

ENCOUNTERING THE RELIGIOUS OTHER: CHALLENGES TO RAHNER'S TRANSCENDENTAL PROJECT

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Fruitful interreligious encounter is the meeting of human beings, and calls for a metaphysics, a common humanum in order to proceed to dialogue. Rahner's transcendental method could serve as an important tool for entering into interreligious encounter. It offers a metaphysics that in its apophatic aspects has resonances with some forms of postmetaphysical thought, particularly the notion of gift. The author here pursues this idea but only after considering some critiques of Rahner's transcendental project.

IS INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE POSSIBLE? In his preface to a book on returning to Europe's Christian roots, Pope Benedict XVI writes that "an interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the word is not possible" because "a true dialogue is not possible without putting one's faith in parentheses."¹ The pope maintains that authentic dialogue involves an openness to the other that may place one's own religious decision—one's faith—in question or in brackets, and submit it not simply to discussion but to dilution in a well-intentioned intercultural mix. The pope does not intend to cut off interreligious communication, much less interreligious cooperation, but he signals a prudential caution about entering into the seriousness of what an interreligious dialogue could entail or even require, particularly, it seems, in Europe.

The background to this question is a long-standing debate about the possibility and limits of interreligious dialogue.² The heart of the matter

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¹ "Pope Questions Interfaith Dialogue," *New York Times*, November 23, 2008.

² This debate has been reflected in the pages of this journal in recent years. See, e.g., Terrence W. Tilley, "'Christianity and the World Religions': A Recent Vatican

for Catholic theologians is the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and how that uniqueness is to be understood when entering into dialogue with a religious other. This was certainly the major concern of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in its 2000 declaration, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, which understands interreligious dialogue as part of the Church's evangelizing mission.³ More recently, further debate has arisen over the possibility of interreligious dialogue, partly as a result of the searching work of scholars such as Peter Phan and Catherine Cornille. In his recent work, Phan argues for the possibility of an interreligious dialogue that does not require the bracketing (or *epoché*) of one's Christian faith, but sees an opportunity for growth in the understanding of Catholic faith precisely by entering into dialogue with religious others.⁴ Cornille explores the obstacles to fruitful interreligious dialogue, particularly claiming truth in such a way that the possibilities are limited for growth in understanding of that truth precisely through dialogue. For her the question is not possibility or impossibility of dialogue per se, but recognition that "the capacity for dialogue is thus itself a process, involving, indeed calling for, continuous critical self-examination and a creative retrieval of resources that may open the tradition to the religious other and to growth in the truth."⁵

With such a discussion in mind, I have chosen to limit the scope of my analysis here to an interreligious encounter as opposed to a dialogue per se. While I agree with Phan and Cornille that, properly understood, a dialogue is possible, I am examining here the underpinnings of such a dialogue, and

Document" 60 (1999) 318–37; Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "As Long as We Wonder: Possibilities in the Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue" 68 (2007) 531–54; David M. Coffey, "A Trinitarian Response to Issues Raised by Peter Phan" 69 (2008) 852–74; and the entire June 2008 issue, entitled "The Catholic Church and Other Living Faiths in Comparative Perspective."

³ CDF, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html (accessed April 19, 2010).

⁴ See Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008). The pope's reference to "bracketing" faith evokes the *epoché* (a term derived from Husserl) that would place in brackets the heart of faith, e.g., personal faith in Jesus Christ, for purposes of advancing interreligious dialogue. This is an approach that seasoned scholars such as Phan completely reject. For a summary of his views on this approach, see David M. Coffey, "A Trinitarian Response to Issues Raised by Peter Phan," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008) 852–74, at 873.

⁵ See Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2008) 216. While acknowledging that an authentic interreligious dialogue—one in which each party learns from the other—is a difficult task, the key to its success lies in humility, both personal and doctrinal.

that begins with an encounter with the religious other—the grounds upon which such an encounter, prior to a dialogue, can occur. I will propose here how people of Christian faith can have an encounter with any other religion, an encounter that respects both the reality and irreducible claims of the religious other, as well as the irreducible claims of one's own Christian faith. While dialogue as the pope understands it may indeed be impossible, an authentic encounter, properly understood, should not be.⁶ I inquire here into how an interreligious encounter could be undertaken in such a way that the common humanity of each party is taken as a serious constitutive element of the encounter itself. Attending to this fundamental matter is essential before we can think of moving beyond an encounter with the religious other—meeting another religion on its own terms—to any authentic dialogue with the religious other. But, equally, we need a common ground within which to pursue this end. For without some such common ground, we may engage in polite conversation but not truly engage the religious convictions of the other in ways that will lead to a deepened understanding of and cooperation with them. And we might also lose the opportunity to understand our own faith more profoundly.

