

CAN WE KNOW GOD DIRECTLY? RAHNER'S SOLUTION FROM EXPERIENCE

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ACCURACY IN thinking about God's transcendence and presence in creation has always been the priority in a Christian doctrine of God. It still is.¹ Because Christians have always believed that God is both transcendent and involved in creation, it was and is considered imperative that theologians distinguish conceptually and really between God and man, Creator and creature, in order to describe a real relationship of completely different partners. Without this distinction it is impossible to know that one is describing anything other than the content of one's experiences, which in fact can never be divine in a Christian doctrine of God.

I

THE PROBLEMS

Among contemporary theologians, Karl Rahner is perhaps the most widely recognized thinker to grapple with this problem. Rahner's position, however, exhibits serious logical and theological difficulties, among which is his inability to demonstrate that his concept of God's transcendence corresponds with anything other than the content of man's experience of the absolute, conceived philosophically.² He would argue that he is using metaphysics to support the Church's living faith, that his metaphysics is a theological one derived from Christian revelation of the triune God, and that he is merely seeking the necessary reasons for faith in accordance with traditional fundamental theology.

As we shall see, it is precisely this thinking which ultimately leads Rahner into conflict with Scripture and the tradition as to the very nature of God's freedom in Himself and in the Incarnation *ad extra*.³

¹ A. Carr, "The God Who Is Involved," *Theology Today* 38 (1981) 314-28, at 314. She enthusiastically calls the doctrine of God "the only problem there is." Unfortunately, Carr and many of the authors she cites make God indistinguishable from human experience by assuming, with Rahner, that God is in fact "dimly known, not as an object of knowledge but as the infinite horizon within which every finite object is apprehended" (316). Thus it is assumed that "Experience of God . . . is present everywhere in everyday life" (316).

² Martin R. Tripole, S.J., "Philosophy and Theology—Are They Compatible? A Comparison of Barth, Moltmann, and Pannenberg with Rahner," *Thought* 53 (1978) 27-54, reaches this conclusion by saying that Rahner's transcendental Thomism is actually an attempt to reduce theology to philosophy.

³ See text, section "Symbolic Necessity."

Thus the real question addressed by this article⁴ is not whether Rahner thinks he is doing theological ontology, but whether he can show us that what he "calls" God is anything that actually transcends reason and experience.⁵ The real issue, then, is whether we can reason to the true God without faith in His Son and Spirit, whether we can really reach the true God via metaphysics first and only then by revelation without reducing revelation to a metaphysical assumption at the outset.⁶ The essential point of this article is that since the God Christians experience is totally other, we cannot provide reasons for faith. We can only give an account of the one in whom we believe.

Ultimately, the problem here is that one must make a choice between the object of philosophical reflection, i.e., being in general, and theological reflection, i.e., the triune God in whom we believe and who transcends any such reflection. Although Rahner intends to maintain God's freedom in se and in revelation, his thought obviates God's freedom and any real distinction between philosophy and theology precisely because he is not willing to make this choice.⁷ While Rahner insists that metaphysics is not the norm for his doctrine of God, he does make his norm experience⁸ and insists that metaphysics directs us to the unthematic experience of God we already have.⁹ Indeed, Rahner's criterion of theological truth is not pure metaphysics, but being in general as objectified by man on the basis of his self-experience and of creation. But by assuming that everyone has an unthematic experience of God and that natural theology is an inner factor in a general doctrine of being,¹⁰ Rahner does in fact reduce the triune God to his naturally known God.¹¹ The result of this thinking is Rahner's inability to see that the answer to the truth question can only be a theological and not a philosophical answer.¹²

⁴ See text, sections "The Tradition," "Christological Implications," and "Symbolic Necessity."

⁵ See text, section "Freedom of God."

⁶ See K. Rahner, "Observations on the Doctrine of God in Catholic Dogmatics," *Theological Investigations* 9 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 127-44, at 138, for an example of how he relies on metaphysics. This series hereafter will be abbreviated *TI*; the publishers, where different, will be indicated.

⁷ See n. 13 below.

⁸ Rahner, "Observations" 133-136.

⁹ Rahner, "Observations" 138. For the same idea, see K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 20-21; hereafter abbreviated as *Foundations*.

¹⁰ K. Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 171; hereafter abbreviated as *HW*.

¹¹ See text, section on "Freedom of God."

¹² Rahner's problem can be illustrated as follows. In his philosophy of religion Rahner says that we cannot prejudge whether revelation has occurred (*HW* 23 and 173-74). Thus, for Rahner, God's revelation is free. We know this, he says, because man must reckon with

Moreover, as we shall see, Rahner is forced to this position because his theology of the symbol, which is determined by his ontology of the symbol, dictates the method and shape of his analysis of Christian doctrine. For example, Rahner bases his dogmatic identification of the immanent and economic Trinity, and his belief that the experience of creaturely being leads necessarily to knowledge of the transcendent God, on the presupposition that the nameless ground which we all experience is identical with the triune God known in faith.¹³ For Rahner, the theological question is not whether this experience of the "nameless" is an experience of the true God; rather, it is a question of whether we

God's silence. But the problem with Rahner's method is that this cannot be a *real* silence, since Rahner has already presupposed that his philosophy of religion, by which he knows this silence, is a "condition that is itself created by God's speaking" (*HW* 174). This position is confirmed on pp. 16, 172, and 175, where Rahner says that if God did not speak, man by *nature* could at least hear this silence. This is the conflict of Rahner's method. He presupposes that God exists and that He has already spoken—the two things he says he cannot prejudice in his philosophy of religion. This is, as will be shown, a confusion of revelation with man's self-knowledge. See n. 132 below for more on this.

