only making explicit for ourselves what we already know implicitly about ourselves in the depths of our personal self-realization.⁵

As it stands, this is only an assertion. Rahner warrants it by calling attention to the intentional, and thus transcendental, nature of knowledge. All knowledge is transcendental in that it intends a remote term as resolution to its own inner but self-unactualized dynamic. In other words, the knowing subject seeks what it itself cannot supply. This in turn implies that knowledge breaks in on the knowing subject 'from the outside', as it were, rather than from within, but not in such a manner as to efface the inner activity or dynamic of the knowing faculty. A completed act of knowing, thus, is one in which a dynamically-oriented need for

⁴ See Carl J. Peter, 'A Shift to the Human Subject in Roman Catholic Theology', *Communio* (US) 6 (1979), 56-72.

⁵ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 53. We shall rest content in quoting primarily from *Foundations* because it is Rahner's summa. A great deal of discussion of these same issues occurs in previous works, though, especially in his *Spirit in the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), *Grace in Freedom* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), and distributed throughout all of the various volumes of *Theological Investigations*.

present knowledge to transcend itself is met by a term which satisfies that need.⁶

Rahner identifies the ultimate term of such acts of transcendence as God, although he does so cautiously and almost hesitantly lest it be thought that God is *a* term among others rather than the ground of the possibility of acts of knowing transcendence being satisfied.⁷ While it might be thought that this is a commonplace among theologians it is not; in fact it is the very failure to appropriate this point which characterizes fundamentalist notions of God. Rahner insists against fundamentalism that God must not be understood 'as one object among other objects'. This is a way of naming God *as over against* other named entities and Rahner will have nothing of it because that which can be named cannot concurrently stand as the condition which makes the naming possible. Thus he also refers to this term as the holy mystery, the nameless one or the infinite horizon. The horizon itself cannot be present within the horizon. Any being which can be identified as existing within the horizon cannot be God because 'it would be a member of the larger household of all reality'.

It might be thought at this point that Rahner has so carefully proscribed experiencing God in a naïve or fundamentalist way that he has in fact precluded the possibility of experiencing God at all. He has in the sense of experiencing God as *a* being within the realm of other beings. But it is clear that he has *not* precluded the experience of God as the transcendent reality who is presupposed by our experiences of objects within the horizon and thus our completed acts of knowing. To be sure this is not a direct experience. Instead it is the indirect but nonetheless real experience of that which is universally presupposed but rarely explicitly or thematically realized.⁸ This is happily consonant with the majority of non-fundamentalist Jewish and Christian reflections on God, and it is to that tradition that Rahner wishes to be faithful.

⁶ To be precise, we should say that it satisfies this or that particular expression of that dynamic need. To say that the need itself is satisfied might imply that knowing as such is only accidentally dynamic rather than essentially so, which Rahner denies for the same kinds of reasons that Calvin does. See Rahner, 'Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God', *Journal of Religion* 58 (1978 Supplement), S107-S125.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, 61ff.

⁸ Analogies here might include the experience of gravity within physics, the experience of the law on non-contradiction within rational thinking, or the experience of one's long-dead ancestors within one's own existentiality.

Thus far we have discussed how it is that Rahner considers the transcendence of knowing acts but we have not yet seen how he construes such acts as religious acts, i.e., as acts whose ground is *God*. To recollect the term 'holy mystery' mentioned above, we have seen why knowledge presupposes God as mystery (because God cannot be known by the same intentional act of apprehension by which we know all things other than God) but not yet why it presupposes God as holy.

Once again Rahner begins from the perspective of the transcending subject.⁹ To say that the *esse* of human nature is to know is not simply synonymous with saying that the *esse* of human nature is to know things or even concepts. More fundamentally, it is to say that human nature freely and willingly opens itself in transcendence towards that which it is not, or that which it is not yet. We saw before that this is presupposed by the possibility of knowing, but here we may also see that there is an essential *moral* component to such openness. Cast in rhetorical terms we might say that the moral component is analytic to transcendence because we know what it means to refuse to open ourselves to the other and thus to refuse (however temporarily) the possibility of self-transcendence. But to refuse the possibility of self-transcendence presupposes the greater priority of freely choosing it precisely inasmuch as the refusal itself is a free and willing choice, in this case the choice to refuse. Thus our primal orientation towards what Rahner calls the horizon of possibilities is one of freedom and willing; it is from that foundation that we choose whether to accept or reject.