In the past we might have given the name “metaphysics” to such a common ground, for metaphysics, or ontology (according to a particular understanding of it), provided a framework for understanding all human beings according to a universally applicable set of philosophical presuppositions. Today, however, metaphysics as a science of being, an ontology, has been discredited in many circles, where, in the wake of poststructuralism and deconstruction, a “postmetaphysical” era has been proclaimed. Hence, transcendental projects such as Karl Rahner's can seem to belong to a bygone era of categories now surpassed. My argument, however, is that Rahner's transcendental project, critically understood and brought into conversation with postmetaphysical thought, holds promise for the establishment of common ground for this encounter with the religious other. Rahner's project offers a philosophical context for understanding humanity that could serve as a common ground for encounter with the religious other around any number of issues facing us in common, from human rights to environmental devastation, from the elimination of torture to the promotion of public health. All these issues have “metaphysical” import in a

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas offers a philosophical framework for an encounter with the other that focuses on an ethical foundation of responsibility for the other, rather than an ontology of being. His project is of great importance for recovering a positive sense of the other as constituting the “I” through the other's alterity. However, I am proposing here the value of a more systematically developed ontology or metaphysics to establish a foundation for encounter with the other. For further insight see Declan Marmion, “Rahner and His Critics: Revisiting the Dialogue,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68 (2003) 207–10.

broad sense of the term, for they ultimately lead us to the subject matter of theology, which is the truth of God and of ourselves that is revealed in what is real, and preeminently what is religiously important about the human being. What is needed today for authentic encounter with the religious other by Christian theology, then, is a critical retrieval of metaphysics as an understanding of the fundamental reality of the human being. Rahner's transcendental project still has much to offer in arriving at such a retrieval, especially when we place it in conversation with philosophical developments that have emerged since Rahner's time, and new insights into the value of the pluralism of religions as a context for pursuing Christian theology—a matter that Rahner himself was prescient in seeing later in his career.⁷ I am not suggesting that, for authentic dialogue to take place, it is enough to have some shared understanding of the human, although this is essential. For a shared understanding of the human is the foundation for dialogue about the religious particulars that can lead to a deeper understanding of the truth we hold, and this would presumably work for both partners in an interreligious dialogue.

I will pursue this line of thinking, first, by showing how certain aspects of Rahner's transcendental method establishes a common ground for pursuing interreligious encounter. Here I am interested in what "metaphysics" means in Rahner's project, and the implications of this meaning for an understanding of the human person as a spiritual subject. Next, I will examine three major challenges to this approach: (1) the transcendental method is not seriously concerned with particular knowledge of the religious other, for it subsumes all religions within a transcendental ontology; (2) the thesis of the "anonymous" Christian only makes explicit this fundamental weakness; and (3) the transcendental method does not adequately engage the concerns of historical and cultural contexts within which religions are lived. Finally, I will turn to so-called postmetaphysical philosophical movements that have decentered being and essentialist ontology, presumably rendering transcendental projects obsolete. I will respond to this last critique by suggesting that there are certain ways in which Rahner's treatment of being anticipates and aligns well with the postmodern critiques of ontology that embrace the notion of "the gift," particularly in his appeal to apophatic experience as a path to knowledge. Finally, I will suggest that, taking these critiques seriously, Rahner's transcendental project may lie at the center of the theological search for a common ground for

⁷ For a critical appreciation of what Rahner appreciated of the encounter with the religious other, and also of some limitations in his thinking, see Francis X. Clooney, "Rahner beyond Rahner: A Comparative Theologian's Reflections on Theological Investigations 18," in *Rahner beyond Rahner: A Great Theologian Encounters the Pacific Rim*, ed. Paul G. Crowley (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) 3–21.

the encounter with the religious other, and not on the periphery. This last claim is driven by the conviction that we must find a way to recover metaphysics, critically understood as a philosophical anthropology, if Catholic theology itself is not to be consigned to the sidelines of history and excluded from important topical debates that arise from encounters among the religions.

RAHNER'S TRANSCENDENTAL PROJECT AND METAPHYSICS

The contemporary discussion of Rahner's approach might take its cue from scholars more recently engaging Rahner than from those of the Atlantic axis of the past 50 years. Notably, Rahner has been well received in Asia, particularly in Korea and Japan, and most recently, in China. The most appealing element of Rahner's thought in these contexts seems to be his philosophical anthropology, which offers opportunities for some theologians to bridge Christianity with Asian cultural and religious traditions.⁸ What these scholars find in Rahner is a metaphysics in the fullest sense of the word: not only an ontology of being but a metaphysics in a broader sense: a view of the real in which the human is situated within a cosmos, and that cosmos understood in relation to an absolute. On this basis Rahner speaks of being, the classic domain of ontology, but also of knowing and loving as expressions of human existence, of being in time. A fully developed metaphysics does not subordinate knowing or loving to being; the three are mutually conditioning dimensions of a comprehensive understanding of human existence. To be able to enter into a metaphysics in this broader sense is crucial to an engagement with other religions as such, for religion is more than an epistemology, ethics, doctrine, or ritual system, although it certainly entails all these elements in varying forms. It is, more fundamentally, an expression of what makes of the world a cohesive universe of reference and direction, what endows the world with an absolute coherence. This understanding of religion, as I will show, is implied by Rahner's transcendental project, where the coherence is rooted in a transcendent Absolute.