¹³ E.g., see K. Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," *TI* 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 36–73, at 50 ff. Because Rahner maintains that all conceptions of God spring from our unobjectified experience of transcendence (the whither), he believes that human knowledge of God follows the pattern: "The concept from the pre-conception, the name from the experience of the nameless" (50). Again, convinced that revelation does take us further than reason, Rahner would insist that it is not the efficient cause known from reason that determines his view of the Trinitarian self-revelation. But the main point of this article is (see sections "Direct Knowledge of God" and "Transcendental Method" and notes 73, 86, 89, 93, and 103) that his methodological assumption that our experience of the "nameless" is an experience of the *true* God forces him to identify the immanent and economic Trinity; it forces him actually to identify the *triune* God with our naturally known God and ultimately allows him to confuse the object of the Christian faith with the object of philosophical reflection, as in the following statements: "According to the Church's teaching, the *world* in which we live is in fact *supernatural*, that is, a world which as a whole is ordered to the personal, Trinitarian God beyond the world" ("Theos in the New Testament," *TI* 1, 79–148, at 80–81). Rahner also writes that creation is "the beginning and 'grammar' of the divine self-expression communicated into the void. Thus it is the beginning of the trinitarian self-revelation" ("Observations," *TI* 9, 134). This can only be true if we confuse revelation with what reason discovers apart from revelation, i.e., with what Rahner describes as the "unfathomably Inconceivable" on the same page. For more on this problem see Rahner, "Theos," *TI* 1, 82–83, 133–35, 137, 143, 144, 147–48; "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," 319–46, at 329–35 and 333–34 ff.; "The Concept of Mystery," *TI* 4, 65–67; "Nature and Grace," *TI* 4, 165–88, at 175 ff.; "Immanent and Transcendent Consumption of the World," *TI* 10, 273–89, at 281 (New York: Seabury, 1973); and *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 22–23 ff. And all of this leads to the monism in Rahner's doctrine of God (see my section "Symbolic Necessity") and emanationism in his Christology (my sections "Symbolic Necessity" and "Critical Analysis"). And this, I believe, is in conflict with Scripture and the tradition.

interpret this experience correctly, thus explicating our implicit, though unobjectified, knowledge of the true God.

The purpose here is to demonstrate that Rahner's theology of the symbol is actually built upon the belief that Christians know God directly, by reflecting on their experiences, primarily the experience of the "nameless."¹⁴ We shall see that Rahner's philosophical presuppositions concerning the symbolic nature of reality in general determine this theology. What is more, this thinking is exactly what leads Rahner to compromise God's transcendence (freedom), as seen by Scripture and tradition, in several important respects. Both Scripture and tradition actually maintain that Christians have no direct knowledge of God. Christians cannot simply assume that their experiences are experiences of the transcendent God without making the Creator indistinguishable from the creature. Because Rahner fails to recognize and to maintain this insight, he ultimately makes God indistinguishable from the world at precisely the point where Scripture and tradition insist that God ought to be most clearly discernible.¹⁵

¹⁴ "The Concept," *TI* 4, 50.

¹⁵ Rahner, of course, believes that his distinction between transcendental and categorical revelation and between the outer word of public, official revelation and the inner word of graced transcendental revelation solves the problem posed by his methodological assumption. His notion of mediated immediacy, he would hold, aids all of this. But these distinctions are spurious, since, in accordance with the idea that sign and thing signified are mutually and necessarily related, Rahner assumes that grace and revelation (see my section "Transcendental Method," notes 116 and 118, and Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 221-52, *TI* 4, 234-35) constitute "a characteristic of man's transcendence and transcendentality" (*Foundations* 129). Because Rahner actually believes that everyone has an experience of God in experiencing the nameless (see my section "Transcendental Method") the outer word of revelation really becomes unnecessary. We do not really need an outer word if we already have it as an element in our being. Essentially the description of *direct* knowledge of God (see section "Direct Knowledge of God") is what Rahner means by transcendental revelation (see section "Transcendental Method"). The treatment of quasi-formal causality deals with Rahner's notion of mediated immediacy, which he thinks preserves God's freedom. For the Fathers, this could not preserve God's freedom, because they rejected any notion of mutual conditioning, while for Rahner the medium and the message are the same inasmuch as symbols share in the thing symbolized. Furthermore, Rahner's concept of luminosity (self-presence), which states that knowledge of the true God depends upon the knowing subject as well as the object (see section "Transcendental Method"), actually confuses knowledge of the true God with knowledge of *our* horizon. Again, this assumption makes any need for an outer word pointing to a *free* Word of God unnecessary. So Rahner writes: "Even when one is conscious of possessing a constantly inadequate metaphysics, it is still possible to rely on it, to use it in addressing the true God and in directing man toward the experience which he always has already from God" ("Observations," *TI* 9, 138). That experience, for Rahner, is our unthematic experience of our horizon which he assumes is an experience of the true God. Rahner's presentation of mediated immediacy in *Foun-*

It is my contention that Rahner's methodological assumption, that knowledge of God's revelation cannot contradict knowledge gained from one's metaphysical reflections about God and the world, actually makes human experience the determining factor in his theology. The proof of this is his discovery of six ontological necessities which structure his philosophy of religion and symbolic ontology, and his application of these necessities to the being and activity of God in Himself and God in His relation to the world.¹⁶ This attempt to define both the immanent and economic Trinity by uniting his conception of God drawn from reason (metaphysics) and from revelation finally collapses God's freedom into the necessities inherent in creation. We shall show that this leads Rahner to a monistic position in his doctrine of God and an emanationism in his Christology.¹⁷

After presenting the epistemological and theological problem in the tradition which takes its point of departure from Scripture, we shall systematically illustrate that Rahner's thought follows the pattern just described. We shall briefly conclude with a critique showing how Rahner's position cannot be reconciled with the tradition as drawn from Scripture.

