

What's Happening in Continental Theology? — 2

Karl Rahner's Theology of Grace

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Born in 1904, Karl Rahner has been a member of the Society of Jesus since 1922, and is the most significant Roman Catholic theologian of the second half of the present century. After pastoral work in Vienna in the last war, he had a long career as professor in Catholic theological faculties. A prolific author, he has produced many substantial books and monographs, and hundreds of shorter essays, as well as a wide variety of popular works. His academic writings are opaque to the general reader: abstracts and nuanced, their engagement with the unfamiliar traditions of Thomism and German metaphysics do not make them easy of access. This article focusses on some of the main philosophical and theological components of Rahner's theology of grace, and shows how his work here conditions his approach to a wide variety of theological and practical issues.

The roots of dogma lie in the church's life of service and worship. Dogma, that is, should be understood primarily in terms of its kerygmatic and doxological context rather than its prescriptive or regulative function. 'The root of dogma is the confession of Christ' (Edmund Schlink). When dogma is torn from its native doxological soil, it tends to ossify into a static and self-contained system of propositions, only tangentially related to the church's life of praise, and so oriented more towards controversy than the upbuilding of the Christian community.

Such a petrification of dogma only breaks down when the close relationship between dogma and the life of faith and worship is rediscovered, and the dogma as it were takes flesh and begins to live. The history of Roman Catholic theology in the present century — culminating in the work of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's — is in many ways the history of such a rediscovery. Within that history, Rahner's work is of very great significance indeed. In the earlier decades of the century, Roman Catholic theology in its official seminary and textbook forms was often a stiff and rather stale repetition of a tradition from which the life had by and large departed, and in which engagement with the primary texts of the Catholic tradition — Scripture, the Fathers, the Medievals — had been overlaid by heavy and graceless commentaries. Rahner's work, by contrast, eschewed mere repetition of established formulae and sought to alert theological reflection to its primordial existential and spiritual character.

Rahner's very deep appreciation of the *history* of theology has thus been a pervasive influence on the whole of his theological work. For it has led him to view the Christian tradition as an historically evolving complex of living questions rather than as a flat and undeveloping system, neatly reducible to a set of propositions. His readings of such foundational Catholic texts as the works of Aquinas, for example, have tried to avoid the static representations of earlier commentators which treated Thomas' writings as a series of positions to be defended; instead, Rahner has attempted to catch and enter into the movement of thought which the texts narrate. And to enter into that movement has meant that, like Aquinas, Rahner has been very alert to the challenges and resources of his intellectual environment.

Part of the resonance of Rahner's work is its combination

John Webster continues his series of accounts of developments in Continental theology. His brief is to concentrate on strengths rather than weaknesses, and to inform us of the positions of leading European thinkers. This quarter the influential Catholic Karl Rahner is under discussion.



of shrewd insights into the dogmatic and metaphysical tradition with a warmth of kerygmatic concern and a sharp awareness of the climate of mind in which theology has to live. His theology is, accordingly, a peculiarly *pastoral* theology. Partly this is because of its concern to restate the Christian tradition in a form accessible to contemporary men and women, but also because of its sense that the Christian faith is neither a table of propositions nor an escape from the demands of the world but rather a movement of grace within the realities of human history. Rahner's theology is thus an eirenic and mediating theology, one which stands at the frontiers of many different worlds.

Knowing the Infinite

Rahner's earlier works, notably his books *Spirit in the World* (1939) and *Hearers of the Word* (1941) are primarily concerned to analyse whether and how human knowledge of the infinite God is possible. His starting-point is Kant's scepticism about the possibility of knowledge of any reality transcending the mind. Kant refused any clear correspondence between the mind's ideas and objective reality on the grounds that reality is known only under the shape with which it is impressed by the mind's categories. And so for Kant, analysis of the act of thinking cannot lead to knowledge of any transcendent reality. Rahner, along with other Catholic thinkers such as Lotz, Coreth and Lonergan, develops an account of the mind's knowledge of the transcendent which is much indebted to the work of a French philosopher of the early 20th century, Joseph Marechal. In condensed and summary form, Rahner's proposal is that man is a 'transcendental consciousness'. This — admittedly abstract — definition seeks to state how within the operations of the mind there is a dynamic movement directed towards an infinite being beyond the mind. The very act of asking questions about that which is beyond man presupposes an infinite ground, such that in the act of knowledge or intelligent apprehension, man transcends himself, moving towards an infinite being who is the source of all that he is. If it is true that implicit within all man's mental acts is an immediate and unreflective knowledge of his transcendent ground, then analysis of man's mental operations leads not to Kant's idealism (in which reality is a construct of the mind) but to a realism in which knowledge of the transcendent is fully possible.