The roots of this broader understanding of metaphysics are found in the 20th-century debate over the role of Thomism in Catholic theology. The ascent of neo-Scholasticism at the end of the 19th century and into the early part of the 20th century resulted in a compelling architectonic of "wisdom" that nevertheless departed somewhat from Aquinas's thought in certain crucial ways, due in no small part to the interpretation of Aquinas through the lens of Suárez, who downplayed Aquinas's notion of *esse*, being in act,

⁸ George E. Griener, "Rahner and the Pacific Rim: From the Kulturkampf to China's Cultural Christians," in *Rahner beyond Rahner* 60–66. My own interchange with Chinese theologians at Fudan University in Shanghai confirms this judgment.

realized in existence, for a more static notion of being as essence.⁹ Gerald McCool relates, however, that by the early 20th century a new generation of Thomists emerged who approached Thomas in a very different way, equipped as they were with historical knowledge and varying commitments to historical consciousness, as well as with an openness to newer philosophical movements in Europe. Four of these Thomists—Pierre Rousselot, Joseph Maréchal, Jacques Maritain, and Étienne Gilson—were to blaze new approaches to Thomas. But a sharp divide developed between these younger scholars, one that was to tell upon the direction Rahner (and also Bernard Lonergan) would take as theologians. McCool describes it this way:

Both sides based themselves on the principles of St. Thomas' epistemology and metaphysics as these principles were understood in their tradition. Yet the disciples of Rousselot and Maréchal argued strongly for the legitimacy of an irreducible plurality of philosophies operating in a diversity of historical frameworks while the disciples of Maritain just as steadfastly denied it.¹⁰

From this divide emerged a new generation of theologians, several of them influenced by the fresh approaches to the tradition represented by Rousselot and Maréchal, who had found ways of bringing Thomistic thought into fruitful conversation with Kantian philosophy, idealism, and, later on, with phenomenology. Rahner, who had studied Maréchal and Rousselot assiduously, was one of these new theologians.

Transcendental Thomism was a breakthrough for Rahner, especially because it provided a philosophical foundation upon which to approach religious phenomena, in particular the movement of the Spirit in experience, and, of course, the content of faith itself, revelation. He could now approach knowledge of religious phenomena in much the same way he would approach other domains of knowledge, for knowing, whether of a religious or a nonreligious object, is oriented toward an absolute horizon that is the final cause and term of the act of knowing itself. And this would in turn lead to the notion of the historicity of knowledge—knowledge placed within the framework of historical consciousness—because knowing was no longer understood as abstraction from reality and converting that abstraction into a concept. Knowing was necessarily mediated in and through the world of phenomena, where objects of knowledge are framed by and presented within space and time.

⁹ Gerald McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University, 1989) 31–32: “The act of existence, the keystone of St. Thomas' own metaphysics, is never mentioned. Metaphysics can be a necessary science because Being is what Suárez said it is, a possible essence prescinding completely from existence.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 35.

Understanding this general background is necessary in order to grasp what is happening in Rahner's work, particularly in the later *Foundations of Christian Faith*.¹¹ In that work, transcendental subjectivity is realized in time and history; "historicity and therefore . . . concrete history is an intrinsic and constitutive element of a spiritual free subject."¹² But this is not the concrete history of an individual in isolation from others; it is rather an intersubjective reality that is captured in the imagery of salvation:

If the intercommunication of spiritual subjects in truth and in love and in society belongs to the realization of one's own existence because it is a historical existence and belongs to it as an intrinsic and constitutive element and not as its extrinsic material, then the unity of the history of all mankind and the unity of a salvation history is from the outset a transcendental characteristic of the personal history of every individual, and vice versa, because we are dealing with the history of many subjects.¹³

So, for Rahner, transcendentalism grounds a commonality of human experience in knowing (and later he will say, in loving and in being), all realized in a history encompassed by the Holy Mystery.¹⁴ This is properly a religious worldview in the sense that it is more than an epistemology or an ontology; it offers a comprehensive understanding of the human person in relation to the cosmos and to God. It is possible for human beings to communicate with one another because they have in common a subjectivity and personhood that are historically mediated. But it is also a "metaphysical" worldview insofar as this foundation, or something like it, critically appropriated, is a condition for an encounter with the religious other. This can be said because the common ground laid by this approach is in fact a philosophical anthropology that understands the human person as pure openness to absolute being, a spirit that is in movement, through successive acts of self-transcendence in knowledge and love, toward the Absolute. Building on this foundation, Rahner can speak of what is common about all human beings before the absolute Mystery we call God. All human beings share common ontological structures for knowing and loving, and this common *humanum* constitutes the condition for the possibility of the unity of the human race. This common *humanum* allows an interreligious encounter that is truly open to the ineffable, that can raise authentic theological questions, and risk contradiction by the religious other. There is reason to be optimistic, therefore, about the possibility of interreligious encounter on the basis of this common ground.

¹¹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 25.

¹² *Ibid.* 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ For Phan's account of Rahner's transcendental framework, see *Being Religious Interreligiously* 109–11.