In summary, we shall show that Rahner's theological criterion is in fact the god derived from his symbolic ontology and not the triune God known in faith and by revelation. This he uses to redefine God in His relation with the world. Because Rahner's notion of God follows the pattern of his philosophical presuppositions, he cannot in reality distinguish God from the world, as Scripture and the tradition wished to do. His inability in this regard obscures the positive fact that God really does love us as one who remains other than us. Rahner's idea of God, like the *Nous* of Plotinus, can only have a content, reality, meaning, and truth derived from man himself. What results from this idea is the

dations 83 ff. does not escape this problem of making God's free self-disclosure dependent on the knowing subject.—It should also be noted that by analyzing Christian revelation in light of the idea that all experience is graced (transcendental revelation), Rahner obliterates any essential difference between Creator and creature. Consequently, while Rahner argues for an infinitely "qualitative" difference between God and man (see my section "Symbolic Necessity"), he cannot maintain the essential difference which Scripture and tradition argued for (see my section "Identity of the Immanent and Economic Trinity"). This, because he has confused grace and revelation with our "unthematic" experiences. See also Rahner, "Immanent," *TI* 10, 281, for the same confusion.

¹⁶ See section "Symbolic Necessity" for how this works in Rahner's thought. By actually defining the immanent and economic Trinity according to his two principles of symbolic ontology, Rahner effects his belief that reason and revelation must come to the same conclusion about truth. This very position is what forces Rahner into conflict with the tradition, since he reduces revelation of the triune God to the functioning of his philosophical principles.

¹⁷ See sections "The Tradition" and "Freedom of God."

epitome of mutual conditioning which was rejected by the tradition in the positive interest of distinguishing the reality of God's being from all other ideas of being which are not divine. Rahner has this difficulty because he has failed to note or to see why Scripture and the early tradition maintained that creatures cannot truly know God (the triune God) directly.¹⁸

Scripture

Scripture speaks of God as revealed and yet hidden. That He is revealed is the substance of the Exodus accounts in chapter 3. God reveals His Name to Moses (Exod 3:1-15). Yet no one can see God and live (33:20-23). God is also the Holy One of Israel, whose ways are not our ways. In the NT this revelation and hiddenness is tied to the person of Christ. Thus, John's Gospel maintains that no one has ever seen God (Jn 1:18, 6:36) and yet the only Son has made Him known. Because Jesus is uniquely divine and human, it can be said that to have seen him is to have seen the Father (14:9). Obviously, knowledge of God the Father is tied to Jesus' unique relation with the Father as the pre-existent Word become flesh, so that it can be said that Jesus himself is the way, the truth, and the life and that "No one can come to the Father except through me. If you know me, you know my Father too" (14:6). Knowledge of God's revelation and hiddenness in John's Gospel means knowledge of His glory disclosed in the Incarnation: "The Word was made flesh, He lived among us, and we saw His glory, the glory that is His as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). The key to a correct interpretation of God's hiddenness and revelation, then, is tied to the person of Christ himself by Scripture, and this is exactly how the translators of the *Jerusalem Bible* see it. "The 'glory' is the manifestation of God's presence, Ex. 24:16+. No one could see its brilliance and live,

¹⁸ The only way Rahner could agree with what I present as the tradition would be to reject his own method, which assumes that the *true* God is the absolute mystery we discover and define without faith in revelation. It could be assumed, however, that Rahner would agree with Scripture and the tradition on this point, just as it would seem that his concepts of categorical revelation and mediated immediacy say the same thing as Scripture and the tradition. But while the Fathers were speaking of *thematic* knowledge of the *triune* God known in *faith*, by grace and from revelation, Rahner identifies that reality with the innate ideas of absolute being (mystery and the nameless) which we articulate on the ground of our transcendental experiences. So, while the tradition did not identify the immanent and economic Trinity because it realized that in Christ there was no confusion of divinity and humanity (see section "Christ/Creatures"), Rahner is conceptually forced to do just this because signs and things signified are mutually and necessarily and essentially (quasi-formally) related. This conflicts with the tradition (see sections "The Tradition" and "Symbolic Necessity" and notes 116 and 118, and Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol," *TI* 4, 234-35).

Ex. 33:20+, but the human nature of the Word now screens this glory as the cloud once did. Yet at times it pierces the veil, at the transfiguration, for instance cf. Lk. 9:32, 35. . . . The resurrection will reveal the glory fully, cf. Jn. 17:5+."¹⁹ Thus, simply to see Jesus' human nature was not enough to perceive the glory or presence of the true God. In fact, Jesus' human nature "screened" the glory so that humanity should not be destroyed by its brilliance. In itself this biblical insight into God's revelation and hiddenness is enough to illustrate that no one was claiming a direct knowledge of the transcendent God. This claim was not even made in connection with the Incarnation, as was just shown.²⁰

The Tradition

Traditionally, the concept of God's transcendence used by Christian theologians held that God was "supernatural in the deepest and truest sense."²¹ For Irenaeus, transcendence is *hyperochē*, meaning that God was and is the source of our immortality because "out of His transcendence, not out of our nature, do we possess eternal continuance."²² The *Clementine Homilies* made God's transcendence even more precise: "He who would worship God ought before all else to know what is peculiar to the nature of God alone, which cannot pertain to another, that looking at His peculiarity and not finding it *in any other*, he may not be seduced into ascribing deity to another."²³ For "Clement," God possesses transcendence incomparably. This implies that "none of the things made by Him can come into equal comparison with Him."²⁴

The Christian concept of God's transcendence (holiness) is actually drawn from the teaching of the Hebrew prophets; hence any philosophical account of "otherness" had to consider this.²⁵ As Gilson has pointed out, Christian philosophy is true only as it is actually grounded in God's revelation. The Jewish God is "not a God imagined by poets or discovered by any thinker as an ultimate answer to his metaphysical problems, but one who had revealed Himself to the Jews, told them His name, and explained to them His nature, in so far at least as His nature can be understood by men."²⁶ For this reason, any assumption that everyone possesses innately the idea of the true God is wrong. "If all men had such an idea of God, Moses would not have asked Jehovah for his name; or

¹⁹ Alexander Jones, ed., *The New Testament of The Jerusalem Bible*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 147, note o.