Even when it is not baldly summarised, Rahner's thought is abstruse. In some ways his thinking here can be seen as a kind of natural theology. Its concern, in other words, is to show that within our experience of the world there is already a rudimentary experience of God, since reflection on infinite consciousness

leads to awareness of the infinite ground in which it is anchored. But it is important to catch the 'existential' edge of what Rahner is saying. His proposal is not that our implicit knowledge of God can be located in certain items of knowledge or certain experiences — such as the order of the universe or the contingency of creation — as opposed to other items of knowledge or experiences. Rather, he is looking to the actual performance of the act of thinking: his concern is with the human subject, whose questions about the world betray implicit awareness of the absolute. Rahner may seem excessively intellectualist. But in fact his focus is not on epistemology in the abstract but on the event of knowledge in the real world, on the dynamic process of what takes place in specific acts of thinking. For it is in the actual performance of his intellectual life that man comes, however dimly, to be aware that his whole being is sustained by the hidden presence of grace.

Man the Questioner

Rahner's suggestions in these earlier epistemological and metaphysical studies broaden out into a more general account of the nature of man. Man is the one who has absolute transcendence towards God. In the same way that the act of thinking is grounded in the infinite reality of God, so also the whole of man's humanness is a reaching beyond himself to a transcendent ground. Man is a movement towards infinity: he is 'from God, and directed towards God' (*Theological Investigations* 2 (London, 1963) 238), and so all his acts are an implicit affirmation of the reality of God. It is along these lines, for example, that Rahner understands the idea of man as a 'spiritual' being. Man is spirit because he has a supernatural orientation: 'Man is spirit and, as such, he already stands before the infinite God... In the daily drift of his existence he is man... only because he continually reaches out into a domain that only the fullness of God's absolute being can fill' (*Hearers of the Word* (New York, 1969) 36).

It is on these grounds that Rahner proposes that theology as a whole may be properly *anthropocentric*. Such an emphasis, far from spelling the end of *theocentrism* in theology, is in fact an expression of theology's theocentric character. To be anthropocentric is to be theocentric, since man is the being whose existence is grounded in God. 'As soon as man is understood as the being who is absolutely transcendent in respect of God, "anthropocentricity" and "theocentricity" in theology are not opposites but strictly one and the same thing, seen from two sides' (*Theological Investigations* 9 (London, 1972) 28).

Rahner's reflections here reveal a commitment which lies very deep in his theology, namely the principle that grace is already present in nature. Grace is neither invasive of nor extrinsic to the natural life of man: it is the substrate of all natural experience and reality. Anthropological considerations and a concern for the actuality of man in the world are never very far from the surface in Rahner's writings precisely because of his understanding of grace. His anthropological emphasis denotes neither a compromise with secularity nor a reduced sense of the centrality of the divine. Much rather does it rest on a particular understanding of how nature is already the presence of grace.

Theology in the Modern World

If Rahner's understanding of grace leads to a central place being accorded to anthropology, it also encourages in him a very positive attitude to theology's contemporary intellectual context. It is on such grounds, for example, that he urges an openness to modern work in philosophy or social science.

Once again, the underlying reasons for this positive evaluation need carefully to be scrutinised. He is not merely proposing philosophy or social science as a pre-theological task, as a ground-clearing exercise which is brought to completion by subsequent dogmatic work. Rather he is urging that philosophy, for example, is 'an inner moment of theology' (*Theological Investigations* 6 (London, 1969) 72). Properly understood, that is, philosophy is not a 'secular' exercise preliminary to theological reflection but intrinsic to it, since 'the depth of the human abyss, which in a thousand ways is the theme of philosophy, is already the abyss which has been opened by God's grace and which stretches into the depths of God himself' (*Ibid.*, 78).

Similarly, Rahner is able to develop a positive attitude to the *historical* nature of theology. Theologians since the end of the 18th century have often been acutely conscious that theology is a discipline with a history, one whose formulations and concepts have changed often quite radically during the course of its development. This sense that theology is a changing and flexible exercise posed very large problems for Roman Catholic theology because of its high evaluation of the teaching of the church as a source of revelation: to admit change in the church's apprehension of the truth would seem to relativize the church as a source of authoritative teaching. Rahner's approach to the issue is to emphasise that grace and revelation are not abstract from history but present in it. The process of the church's changing understanding of the truth is a process in which grace enlightens each age in a different way. 'If there is a history of revelation,' he writes, 'then and only then is there a real history of theology' (*Theological Investigations* 9 (London, 1972) 69). Again, the ultimate reason for this lies in

If this is true, Rahner urges, there can be no absolutely godless man: all men have an experience of God as the infinite goal and horizon towards which their being strives. This experience may not be explicitly identified or conceived of as an experience of God, although within the great religions of the world it is so identified.

Rahner's conviction that the whole arena of history, in all its flux and discontinuity, is the location of grace. 'Our place is in history and it is only in its forward-moving course that we possess the eternal truth of God which is our salvation. This saving truth is the same within history, but, while remaining the same, it has had and still has a history of its own' (*ibid.*, 71).

The Spirituality of Ordinary Life

Rahner has devoted a good deal of his work to the theology and practice of the spiritual life, and some of his most sensitive writing emerges in these areas. Because of his conviction that grace is intrinsic to the whole performance of human life, his writings on spirituality are often imbued with a sense that the proper sphere of the spiritual life is that of ordinary, everyday secular vocation. Practice of the spiritual life is not envisaged as

the cultivation of a special sphere of distinctly 'religious' activities and attitudes, essentially separate from the rest of the human existence. Rather, the properly spiritual man is the one who perceives and responds to the hidden mystery of God's presence in the whole of human historical existence. 'It is God who has always established himself within this life as its ultimate depth' (*Opportunities for Faith* (London, 1974) 8).