CRITIQUES OF TRANSCENDENTAL METHOD IN LIGHT OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Before pursuing some implications of this line of inquiry, I will examine three critiques of Rahner's transcendental method as it might be applied to encounters with the religious other, or as it might function in a context of religious pluralism: (1) a methodological critique from the standpoint of comparative theology, (2) a critique of Rahner's theory of the "anonymous Christian," and (3) a critique of the purported ahistorical and individualist focus of transcendental thought. Each of these critiques really asks about the adequacy of the common ground established by the transcendental project. They are presumed by a further critique, undertaken by postmodern philosophy, of Rahner's "essentialism," or of his ontology of being.

Methodological Criticism from the Perspective of Comparative Theology

Francis Clooney, pioneer in the discipline of comparative theology, poses a balanced and respectful critique of Rahner's approach. Clooney's critique focuses on how Rahner engages the religious other in his thought. Limiting his discussion to volume 18 of *Theological Investigations*, which contains several of Rahner's later essays on Christianity in relation to other religions, Clooney describes Rahner as an "integral theologian," by which he means that Rahner not only worked from a philosophical foundation in transcendental thought, but also turned to his own piety to develop his theology. And in all this, he knew his limits—what he could and could not say.¹⁵ Still, as Clooney demonstrates by an analysis of several texts, Rahner's "persistent care for the nuances of Christian thought and piety are noticeably *not* matched by a similar care for the corresponding nuances in other religious traditions, or even by a resolution to refrain from unkind comparisons about which he could not possibly have been certain."¹⁶

Clooney is not asking Rahner for an expertise that lies beyond him, but for methodological consistency. While Rahner is modest about the assertions he can make about other religions, not venturing to claim much knowledge about them at all, Clooney sees him as assigning the work of the "history of religions" to the experts, reserving for himself the posing of theological questions from the transcendental framework. Yet, as Clooney rightly points out, this approach is not even in accord with Rahner's own transcendental method, which reaches for the concrete categorical mediations of transcendence. When comparing mysticisms or models of transcendence, for example, it is necessary to engage the categorical dimensions of religion, to consult the experts in the history of religions, and to have

¹⁵ Clooney, "Rahner beyond Rahner" 4–5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 8.

“an exchange of ideas among experts, if we are to have a theological reflection that is truly attentive to both the Christian and another tradition.”¹⁷ Rahner would seem to eschew that exchange, however, resting content with limning the theological outlines within a transcendental framework of what might be at stake for Christian faith in such an exchange.

Clooney's analysis is challenging, for it can indeed be said that the particulars of other religions did not lie at the center of Rahner's theological concerns through most of his career. What did lie at the center, of course, was the mystery of God in relation to the human person as revealed in the mystery of Christ and the life of grace, and the relation of the saving work of Jesus Christ to all human beings.¹⁸ Clooney sees the value of Rahner's contribution, particularly in his work on the anonymous Christian, as realized in theologies of religion like those of Jacques Dupuis and Gavin D'Costa. These theologies either explicitly or implicitly assume a common ground, or the ontological structures of openness to Mystery that Rahner presents in his transcendental project. Dupuis, for example, carefully explores the *advaita* experience in Hinduism and the consciousness of Jesus with a view toward not only doctrinal complementarity but also a comparison of mystical experiences in these traditions.¹⁹ Such explorations challenge limited notions of Christian uniqueness and open up the possibility that dialogic understanding of other traditions could lead to conclusions about the divine intentionality, indeed about God, that would not have occurred outside such encounters with the religious other. In all this, these theologies are indebted to the transcendental method. If it is faithful to its own methodological principles, therefore, the transcendental approach can serve to engage the religious other.

The Anonymous Christian²⁰

Rahner's famous theory of the “anonymous Christian” flows from the transcendental principles that undergird his project, for it presumes a basic

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ In addition to his articles on the anonymous Christian (see nn. 21, 22, and 24 below), a partial listing of Rahner's work in this area would include “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” *Theological Investigations* (1966) 5:115–34; “The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation,” *Theological Investigations* (1979) 16:199–224; “Jesus Christ in Non-Christian Religions,” *Theological Investigations* (1981) 17:39–50; and “On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation,” *Theological Investigations* 18:288–95.

¹⁹ See Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis, 1997) 268–79.

²⁰ See my earlier work on this topic, “Introduction: Improbable Encounters?” in *Rahner beyond Rahner* xiv–xvii, from which the content of this section is derived.

ontological structure that applies to all human beings *qua* human. It suggests that this common ontological structure of openness to all that is and finally to the Absolute is the condition for the possibility of a human being's response to God's grace and to living a graced existence, even if one is not formally Christian by virtue of baptism. Yet this theory has frequently been criticized for failing to take seriously the otherness of the religious other and the irreducible differences that exist among the religions.