It is also more than this. It is also an orientation of love. When a person is freely and willingly open towards an object within the horizon then the proper word which describes that openness is transcendence. When that openness is oriented towards another subject, however, then the proper word to use is love. I do not intend to draw any greater distinction between these two words than simply a distinction of appropriation: 'love' points out the subject-ness of the other. Love, that is, implies a more intense degree of self-transcendence because it recognizes that the other is also a being who wills, intends and transcends freely. '[For] a subject who is present to himself to affirm freely vis-à-vis another subject means ultimately to love.'

What this means with respect to our analysis of transcendence is that the ultimate term or source of transcendence is as much

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65ff.

love as it is freedom and will, and that it too is nameless. That is, the love which it makes possible acts of subject—subject transcendence is not itself a loving thing or a loving being because such things or beings are within the horizon. Instead, *this* love is the condition and thus the source of all other (horizontal) acts of loving.

For what else would we call that which is nameless, that at whose disposal we exist and from which we are distanced in our finiteness, but which nevertheless we affirm in our transcendence through freedom and love, what else would we call this if not 'holy'? And what could we call 'holy' if not this, or to whom would the name 'holy' belong more basically and more originally than to this infinite term of love, which love in the presence of the incomprehensible and the ineffable necessarily becomes worship[?] . . . The two words 'holy mystery', which are understood as a unity, but between which nevertheless there is an intrinsic difference, express equally the transcendental both of knowledge and of freedom and love.¹⁰

Rahner makes the linguistic point here that what we call holy is that which we love most intensely or infinitely; that is, 'holy' is what all individual loving acts ultimately intend. Thus when we love or are loved, we are in the presence of the holy as ground and goal of that love.

What Rahner has done here is to show how the common (and essentially) human activity of knowing reveals a basic and original experience of the 'holy mystery' or God every time it occurs. Knowing is a self-transcending act, and the ground of the possibility of any and all such acts, especially but not solely those whose term is another subject, is this holy mystery. As *holy mystery* God is both utterly undefinable and utterly the ground of all transcendental possibilities within the horizon, and for that reason is the source of the knowledge of those possibilities. As *holy mystery*, God is the ground of the love with which we love. God's character as love cannot be defined by anything more basic than itself. It is the most fundamental love and is thus the love by which we love.

The final notion upon which I shall touch in this survey of Rahner's thought concerning revelation and the knowledge of God has to do with the personal nature of God, or rather with the nature of God as person.¹¹ Here the evangelical reader of Rahner

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73-75.

is quite likely to be surprised by his traditionalism¹² while the veteran will be even more surprised by his brevity. In just a few paragraphs he outlines both how it is not and how it is appropriate to speak of God as person. We shall do the same in our quest to assess the compatibility of Rahnerian and Calvinist ways of thinking about the self-revealing God.

It is to be expected that Rahner rejects the appropriateness of speaking of God as a person since doing so would precisely violate the transcendent nature of God as ground of our transcendental knowledge of Him and of all else. However, provided that one does not imply that God is 'a' person among and thus similar to many other persons, then one can conduct the discussion in a meaningful way. The only alternative is an agnosticism which critically rejects the predominant Christian response to the question.