²⁰ All of this seems compromised by Rahner's Christology (see my sections "Christological Implications" and "Symbolic Necessity").

²¹ G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1981) 25.

²² Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5, 2, 3 (Prestige 25).

²⁴ *Hom. Clem.* 10, 19 (Prestige 26).

²³ Prestige 26 (emphasis mine).

²⁵ Prestige 26 ff.

²⁶ Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1979) 38.

else Jehovah's answer would have been: 'What a silly question! You know it.'²⁷ For the early tradition, then, God's transcendence and involvement in creation, known from revelation attested in Scripture, could be compromised neither by Stoic monism nor by the Epicurean idea that God is remote from His creation. While Christians believed that the Creator God was involved with His creatures, this insight was obscured whenever His independence was not perceived first. Conceiving God's transcendence and immanence pantheistically (monistically) meant confusion of God with the world; and the hallmark of any such explanation is, as was pointed out very early in Church history by Methodius, that God and matter are described as "mutually dependent."²⁸

By maintaining the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, the tradition has been to emphasize that the God who is self-revealed in Scripture is in fact free. Although the exact biblical origin of this doctrine may be debated, its meaning is not.²⁹

The meaning of the *creatio ex nihilo* is that nothing in creation is, or ever becomes, identical with and necessary for God to be God.³⁰ This insight is implied each time the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* is articulated by the tradition, against the false understanding of the relationship between Creator and creature which actually maintains both identity and necessity. For example, Meister Eckhart proposed that "at the same time and once and for all, when God existed and when He generated His Son, God coeternal, and coequal to Himself in all things, He also created the world."³¹ This pantheistic viewpoint was rejected in 1329 on the basis of the traditional doctrine of creation, which rejected the idea that both creation and Creator were eternal. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, drawn from Scripture and the early tradition and reinforced by Aquinas, emphasized exactly the same point stressed by Vatican I as late as 1870: "In order to manifest His perfection through the benefits which He bestows on creatures—not to intensify His happiness nor to acquire any perfection—this one and only true God, by His goodness and almighty power and by a completely free decision, from the very beginning of time has created both orders of creatures in the same way out of nothing. . . ."³²

²⁷ Ibid. 82.

²⁸ Prestige 28–29.

²⁹ Daniel O'Connor and Francis Oakley, ed., *Creation: The Impact of an Idea* (New York: Scribner's, 1969) 7. Cf. also *Jerusalem Bible*, Gen 1:1–2. The translators indicate that the images used here express "the idea of 'creation from nothing,'" which reaches precise formulation for the first time in 2 Macc 7:28: "I implore you, my child, observe heaven and earth, consider all that is in them, and acknowledge that God made them out of what did not exist, and that mankind comes into being in the same way."

³⁰ See O'Connor-Oakley, *Creation* 4 ff., and Gilson, *God and Philosophy* 88 ff. and 99 ff.

³¹ John F. Clarkson, S.J., et al., tr. and ed., *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (London: Herder, 1955) 147, no. 399.

³² Clarkson 152, no. 356.

The council went on to reject pantheism by insisting that both spirit and nature did not emanate from God, that God did not evolve into "another" being, and in particular it rejected the idea that God "created necessarily, just as He necessarily loves Himself."³³

Recognizing the fact that God is transcendent means acknowledging that creatures do not know Him directly. This means taking account of God's actual hiddenness as portrayed in Scripture. "The Fathers are emphatic that the revelation of the divine nature is not made directly to the mind of man, but is to be inferred from God's works. . . ."³⁴ Origen observed that "human nature has not the capacity in any manner to seek God and to find Him without assistance from the object of the search."³⁵ Basil of Caesarea states that "it is from His activities that we say we are acquainted with our God; we take no pledge to approach His very essence."³⁶ In this insight there already began developing the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, which carried through the perception that the transcendent God cannot be known directly. That God is transcendent and that creatures might know Him directly are mutually exclusive presuppositions in a Christian doctrine of God—for the tradition as for Scripture. If God is really transcendent, He is not part of the essential ontology of creation (Stoic monism). To say or to imply that we know God directly denies this positive insight into the true relation between God and creatures established by God Himself in the economy of salvation. For if we knew Him directly, the inner divine essence would have to be part of the structure of creation itself. This is what pantheism and panentheism presuppose. As we shall see, this is the danger involved in thinking about God using the categories of Plotinus which also faced Augustine. The only corrective here is the insight that while God became man in Jesus to enable creatures to relate with Him, He was not transformed into a creature. He remained Lord of history.

In a Christian doctrine of God, pantheism or panentheism cannot perceive and maintain God's freedom since what creatures know directly is never more than the realm in which we ourselves exist, i.e., creation. Any claim to more than this on the part of creatures cannot logically demonstrate that its claim is true. It cannot show that what it claims as knowledge of the transcendent God really is knowledge of a being which factually and truly transcends man himself.