In one of the earliest appearances of "anonymous Christian," the issue at hand is not religious pluralism, but rather the challenge posed to Christian faith by secularism and atheism, and the "diaspora" situation in which Christians find themselves, especially in desacralized "first-world" cultures.²¹ What does Christian identity mean in a world where belief in the claims of Christian faith has become irrelevant, and where the claims of Christian faith have become cultural memories that few people seriously believe in? How is a believing Christian to perceive his nonbelieving brethren within the economy of salvation? In Rahner's earliest essay on the term, the theological response to these kinds of questions is ecclesiological: there are degrees of membership in the Church, from the explicitness of baptism to a nonofficial or "anonymous" form of Christianity. The measure of "Christianity" is not necessarily located in the explicitness of baptism, but in the sometimes hidden acceptance of grace, in ways that are essentially Christian because they involve a profound acceptance of not only oneself but also the other, in love, by following the promptings of one's conscience. This theory presumes universal ontological structures of spiritual subjects characterized by openness to Holy Mystery.

In a later essay, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church,"²² the emphasis shifts from ecclesial membership toward the problem of religious pluralism. Rahner asks how the notion of an anonymous Christianity affects the church's missionary vocation to non-Christian peoples and religions. Here the issue is the pluralism of religions, and the salvific integrity of those religions. This issue became especially acute in light of *Nostra aetate* of Vatican II, that declaration on the Catholic Church's relation toward non-Christian religions, which essentially opened a Pandora's box of theological conundrums about the exclusive claims of Christian faith vis-à-vis the claims of non-Christian religions. As several critics have pointed out, Rahner's presupposition, that salvation is established normatively for all of humanity in Jesus Christ, places him among the inclusivist theologians who see the salvific work of God as

²¹ Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," *Theological Investigations* (1969) 6: 390–98.

²² Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," *Theological Investigations* (1974) 12:161–77.

taking place in other religions through the agency of Christ. This idea of the "anonymous Christian" has been criticized by some as too narrow or too presumptuous.²³

In response to this kind of criticism, Rahner's final formal contribution to the topic appears as "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian.'"²⁴ Here he gives his "updated" version of the term: "The 'anonymous Christian' in our sense of the term is the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ's grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ."²⁵ While Rahner does not move here beyond the position of a salvation constituted in Christ for all persons, he tries to deal with the human reality that remains after Christian faith has encountered non-Christian realities in the form of other religions: that human beings do not necessarily become explicitly Christian by virtue of that encounter. And, therefore, he concedes, this theory of anonymous Christianity is insufficient in itself ("solely") to engage with non-Christian religions.²⁶

We can trace the transition from an ecclesiological doctrine, rooted in the diaspora situation that Christians may themselves experience in Rahner's kind of culture, to an emphasis on God's grace as already at work even outside explicit Christian faith, to a fundamental and basic recognition of our shared humanity in the realm of God's grace. We can see from this brief analysis that the meaning of the term itself develops within Rahner's *oeuvre*. Rahner would later say that he was not particularly concerned about the tenability of the term itself, but that he was simply trying to make a statement about the absoluteness of God in relation to human beings.²⁷ In the end, the theory of the anonymous Christian is rooted in the doctrine of grace as God's self-communication—it is an expression of that doctrine. And, as such, it provides one paving stone in the path toward encounter with the religious other, because that other shares a common human nature, which, as seen through a Christian lens, is pure openness to the self-giving Mystery.

²³ For a well-balanced overview of various criticisms, see Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Rahner and Religious Diversity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (New York: Cambridge University, 2005) 235–48.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'" *Theological Investigations* (1976) 14:280–94.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 283

²⁶ *Ibid.* 293–94.

²⁷ See Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965–1982*, trans. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 218–19, 268.

What remains, then, is this pure openness, something to which I will return toward the end of this article.

Critique of Rahner's Ontotheological Project: Political Theology

Perhaps the most significant critique of Rahner's transcendental method comes from those theologians who claim that the era of metaphysics is finished, and that a theological project rooted in metaphysics is deficient and outdated. One branch of this critique comes from those who hold that Rahner is insufficiently attentive to history and to the actual concrete conditions within which people live. To some degree, this is implicit in Clooney's evaluation of Rahner's knowledge of the categorical details of non-Christian religions. But this critique is not about a data base of knowledge; it has to do, rather, with the point of departure for theological reflection. Johannes Metz, one of Rahner's most devoted students, argued that history does not play a foundational, methodological role in his theology.²⁸ Rahner's philosophical grounding embraces history as the necessary mediation of the transcendental, and as the place where the infinite being is both disclosed and hidden, but history does not play a foundational role in the shaping of theological questions or arriving at a theological vision. The transcendental method, in its focus on the spiritual subject, is not only ahistorical but individualist, and thus does not engage the "political" reality of human existence. Taking up this critique, some other theologians, particularly those committed to the methods of liberation theology, argue that Rahner's "system" is an essentialism that focuses so much on the spiritual subject, the "individual" before the Absolute, that history, particularly the social and communal dimensions of human life, are not sufficiently treated. These critics want to extrapolate from the model of transcendental subjectivity to a wider, more interpersonal and historical map.²⁹ They propose theologizing not from the standpoint of the transcendental subject and person, but from the data of history—human situations, actions, and realities.