Within these limits, then, Rahner insists that God is person. First of all, he says, it is self-evidently or analytically true that God is person because the ground (God) of a reality (human persons) must itself possess in absolute fullness and perfection all of the reality which is grounded in it. That is simply what it means for 'x' to be the ground of 'y'; to say otherwise is nothing more than to deny that 'y' is grounded in 'x'.¹³ This is precisely the opposite of attributing humanly subjective limitations to God because it is the only way we have of ascribing person-ness to God while maintaining the traditional twin beliefs concerning human nature as image of God and God's transcendent otherness at one and the same time. Thus Rahner will say that God is person but deny that God is an individual since the latter entails identification by means of limitation as over against others, and this cannot be said about the one who grounds and establishes what is personal in all who are individuals. And he will deny that God is person only to those who insist upon identifying person and individual.

¹² Mr. Noble refers to the same traditional perspective in Calvin when he says that Calvin has a practical rather than speculative theory of the knowledge of God: 'There is no merely mental or disinterested knowledge of God. All true knowledge of him issues in worship and obedience', *op. cit.*, 3.

¹³ Note that it is not to assert what 'y' is grounded in or anything else about the nature of 'x' as a ground. It is simply to fail to make the case that 'x' is the ground of 'y'. Sebastian Moore makes the same point more gracefully when he summarizes the scholastic understanding of God as ground of human nature: 'what the human being has, that God is', *The Inner Loneliness* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 21.

Second, Rahner says, it is from our concrete and historical experience that we know God as person. 'As philosophers', he says, we generally know more of what statements mean the more that we can fill them in with content drawn from our own historical actualities. Thus too we know more of what the statement 'God is a person' means by critical comparison with statements about any historical persons. If we refuse to allow God to inform us of His person-ness through our own transcendently-known personal experiences then we naively call that person-ness an empty category, and this is ultimately no different than saying that we do not believe that God is person at all. The proper course, he says, is to reflect upon the experiences of God we garner 'through prayer, in the depths of our conscience, in the history of Christian revelation, and in the whole history of the human race', a tolerably wide pool from which to draw. It is through such experiences that we encounter revelation as revelation of *God*. Rahner goes no further here in supplying criteria by which to distinguish revelations of the true God from those of false ones other than to imply that only the true God can be revealed as ultimate and absolute ground of all person-ness, while other revelations reveal those gods as distinct from God (and each other) precisely by means of limitation. Only one God can be ultimate ground and it is that God whose presence is revealed, indirectly but nonetheless really, as ground of all horizontal acts of self-transcendence.

Calvin and Rahner: A Critical Compatibility. Already we have seen enough to suspect a reasonably wide degree of overlap between Calvin and Rahner. In this final section we shall explore and criticize various aspects of this overlap, keeping in mind that our ultimate criterion is the religious one of accounting for how it is that Christian believers concretely experience God.

We have already pointed out the methodological differences between Calvin and Rahner resulting from their different epistemologies; for Calvin it was entirely appropriate to begin with God whereas for Rahner such a beginning point is critically presumptuous. In spite of that, though, both argue that the fundamental distinctive of human nature, that which is also *Imago Dei*, is the faculty of knowing, what we might refer to as the possibility of knowing or more simply as human knowability. As we have seen above, Rahner includes much more in this faculty than simply the actual grasping of certain themes and propositions. He insists that intellectual (willing choice) and moral (willing love) activities find their ground in the soul as

well, and beyond this that their ground is ultimately found in God. Mr. Noble notes the same insistence in Calvin:

... the image of God constitutes not human nature itself (i.e., the soul substantially) but 'the entire *excellence* of human nature . . . By this term . . . is denoted the *integrity* which Adam was endowed with when his intellect was clear, his affections subordinated to reason, all his powers duly regulated, and when he truly ascribed all his excellence to the admirable gifts of his Maker . . . [It] comprehends everything which has any relation to the spiritual and eternal life.'¹⁴

For both, then, knowing God is the ultimate (and in the nature of the case, also the primal or fundamental) distinctive of human beings. Granted that Calvin does not use the language of intentionality or transcendence to refer to the dynamic by which the act of knowing presupposes and is thus initiated by God, nor would we expect him to because of his historicity. Nonetheless the conceptual blocks are in place which later philosophical insights could utilize without the necessity of significant reformulation.