Beyond this, such a claim compromises the historical nature of creation, inasmuch as it implies that there is no real and final way to know that we creatures exist in our own right. In other words, we, whose existence is supposedly different from God's, actually might not exist at

³³ Clarkson 153, no. 362.

³⁴ Prestige, 56.

³⁵ Prestige, 57.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

all if we can be suspected of being part of His essence. So, by theoretically calling God's transcendence into question by assuming direct knowledge of His essence, it is also clear that we end by calling our own existence into question. To avoid this conclusion, Ignatius and others in the tradition argued strenuously against Docetism.³⁷ In light of the patristic insight that direct knowledge of God's inner essence is precluded by His transcendent nature, an epistemology which actually perceives God's transcendence and real presence in creation will never claim to be more than a sign, or an indirect pointer to one who transcends the knower himself in any encounter between God and creatures. It will never assume that one can really know God just by knowing oneself.

Augustine (354–430) thought about this theme in categories inherited from Plotinus. Hence he assumed that he had found the triune God of Christian revelation in reflecting upon the One, the Nous, and the world. Moreover, he supposed that Plotinus himself had found the Christian God in exactly the same way. Augustine certainly found the triune God in Plotinus' writing. Yet it is just as certain that Plotinus himself had no idea of the Christian God in his philosophy.³⁸ Thinking about God's transcendence and involvement in history according to Plotinus' model left Christian theologians constantly on the verge of doing the very thing they initially sought to avoid, i.e., confusing God and the world.³⁹ Thinking pantheistically or panentheistically and dissolving God's actual transcendence into the sphere of creation followed such confusion. This is the monism rejected by a Christian belief in *creatio ex nihilo*. Unless the negative insight that God was not identical with the world was seen, the positive insight that it was God who was involved could not be seen either.

Aquinas (1225–74) assisted Christian theologians in this task by sharply distinguishing Creator from creature. Using Aristotle's categories of cause and effect, he spoke of God the Creator as First Cause and of His creatures as effects, never doubting that God remains Creator while His effects remain creatures in their encounter.

Moreover, Thomas insisted on *creatio ex nihilo* to emphasize this fact.⁴⁰ And while his five proofs for the existence of God are still a credible explanation of this encounter, if one argues from the standpoint of

³⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 141. If the Incarnation was only an appearance and not a reality established by God Himself, we might have no real part in eternal life, only the appearance of such a participation.

³⁸ Gilson, *God and Philosophy* 49–50.

³⁹ See George Kuykendall, "Thomas' Proofs as *Fides quaerens intellectum*: Towards a Trinitarian Analogia," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31 (1978) 113–31, at 114.

⁴⁰ Anton Pegis, tr., *Thomas Aquinas, On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Summa contra gentiles* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955) Book 2, chap. 16, pp. 49 ff.

revelation and faith, they are certainly not unequivocal proofs of God's actual existence, since conclusions other than Thomas' are possible.⁴¹

In summary, the tradition took its view of God's freedom and transcendence from the scriptural testimonies to God's self-revelation in Israel, in Christ, and in the Church. By appealing to their faith in God as one who creates from nothing, they excluded the possibility of direct knowledge of God and of the corresponding notion of mutual conditioning between Creator and creature. This was all done in the positive interest of distinguishing the reality of God's presence and involvement from idols. Both implicitly and explicitly direct knowledge of God was rejected in an attempt to express this position.⁴²

Direct Knowledge of God in Rahner's Thought

In answer to the question of how man knows God, Rahner maintains that creatures have an obediencial potency and a supernatural existential. Man's obediencial potency consists in the fact that he is "oriented" to God's revelation, should it occur. His supernatural existential consists in the fact that he never actually exists apart from grace.⁴³ Because, for Rahner, grace belongs to the enduring existential modalities of man, he believes that the theological idea of "pure nature" has no practical significance. It is purely a theoretical distinction since, in the order of existence, there is no such thing according to his very presuppositions. Thus "it is coming to be recognized that the state of 'pure' nature never exists in the concrete at all. . . ."⁴⁴ This is why precise thinking is secondary here. Rahner writes: "it is no great loss if the analysis of man as *potentia oboedientialis* is not a 'chemically pure' presentation of pure nature but is mixed up with trace elements from actual nature, and hence its state of grace."⁴⁵ Obviously, for the tradition, the inability to make such a distinction resulted in the greatest possible loss. It meant that man could be described as having been assimilated to God. That this is exactly how Rahner describes man's quasi-formal alteration by grace is therefore no accident. He writes: "it [grace] constitutes man as a subject fit to receive the substantial gift of the divine essence . . . it assimilates man to God's nature considered as the principle of his possession of himself in Trinity; and thus it at once becomes the *causa formalis* of all

⁴¹ Kuykendall, "Thomas' Proofs" 115.

⁴² See n. 18 above.

⁴³ See, e.g., Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," *TI* 12 (New York: Seabury, 1974) 161-78, at 170 ff. See also "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," *TI* 1, 297-317, at 313, and "On the Theology of the Incarnation," *TI* 4, 105-20, and "Nature and Grace," *TI* 4, 165-88, esp. 182-83.

⁴⁴ Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity," *TI* 12, 167, n. 2

⁴⁵ Rahner, "Nature and Grace," *TI* 4, 187.

the properties of man's supernatural elevation."⁴⁶ It is exactly this description that finally leaves us unable to distinguish God from ourselves both theoretically and practically. It can be seen from this analysis that the distinction between our obediential potency and our supernatural existential is just as fluid as it is between nature and grace in Rahner's thought.