²⁸ For Metz's critique of Rahner, see "An Identity Crisis in Christianity? Transcendental and Political Responses," in *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner, S.J.*, ed. William J. Kelly (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1980) 169–78. For a thorough overview of the critique and Rahner's responses, see Titus F. Guenther, *Rahner and Metz: Transcendental Theology as Political Theology* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994).

²⁹ Robert Lassalle-Klein raises such questions with regard to Rahner's "supernatural existential," which, he argues (with Miguel Diaz), is not sufficiently attentive to the communal dimensions of human experience because of the "individual starting point" that shapes his anthropology. See Lassalle-Klein, "Rethinking Rahner on Grace and Symbol: New Proposals from the Americas," in *Rahner beyond Rahner* 88–89.

There is some validity to these critiques. Rahner's is not in itself a political theology, to be sure, nor even a theology of history. But one could argue that Rahner's project does in fact contain within itself a theology of history, and in this it is strikingly Hegelian, as the spirit unfolds through concrete mediations into a history of intersubjectivity, what Declan Marmion calls the "ongoing dialectical tension between transcendence and history at the heart of Rahner's twofold theological method."³⁰ The self-donation of God to the spiritual subject is not a purely spiritual act; it is mediated in and through the concreteness of persons, and these persons come to be as such in relation to one another in the concreteness of space and time. This gives rise to what Marmion calls a "performative understanding of spirituality": "The human person is not only a hearer of the Word but a doer of the Word as well. Christian spirituality is not merely an 'experiencing' but a 'doing,' an activity, necessarily involving a 'praxis' of solidarity with one's neighbor."³¹

In engaging this criticism, it is important to underscore how strong the "intersubjective" actually is in Rahner's transcendental project, and that he does not begin theological investigation with the transcendental as such, but with the experience of the finite, of all that one encounters within space and time, the "everyday" matter of human life, including experiences of injustice. This is one reason why it was not such a leap for Rahner to write at the end of his life in defense of Gustavo Gutiérrez's liberation theology, and to see it as of a piece, in a sense, with his earlier work.

All three of these challenges can be met in such a way that Rahner's method can still stand as a foundation for engaging with the religious other. But a more formidable challenge is presented by some representatives of postmodern philosophical movements that consider the era of metaphysics as ontology to be obsolete. It is to this critique that I now turn.

CRITIQUE OF RAHNER'S ONTOTHEOLOGICAL PROJECT: POSTMODERN METAPHYSICS

The critique of Rahner's ontotheological project comes from those philosophers and theologians who see him as the epitome of the Enlightenment, the last of the modern theologians. In this view, the fundamental challenge is to the subjectivity on which the modern project of transcendentalism is centered.³² This, in turn, poses a challenge to a metaphysics of

³⁰ Marmion, "Rahner and His Critics" 201.

³¹ Ibid. 200.

³² For a succinct summary of this position, see Michael Purcell, "Rahner amid Modernity and Post-Modernity," in *Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* 195–209. He writes: "If, in modernity, the concern was the constituting role of the epistemic subject in knowing and the concomitant problem of the ontological status

being so that philosophers like Gianni Vattimo speak of “the end of the metaphysical God” and the “end of metaphysics.”³³ He is joined in this sentiment by such thinkers (with quite different projects) as Jean-Luc Marion and John Caputo. Such views emanate from the original destabilization of ontology in the later Heidegger, with his cancellation of being, a move further developed by the deconstructionists and their successors. Heidegger replaces the strong ontology of a “being of beings” with an understanding of being as existence in time—a being that is both disclosed and hidden in its givenness. Vattimo would displace even Heidegger’s ontology of the presence/absence of being with what he calls a “weak ontology,” a metaphysics that does not speak of being as such:

If, indeed, Heidegger’s critique of objectivistic metaphysics cannot be carried forward by replacing the latter with a more adequate conception of Being . . . , one will have to think Being as not identified, in any sense, with the presence characteristic of the object. . . . Being has a nihilistic vocation and that diminishment, withdrawal and weakening are the traits that Being assigns to itself in the epoch of the end of metaphysics.³⁴

Being does not stand on its own, as an *ens a se*. Instead of being, Vattimo speaks of *kenosis*, the self-emptying of being (in its vocation to diminishment and ultimate nothingness) exemplified in what he calls the abasement of God, which occurs as incarnation. Being as *kenosis* is now only “half-being,” and there is no transcendental subject as such to receive it.³⁵ There is only the giving, the *es gibt*.

Vattimo and others who share his rejection of a strong ontology prefer to speak of the “gift,” a philosophical trope proposed by Jacques Derrida.³⁶

of the object, the problem in post-modernity is the displacement of the stable subject, now viewed not simply as constituting and constructing but also as constituted and constructed, and the concomitant return of the object whose exteriority disturbs and disrupts subjective frameworks and horizons. Said otherwise, the post-modern concern is for fragmented subjectivity or interiority and the return of objectivity or exteriority, and the challenge which these present to enlightened transcendentalism” (195).