A second noteworthy element of consonance between Calvin and Rahner involves what often goes under the title of nature and grace. Mr. Noble notes that Calvin seems to use *Imago Dei* in wider and narrower senses; the former refers to human knowledge of all objects of 'earthly concern' (e.g., 'the mechanical arts, liberal studies and civil government') while the latter refers to the spiritual life of human beings in which they respond to God by means of 'knowledge, purity, righteousness, and true holiness'.¹⁵ The effects of sin are said by Calvin to have 'effaced' the latter but only to have 'corrupted' the former. That is, sin eradicated the possibility of knowledge, purity, righteousness and true holiness existing within humans except as deliberate supernatural reofferings to them. On the other hand, the natural gifts of reason and will, while diminished, were not completely eradicated: 'human reason has no knowledge of God or of his paternal favour toward us, but does have some knowledge of the method of regulating our conduct in accordance with the Divine Law.'¹⁶ While initially it looks as though this traditional Protestant pessimism concerning natural endowments cannot be conjoined with Rahner's more optimistic perspective, I believe that there is greater affinity between them than might initially be thought.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, 6, quoting from the *Institutes*, I, xv, 3,4; emphasis original.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Let us recall that neither Calvin nor Rahner looks to the actual exercise of the soul's intellectual and moral activities as the location of God's participation in the human sphere. Instead, His 'location' is the condition which makes possible those exercises; God is the one who accounts for rather than the one who actually performs. Because God is always and only experienced in this indirect fashion, then in principle human beings are able to account for their experiences in ways that do not attribute any sort of causation or initiative to God. Granted that faith would not commend this type of penultimate attribution, still it is both possible and intelligible. Unbelief is sin, not irrationality.

What this entails is that the reception of God's self-revelation by humans comes through those avenues of intelligibility which both Calvin and Rahner call natural.¹⁷ This is another way of saying that such avenues are themselves the means through which God's self-revelation occurs to concrete humans in their historical situations. But if the natural gifts of reason and will are the usual means through which God reveals Himself then they are hardly to be denigrated in the ways that conservative Protestantism (especially Lutheranism on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other) often does. Instead they are to be cherished and nourished as the arena of God's transcendental participation in our lives (Rahner), the seat of the image of God (Calvin) or we might say, the home of the Holy Spirit.

It is true that Mr. Noble immediately follows our last quotation of him with a discussion of how 'the natural gifts, the remnants of the *Imago Dei*, [cannot] give man anything to plead before God', i.e., a discussion of total depravity. But of course! What gift properly received as such could possibly allow the receiver to boast about his or her superiority over the giver? Regardless of the moral *use* to which we put our natural gifts (and I surely agree that such usages are characteristically sinful), the more fundamental theological point is that they are *gifts* and thus that they are intrinsically revelatory of the nature of the God who gives them. The fundamental sin we commit with respect to our natural endowments is not how we use them but rather how we construe

¹⁷ Lest it be thought that this ignores Rahner's understanding of the supernatural existential, I am here speaking about the explicit reception of divine revelation. The doctrine of the supernatural existential addresses the condition of the possibility of such reception, and occurs in the order of systematic theology one step prior to any such actual reception. For his discussion of the supernatural existential see *Foundations*, 126ff.

them, i.e., whether we view them as gifts from God on the one hand or as non-theological constituents of human nature on the other. If we view them as the latter then we cannot but use them in a sinful manner. When we see them as the former, however, then at least we have the reasonable possibility of using them precisely *as* gifts and thus as agents capable of mediating God's character and intentions to us at the very time that they allow us to function as rational and moral beings in the world.

The final critical question I promised above to address in this paper is whether Rahner's conclusions concerning revelation and the knowledge of God may be taken as successful in accomplishing their ends, especially as evangelical protestants construe those ends. It would be quite odd to suggest a monoforum answer to this question since among other things it invites all sorts of cultural, ethnic and historical factors to be considered alongside of more explicitly theological ones. However, that is not to imply that nothing can be said, and what can be said ought to be.