In specifically addressing the problem of knowledge, Rahner states that human knowledge of God is mediated and to that extent indirect knowledge.⁴⁷ This appears to place his thought in line with Scripture and the tradition. His explanation of "categorical revelation" describes this mediated knowledge.⁴⁸ But Rahner also presupposes a direct knowledge of God which he calls transcendental revelation. This knowledge is grounded in man's quasi-formal relation with God in revelation (God's self-communication) and grace (the formal entitative alteration of the structure of man). He describes this alteration as man's "entitative divinization," i.e., "a transcendental divinization of the fundamental subjective attitude, the ultimate horizon of man's knowledge and freedom, in the perspective of which he accomplishes his life."⁴⁹ This is man's grace-given supernatural existential, his beginning to live the *visio beatifica* in this life.⁵⁰

Revelation, then, is not just mediated by finite symbolic realities. It is God's direct self-communication to the creature and thus it cannot be confined to words.⁵¹ It must be the giving of grace too; which for Rahner means "an inner, objectless though conscious dynamism directed to the beatific vision."⁵² The beatific vision, of course, is the direct apprehension of God, given by God Himself, which is in reality no different than the object of man's initial dynamism of spirit which recognizes being in general. This is why Rahner can adopt Maréchal's analysis when he writes:

In his intellectual and transcendental dynamism, Maréchal considers man (as spirit, i.e., in his "nature") in the inmost heart of his being as "*desiderium naturale visionis beatificae*"—to use the words of St. Thomas. This desire is conditional and so there is no necessity for the actual call to the vision by grace. But it is a real longing for the absolute being and one which is present in every

⁴⁶ Rahner, "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," *TI* 1, 319-46, at 343.

⁴⁷ Rahner, *HW* 114-15.

⁴⁸ Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966) 13-21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 16; see also n. 5 above.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 61 ff.

⁵⁰ Rahner, "The Concept" 60 ff.

⁵² *Ibid.* 61.

spiritual act as its *raison d'être* . . . it is the *a priori* condition of all knowledge where a finite object is grasped.⁵³

Thus, for Rahner, man knows God directly via quasi-formal causality, since it is this category which Rahner uses to describe man's entitative alteration epistemologically.

Quasi-Formal Causality

Rahner is consistent in using this category of quasi-formal causality to describe how man is directly related with God, by God Himself. For example, in contrast to the tradition, Rahner presupposes that the "conjunction of the Holy Spirit in particular with man is a proper and not merely an appropriated relationship."⁵⁴ Hence the only way to conceive of uncreated grace is via an entitative modification of man himself.⁵⁵ This modification is what is presupposed, discovered, and examined by Rahner's transcendental method.⁵⁶

⁵³ Rahner, "Nature and Grace" *TI* 4, 169.

⁵⁴ Rahner, "Some Implications" 323. Thomas and the Fathers insisted on the fact that this was an appropriated relationship in order to emphasize that it was in fact not direct, that this was a relation and not an assimilation, as it is for Rahner.

⁵⁵ Rahner, "Some Implications" 324.

⁵⁶ For Rahner's explanation of this, see "Some Implications" 324 ff. It is this insight which allows him to identify the truth discovered from reason with the truth revealed by the triune God. Because he thinks man's experience of the whither of his existence is identical with God's grace of revelation, he really believes everyone has an immediate grasp of God (*TI* 1, "Concerning the Relationship" 312-15; *TI* 4, "The Concept" 54, 61, 65-67; *TI* 5, "History of the World and Salvation-History" 97-114, at 102; and *TI* 11 [New York: Seabury, 1974], "Reflections on Methodology in Theology" 68-114, at 107). It is important to realize that, although Rahner would explicitly deny making the Trinitarian self-revelation subordinate to the efficient cause known from reason (cf. my section "Identity of the Immanent and Economic Trinity"), it is this very presupposition which forces him to maintain that the absolute mystery we experience as the "nameless" is the reality of the triune God. So in his philosophy of religion Rahner writes: "All things strive to return to themselves, want to come to themselves, to take possession of themselves, because 'having being' which they desire comes to be in the measure in which they take possession of themselves. All activities, from the sheerly material to the innermost life of the Blessed Trinity, are but modulations of this one metaphysical theme of the one meaning of being: self-possession, subjectivity" (HW 49, emphasis mine). And this is exactly what he does in "Theos in the New Testament" and elsewhere by saying that what natural theology discovers is the same God as the Father in the NT. It really is not. But for Rahner it is, because he thinks God can be defined as "the total unity of reality . . . who existed before the multiplicity of his immediately given objects" ("The Dignity and Freedom of Man," *TI* 2, 235-63, at 239). This assumption places Rahner's dogmatics in the position of molding the Trinitarian self-revelation into the philosophical notion of a first efficient cause (unoriginate origin) unfolding into the many and becoming quasi-formally assimilated with the many (see my section "Transcendental Method").—See also *Foundations* 183-84, 189, and 192, which bear out Rahner's belief that the absolute being (mystery) we discover in our experience of ourselves is truly the God of Christian revelation. He further describes

In fact, it is the entitative modification of the knowing subject which Rahner terms created grace. Simultaneously, this modification is the formal basis of man's *analogia entis* and the foundation of his relation with God.⁵⁷ Within this framework Rahner explains that this entitative modification of the creature cannot be understood under the category of efficient causality because from reason we can know God as first cause.⁵⁸ But it is through formal causality that we know the "supernatural mysteries," as, e.g., the hypostatic union, the *visio beatifica*, and the supernatural bestowal of grace. Rahner defines efficient causality as a production out of a cause, and formal causality as "a taking up into the ground . . . 'ein In-den-Grund . . . Hineinnehmen.'" ⁵⁹ While the creature cannot know a Trinitarian hypostasis from its natural reflection, it can know God as efficient cause.⁶⁰ Revelation is necessary to know of this formal causality, by which Rahner means that the creature is formally changed by God's action in the Incarnation to be disposed cognitively to an immediate communication of the divine Being.⁶¹ He insists that he uses the word *quasi* to remind us that this *forma* remains absolutely transcendent and free and that our concepts are analogical.⁶² He therefore believes that this immediate ontological relation with God via quasi-formal causality does not alter God's transcendence and immutability.⁶³ Accordingly, he defines man's abiding tendency toward the efficient cause