³³ See Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1999) 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 39.

³⁶ A superb explication of the notion of the gift, one particularly helpful to Catholic theologians, is offered by Jean-Luc Marion, “Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift,” in his collection of essays entitled *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University, 2008) 80–100. For a helpful introduction to Derrida’s writings on the gift, along with representative samples of his development of this idea, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1997) 160–299. For specific reference to the notion of the gift and the theology of Karl Rahner, see Michael J. Scanlon, “A Deconstruction of

The gift is what we are given, what we receive from the other as a welcome. I begift the other, not out of indebtedness or in expectation of reciprocity, but as a sheer giving without any expectation of thanks or return. I thus come to share the circle of the other. What we are together is dependent on the gift of the other and, more specifically, on the other's *self-giving*. The gracious and active response to the gift that does not finally depend on the gift is called charity. Charity is itself a mode of giving without any expectation of return. The traditional metaphysical foundations of gift and thanksgiving, receiving and reciprocity, which are dependent on a philosophy of being, are undercut here. The notion of being is replaced, in effect, by a deontological ethics. But this displacement of being would seem to undermine real engagement with another—a religious other—that could be in any way dialogical. For there is no being there, no presence, to engage.

If this critique were to stand without response, it could well seem to undercut Rahner's approach, which indeed seems to presume a "strong" ontology in the sense of ontological structures of a spiritual subject, and an understanding of finite being as ordered to the infinite, the Absolute. In one sense, this is the case, for being itself is the qualitatively infinite, that which cannot be comprehended because it cannot be transcended. But this is not because being in Rahner is simply the "being of beings," as if being were that greater than which nothing can be conceived. That would indeed delimit the notion of being and turn it into yet another object, something formally comprehensible even if it is in fact ungraspable. Rather, for Rahner, being is the totality and unity of all that is, both realized and potential; as such, it is the condition for the possibility of anything at all. Inquiry into being is more fundamental, and original, than an objectifiable being of beings.³⁷ Rahner sees being as more than an *ens a se*; to this extent, postmodern philosophers such as Vattimo perhaps unwittingly partially agree with him. But Rahner's is not a weak being either. It is, rather, pure activity, *esse*, which is always coming into being in space and time. In what he calls its "luminosity," being

is more than knowing, it is life and action, decision and execution; but it is all this in such a way that all life and action, every decision and execution, insofar as they are (and insofar as they are not, they are nothing), are luminous for themselves, are self-present in knowing, because, although they differ conceptually from knowing, they are moments that belong intrinsically to being itself, to being that is self-present in its luminosity in all the dimensions in which it unfolds its nature.³⁸

Religion: On Derrida and Rahner," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1999) 223–38.

³⁷ This fundamental position is elaborated in Rahner's early work, *Hearer of the Word*. See *Hearer*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994) 27–29.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 33–34.

This sense of being is Rahner's response to the question, Why is there something rather than nothing? The answer does not simply posit being as a first cause, but as the absolute condition for the possibility of any causality at all. It is the real as such. But it itself cannot be transcended or grasped in and of itself. Often enough we know it only as absence, in an apophatic mode, for in its givenness, the mystery of being remains, and cannot be fully disclosed. There is always more to encounter. Rather than a "strong" ontology in the sense of a being of beings, we find in Rahner an understanding of being that calls for an apophasis, entrance into the world of what is concealed or not positively grasped, in order to come to know anything at all, and most especially God.³⁹ The real, the "metaphysical," does not belong to an objective realm of being. Louis Dupré comments that in this kind of view, "God is not an object but an absolute demand . . . [and] to accept God is not to accept a 'giver,' but a Giving."⁴⁰ And here, he suggests, is where we find common ground with the religions, where, in a sense, the encounter can begin, in that "open space" created by the Giving.

Approached in this way, Rahner seems to have more in common with the successors to the deconstructionists than with those who want to resurrect a classical metaphysics. Rahner's insistence on the givenness of being, of God's self-communication, and of the human subject's disposal toward it, is akin to (though not identical with) the metaphor of the gift that we find in Derrida and those who have been influenced by him. Michael Scanlon describes how Rahner and Derrida, starting from very different platforms, are dealing with an understanding of God that breaks with earlier understandings of ontology or metaphysics. For Rahner, the future "is the good news that God gives God away to the world. God is love, and love is Self-donation to the other." Similarly, though with a different set of presuppositions about the spiritual subject, Derrida speaks of a "God who gives God."⁴¹

Like Derrida, Rahner is seriously concerned with engaging religious reality in the concrete, in what Rahner calls the categorical realm. But, in

³⁹ See Marmion, "Rahner and His Critics" 208: "Yet, within Rahner's later theological writings another strand is evident—one which recognizes that knowledge understood as comprehensive mastery is inadequate. This desire to move beyond a presumptuous ontotheology, with its emphasis on an apprehension and possession of God, is manifested in a more apophatic manner of speaking that stresses the incomprehensibility of the holy mystery."