Accordingly, the place where God is to be sought is not a hallowed sphere but simply 'our life in the concrete: that is, our relationship with our neighbour, our miserable daily duties, our capacity for forgiveness, our acceptance of life's disappointments, and resignation in the face of death' (*Ibid.*). 'The difference between ordinary life and the sublime and sacred hours of destiny in a human life should certainly not be smoothed out. . . . But first of all it is important to say clearly that the whole of man's life in personal knowledge and freedom, and thus too in its ordinariness, is the history of grace' (*ibid.*, 109).

Anonymous Christianity

Many of the same theological principles are at work in Rahner's approach to non-Christians religions. Since grace is implicit within nature, there can be no 'pure' nature, no nature from which God is entirely absent. 'Our actual nature is never 'pure' nature. It is nature installed in a supernatural order which man can never leave, even as a sinner and unbeliever' (*Theological Investigations* 4 (London, 1966) 183). If this is true, Rahner urges, there can be no absolutely godless man: all men have an experience of God as the infinite goal and horizon towards which their being strives. This experience may not be explicitly identified or conceived of as an experience of God, although within the great religions of the world it is so identified. Accordingly, all man's religions are spheres within which grace is already operative: 'Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion . . . does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God . . . It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ' (*Theological Investigations* 5 (London, 1966) 121).

It is on this basis that Rahner develops his idea of 'anonymous Christianity'. Since all religions are the sphere of the grace whose focus and culmination is God's presence in the person of Christ, then all religious believers may be claimed as 'implicit' or 'anonymous' Christians — 'implicit' or 'anonymous' in the sense that their experience of grace is not explicitly identified with the name of Christ. This, quite naturally, conditions Rahner's understanding of the nature of the church's missionary activity. 'Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must be regarded as an anonymous Christian' (*ibid.*, 131).

Some Reflections

Classical Protestant discussions of the theology of grace usually occur in the context of soteriology. In this way, grace is particularised: it is located in the specific act of self-giving of God in Christ and, more specifically, in the historical episode of Calvary. Rahner, by contrast, sees grace in much more general terms. The context of his discussion of grace is not so much the doctrine of salvation as the doctrines of creation and providence. Grace is not so much a specific act or episode in which God, as it were, inserts himself into the history of the world; rather it is his immanent presence to all creatures as the infinite ground towards which their self-transcending natures move.

It may well be that this understanding of grace leads to an uncertain place for Christology in Rahner's writings. Christology is, of course, in many ways central to his theology, as his work on the Incarnation and the Trinity amply demonstrates. Yet it is often hard to elude the sense that God's revelation in Christ is merely an instance — albeit the supreme instance — of God's gracious presence to the whole of creation. Christ, he writes, 'is a moment of the history of God's communication of himself to the world — in the sense that he is part of the history of the cosmos itself. He must not be merely God acting on the world but must be part of the cosmos itself in its very climax' (*Theological Investigations* 5 (London, 1966) 175). It is at least arguable that Rahner's general theology of grace tends to eclipse his Christology, and to blunt some of the sharper contours of the sheer particularity of God's grace in Christ.

Whatever answer be given to that issue, it is certain that Rahner's account of man as 'transcendental consciousness' needs fuller explanation and justification, the more so because his commitments here are invoked all through his theological writings. 'Always and of necessity man posits in his existence the "whence" for an answer, and hence implicitly the answer to the question of being itself' (*Hearers of the Word*, 26). Rahner's defence of this kind of proposal stands badly in need of some kind of empirical explanation if it is not to appear more than a rather diffuse re-statement of natural theology. Such an empirical exercise might well reveal the very profound disagreements between his theology and contemporary accounts of man and his world, disagreements which Rahner's synthetic and mediating approach tend to overlook or underrate.

But, as always in theology, what one learns from a theologian may well not be so much as a set of answers as a series of possible questions or a manner of approach. Within the confines of contemporary Protestant theology there are few whose theologies have held together the claims of the intellect and of the spiritual life, or whose work has been so heavy with pastoral concern.

For further reading:

G. McCool ed., *A Rahner Reader* (London, 1975) has a comprehensive selection, with helpful introduction and commentary. The more ambitious might tackle some of the 20 volumes of his collected essays in *Theological Investigations* (London, 1960-82), or his *Foundations of Christian Faith* (London, 1978). A more popular text from which to start would be *opportunities for Faith* (London, 1974).

Short studies of Rahner can be found in H. Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner* (London, 1965) and K.H. Weger, *Karl Rahner. An Introduction to His Theology* (London, 1980). Fuller accounts are given in L. Roberts, *The Achievement of Karl Rahner* (New York, 1967) and A. Carr, *Karl Rahner's Theological Method* (Missoula, 1977).

Rahner's intellectual background is helpfully filled in by O. Muck in *The Transcendental Method* (New York, 1968) and by E.L. Mascall in *The Openness of Being* (London, 1971), chapters 4 and 5.