God's "proper reality" as Unoriginate in "On the Theology of the Incarnation," *TI* 4, 114, where he writes of the self-emptying that it is the coming-to-be of God Himself, "who can come to be by becoming another, derivative, in the act of constituting it, without having to change in *his own proper reality which is the unoriginated origin*" (emphasis mine). By not purging the Logos Christologies of their subordinationism, he must now maintain that in the Incarnation we meet something less than this "proper reality," something less than the efficient cause, i.e., its appearance or symbol. For the tradition, God's "proper reality" was His eternal existence as Father, Son, and Spirit. Thus God was no less transcendent even in the Incarnation and grace. But for Rahner He is, and that is the problem with this quasi-formal explanation of grace and Incarnation. On this point see also Rahner, "Theos," *TI* 1, 133-34. The real conflict here is between the God of natural theology and the Father in the NT. For more on this, see my sections "Symbolic Necessity" and "Critical Analysis."

⁵⁷ Rahner, "Some Implications" 324-25.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 328

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 329.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 330.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 332-33.

⁶² *Ibid.* 331.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 330. Again, it should be noted that Rahner believes his distinctions between efficient and formal causality, between categorical and transcendental revelation, and between unthematic and thematic knowledge of God maintain an infinite qualitative difference between God and man. The problem is that Scripture and the tradition argued for an essential difference which preserved divine and human freedom in a way Rahner cannot.

as a supernatural existential, an abiding existential of man as he really is.⁶⁴ Thus Rahner believes that grace orientates man to what he calls an "immediate" grasp of God.⁶⁵ These presuppositions lead him to conclude that the transcendent being of the triune God can be described simply by applying the ontological necessities inherent in creation to God's action *ad extra* in Christ and the Spirit.⁶⁶

Six Ontological Necessities

Since Rahner presupposes direct knowledge of the Creator, he sees six ontological necessities operative in all being and especially in its symbolic structure.⁶⁷ They may be summarized as follows: (1) the necessity for all beings to express themselves in order to realize themselves; (2) the necessity for all being to agree ontologically with its origin; (3) the necessity for all being to be of itself luminous; (4) the necessity for all being to be mutually conditioned and mutually conditioning; (5) the necessity for all being to love and be loved; (6) the necessity for all being to be explicable by man's general metaphysics. These necessities are interrelated and to some extent mutually conditioning. Once one assumption is made, the others logically follow. Thus it is difficult to decide where one leaves off and the other begins. For the purposes of clarity, they can be segregated into these six ontological presuppositions, each of which determines Rahner's thought in its own way. I shall examine Rahner's dogmatics chiefly in light of his method and then only in light of the first necessity, to show how his philosophy determines his theology. The other five necessities are always there, but how they shape each aspect of Rahner's dogmatics cannot be treated in this article.

It is important to note that if, with Rahner, we actually think that any one of these necessities applies to the being of the transcendent God recognized by Scripture and the tradition, we have already identified the being of the creature with that of the Creator and we shall always describe creation as necessary in some sense to God. As noted above, any such description was considered a denial of God's freedom, because it failed to show that what was described as God really was God. In connection with the present analysis, Rahner identifies the efficient

⁶⁴ "Concerning the Relationship," *TI* 1, 312-15. See also "Some Implications" 330. Compare "Theos" 80 ff. and 133 ff. Rahner believes that he preserves God's freedom and the freedom of creatures using his notions of quasi-formal causality and the supernatural existential. But, again, the conflict between what philosophy discovers apart from grace and what the theologian discovers by grace is evident.

⁶⁵ "The Concept" 54, 61, 65-67; "History of the World" 102; "Reflections on Methodology" 107.

⁶⁶ See n. 16 above.

⁶⁷ "The Theology of the Symbol," *TI* 4, 221-52.

cause known from reason with the triune God known from revelation precisely because he presupposes direct knowledge of God.⁶⁸

Critical Analysis

What Rahner's epistemological analysis does not and cannot answer is why discovery of an efficient cause should be regarded as real knowledge of the transcendent God at all, since, according to his own presuppositions, what is here known is not in fact other than man himself. Thus there is no reason why the efficient cause discovered by reason should be the same as the triune God of Christian revelation. This raises the question of whether there is in fact one true God or other "gods" which we think are real but are not. It is possible, e.g., for man to conceive his origin in terms of an efficient cause, and of the Incarnation as an alteration of his nature. But in neither case can it be shown that the truth of his existence is grounded in anything other than his epistemological assertion that this is the way he perceives things to be. Thus the fact that man posits an efficient cause hardly means that there really is one. And it certainly does not tell us which efficient cause is really God and which one is an idol which deceives us. Moreover, the question raised here is whether Rahner's thinking actually allows the truth of God's transcendence as seen by Scripture and the tradition to come into view at all. I contend that Rahner does not, because he assumes at the outset that God's inner being (the immanent Trinity) is identical with the knowledge of an efficient cause discovered by man who is now embedded in grace via the Incarnation. This assumption reduces the reality of God and His revelation to the content of the ideas of efficient and formal causality which man objectivates on the basis of his experience. This is why the notion of mutual conditioning between reason and revelation and between faith and grace is so evident in Rahner's thought.