⁴⁰ Louis K. Dupré, "Spiritual Life in a Secular Age," in *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection: Excursions in the Phenomenology and Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998) 131-44, at 138.

⁴¹ Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* 227.

relation to the religious other especially, this engagement will as likely occur through an apophatic approach as a more positively constructed comparison of religious particulars. Phan takes this up in his discourse on the “foolish wisdom” required to enter into encounter with the religious other, and he draws on the Christian tradition of apophatic theology, particularly in Thomas à Kempis and Nicholas of Cusa.⁴² Cornille also invokes the apophatic tradition as a resource of interreligious encounter and dialogue, and notes that most “Christian theologians engaged in dialogue with other religions in fact implicitly or explicitly point to the ineffability of ultimate reality as the basis for dialogue or as the ultimate goal of all religious dialogue.”⁴³ This apophatic approach allows for the gift of the other to enter into knowledge, not starting with religious particulars, but with a disposition toward the Absolute in love.

As Dupré suggests, however, the apophasis that allows us to speak of God also calls for a constructive moment of positive engagement with reality, a dealing with religious particulars (theologies, doctrines, texts, practices, rites, rules, etc.). Being as such only appears (and is concealed) within the world of existing persons and things and the cultures they construct. And for Rahner too, the transcendental is known only in and through the historical particular. Rahner's transcendentalism provides the *humanum*, the commonality of the human, wherein religions and the “religious other” can be encountered in those historical particulars. Here is where he differs from Derrida, for whom religions are given as irreducible, and for whom there are no a priori structures of openness whereby one can enter into them. Caputo suggests that Derrida offers a way of addressing this problem, by offering the notion of “factual” particulars—what Rahner might call the categorical dimension of religion. These we know not in any a priori sense, but by entering into them “doing the truth,”⁴⁴ presumably in shared experience with the other, as in shared ethical projects. From this standpoint, the notion of transcendental subjectivity that moves Rahner's approach need not be shared by all who want to enter into the encounter of religions. What Rahner is adverting to on the basis of a transcendental metaphysics could be discovered, it seems, by entering first into the categorical, by exploring the depths of what the categorical offers, where the gift (or Giving) is encountered. And this includes discovery of the human being who receives the gift in and through encounters with the real, with the other.

⁴² Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously* 13–16.

⁴³ Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* 40–42, at 42.

⁴⁴ As described by Scanlon in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* 126.

TOWARD A RAHNERIAN ENCOUNTER WITH RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: A COMMON GROUND

Where do these challenges to Rahner's transcendental project and our responses to them lead us as we endeavor to bring this project to bear upon encounters within a world of religious pluralism?

First, it is clear that we cannot begin with a naïve sense that Rahnerian transcendentalism will make it possible for Christian theologians to enter into, encounter, and comprehend the religious other, much less conduct an authentic dialogue of the sort to which Pope Benedict refers. This would indeed constitute a kind of theological presumption that should be seriously questioned, for it would move beyond even the "constitutive inclusivism" of Rahner's theology to a christological universalism that would not properly respect the differences among the religions. And, short of revelation, or of certain cognitive and perhaps mystical points of entry, the religious other cannot be comprehended such that a genuine dialogue with the other could transpire. Transcendental method does not imply or even aim for such a result.

On the other hand, what Rahner's transcendental project does offer is a framework for encounter with the other on the basis of a common ground rooted not in the accident of the historical moment, but in the fundamental reality of being human, which is pure openness to the gift and constituted by the gift. Rahner insistently returns us to the spiritual subject. More broadly, his theology offers a view of religion that can be understood under the rubric of metaphysics, where metaphysics itself is understood more broadly than as a "being of beings" ontology. Rahner's transcendentalism posits that, apart from the shared world of categorical objects, there is an experience of these objects that, while differently parsed in the various religious traditions, is the condition for possibility of communication about them. It is here that Rahner's project has much to offer, because in the absence of common understanding of the spiritual subject, even the categorical has the potential of becoming a disjointed assemblage of claims and counterclaims. Even when the encounter with the religious other is primarily conceived as an ethical project, little can follow from it without some ultimate consensus about spiritual subjects. This is where metaphysics as I have discussed it here comes into play for the Christian participant in the encounter.

I would argue, therefore, that Rahner's transcendental theology actually promotes the possibility of encounter with the religious other, not because it imports a certain faith conviction that sees Christ at work in other religions, although it does do that; but because the transcendental approach on its own terms leads to the possibility of an authentic encounter, one that can be transforming as well as useful. This is seen quite clearly, I think,

in the methods of comparative theology, which juxtapose texts, Christian and other, to discern points of contact and divergence, and possible inferences as well as insights into one's own faith. Above all, and for the ethical implications of encounter with the religious other, Rahner's theological approach offers a metaphysical platform that allows the Christian and Christian theology to enter into discussion of a common *humanum*. Apart from such a metaphysical foundation, I must ask what is the point of even attempting an encounter among the religions that could possibly move us beyond ethical rhetoric, important though it be, and toward a deeper common engagement, an interreligious dialogue, concerning the mysteries of human existence?