I believe that there is a great deal to commend the study of Rahner's transcendentalist critique among and by evangelicals. In ways that we have only barely touched upon in this article, it is a thoroughly modern philosophical method which does *not* appear to require an abandoning of critically central beliefs of traditional Christianity. Evangelicals have quite properly been suspicious of the use of subjectivist philosophical frameworks within theology because so often those frameworks generate greater degrees of historical and anthropological specificity at the cost of eviscerating some fairly ancient beliefs; faithfulness to modernism's critical consciousness was taken by *modernists* to be incompatible with faithfulness to traditional religious and theological tenets. Such is not Rahner's intention, though, in his appropriation of transcendental subjectivism. Repeatedly throughout his works he emphasizes that the proper purpose of any philosophical framework when applied to the experience of the Christian tradition is to make sense of that experience rather than either to reformulate it or (worse yet) to eradicate it.¹⁶ It is fully to

¹⁶ For example he begins his treatise 'Observations on the Doctrine of God in Catholic Dogmatics' by insisting that 'it is not our intention to propound any particular, strikingly new thesis in order to contradict what is usual in Catholic theology, or which would develop a new programme, proclaim a radically new orientation and seek once more to revolutionise theology. Nothing is further from our intention, [not] only because it is contrary to the nature of Catholic theology but because it seems contrary to the reality with which we are concerned here, namely God'. *Theological Investigations IX* (New York: Seabury), 127.

be expected that different theologians will have varying responses to Rahner's attempt to provide 'an introduction to the idea of Christianity.'¹⁹ What would be theologically fruitful, though, is the theological harvest which would result from the enterprise.

In particular I believe that Reformed theology would profit from the conversation with Rahner. As I have outlined in the briefest of terms above, there is at least an initial affinity between Rahner and Calvin which should tempt systematic theologians to further critical comparison. My own suspicion, which for the present remains only as a suspicion because I have not been able to test it satisfactorily, is that the overall 'shape' of Calvinist theology will in the long run prove to be the closest echo of Catholic theology. Traditional Lutheranism is too dualistic to be systematically comfortable with Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy tends to emphasize the systematic priority of the first person of the Trinity in ways that do not set well with nearly all non-Orthodox understandings of christology, and most forms of Protestantism other than Lutheran or Calvinist suffer to some degree from the systematic fallout of sectarianism. As Mr. Noble correctly demonstrates, though, Calvin's theology in the *Institutes* insists on the universality of the knowledge of God whose character is first revealed as Redeemer and then as Creator. Without claiming that there are no other ways to know God, the very methodology of Calvin's systematic theology affirms the distinctively Christian claim that God is initially and best known as Father of Jesus.²⁰ The significant implication of this claim with respect to systematic theology is to make systematics critically oriented towards what Mr. Noble calls 'redemptive revelation', and thus primarily towards one facet of revelation among its many other legitimate ones. The predominant Christian interest in revelation is not in what it says about God abstractly or *per se*, but rather in what it says about the God who has saved us. And that, as we have seen above, is precisely the intention of Rahner's transcendental subjectivism as well.

Thus, while 'beginning with the self-transcending human subject' might initially sound peculiar if not suspicious to evangelical ears, it correlates well with a unified theological system such as Calvin's. More important, though, especially for evangelicals, is the overtly religious nature of Rahner's subjectivist methodology; to borrow his own terminology, the ground and

¹⁹ The subtitle to *Foundations*.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, 12f.

goal of his theology is to employ a contemporary philosophical framework to show how humans are fundamentally oriented towards, and thus always in the presence of, the God of grace. The specific point of contact between God and human beings is the groundedness of the human's knowing activities within the infinite horizon of intellectual and moral possibilities. Neither of these two terms, either 'knowing activity' or 'horizon of possibilities,' refers to a static entity. Instead, each is personal and dynamic by nature in virtue of the possibility and nature of knowledge itself. Thus what the human comes to know is what the horizon reveals from itself, and this, to cite Aquinas, is what we call God.