The real flaw in Rahner's thinking here is that he ignores the dilemma perceived by the tradition and maintains both that man always stands before God and that God remains forever unknown. Rahner writes: "Because of the finitude of our knowledge in the absolute and infinite breadth of our transcendence, God is the one who is for ever unknown . . ." ⁶⁹; and God is "the infinite who, in his infinitude, can be known by man only in the negation implied in the ultimate limit of all finitude. . . ." ⁷⁰

These presuppositions lead Rahner to believe not only that God can only be known through man⁷¹ but that "God can reveal *only* what man

⁶⁸ See n. 13 above and n. 81 below.

⁶⁹ HW 83.

⁷⁰ HW 81.

⁷¹ HW 53 ff. and 111-12 ff.

is able to hear."⁷² Simply stated, "There would be no word of God were there no one who was at least intrinsically capable of hearing it."⁷³ Conceiving the problem of theology (God's transcendence and immanence) in this way, Rahner logically concludes that man must reflect on himself in order to understand God's revelation. The locus of human knowledge of God's transcendence and involvement in history, therefore, is none other than the experience of the self. Hence the history of knowledge of God is merely the articulation of the experience of the self.⁷⁴ As man makes a choice for or against himself, he exercises genuine freedom which is *eo ipso* an experience of God as well.⁷⁵ This reasoning simply ignores the difficulty of mutual conditioning raised by the early Fathers. Rahner ignores the problem of God's transcendence and immanence here by neatly substituting an experience which he assumes is an experience of the reality of God, but which has not been shown as anything more than man's experience of his own finitude.⁷⁶ He begins his reflections on a supposedly real revelation of the true God by reducing God's free revelation to what man is able to hear at the outset.⁷⁷ Thus, as we shall see, if man is unable to accept Jesus as the Son of God, then, for Rahner, this becomes only a theoretical problem and not a real problem of existence. The determining element here for Rahner is man's experience and not the transcendent God. Thus "the heart of theology for Rahner is to be found in man's relationship to himself and not to God."⁷⁸ This substitution of experience for knowledge of God must be

⁷² HW 115, emphasis mine. This statement reflects the notion of mutual conditioning rejected by the tradition in the interest of maintaining God's freedom and self-sufficiency. For Rahner, what man hears from his metaphysical reflections on experience now becomes the determining factor for everything that can be said about God, Christ, Church, sacraments, grace, and faith.

⁷³ HW 168. The logic of this insight ought not to be overlooked. By following his logic as developed in his philosophy of religion, i.e., that man has direct knowledge of the Creator God, Rahner now must flatly deny the existence of the immanent Word of God except as it is necessary for hearing man to *conceive* it. When the tradition rejected Meister Eckhart's pantheist position that creation arose simultaneously with God's eternal existence, this is the kind of thinking that was excluded. Since Rahner thinks this way, he cannot distinguish the reality of God's self-sufficient act of revelation from hearing man. In connection with the *Vorgriff*, Rahner's statement that "God is posited, too, with the same necessity as this pre-concept" (HW 63) reflects this same difficulty.

⁷⁴ "The Dignity and Freedom of Man," *TI* 2, 237-38; "Experience of Self and Experience of God," *TI* 13 (New York: Seabury, 1975) 122-32, at 130-32.

⁷⁵ "Experience of Self" 131 and "Theology of Freedom" *TI* 6 (New York: Seabury, 1974) 178-96, at 185.

⁷⁶ Cf. *TI* 1, Introduction xiii, n. 1. Cornelius Ernst, O.P., there raises a similar objection to Rahner's method.

⁷⁷ HW 115.

⁷⁸ Tripole, "Philosophy and Theology" 44.

made more precise in connection with Rahner's dogmatics and his method.

II

DOGOMATIC IMPLICATIONS OF RAHNER'S THOUGHT

Transcendental Method

There is little doubt, then, that Rahner's dogmatic identification of the immanent and economic Trinity follows from his epistemological assumption of direct knowledge of God and of the existence of what he terms transcendental revelation. From this it follows for Rahner that "A transcendental line of enquiry . . . is present when and to the extent that it raises the question of the conditions in which knowledge of a specific subject is possible in the knowing subject himself."⁷⁹ Thus, "In any act of cognition it is not only the object known but also the *subject* knowing that is involved. It is dependent not only upon . . . the object, but also upon the essential structure of the knowing subject . . . they *mutually condition* one another."⁸⁰ Therefore, for Rahner, revelation "has its existence in man's own conscious thought and hence is subject to the *a priori* structure of human knowledge."⁸¹ This is why he insists that the

⁷⁹ "Reflections on Methodology" 87.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 87.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 91. Obviously, a revelation that is subject in this way to man cannot possibly be a real revelation except in the mind of man. It cannot be free, as it is mutually conditioned by the mind of man. This is what the tradition rejected in rejecting pantheism. Again, the question of how one conceives of revelation is the pivotal point of this article. The very nature of theological method is at stake here. Rahner would contend that he is starting with revelation and the Church's living faith and seeking the conditions of the possibility for faith which faith itself creates within the sphere of creation. Consequently, he would hold that creatures have a positive orientation toward revelation inasmuch as God created us in order to give Himself to us. Rahner asserts this revelation is free and creation is not necessary, that revelation creates its own presupposition for revealing, which presupposition is simply the existence of the world. Thus Rahner distinguishes natural revelation, transcendental revelation, and categorical revelation to preserve God's freedom in creation.— If revelation is free, however, then it cannot be described "symbolically" without making God's free revelation subject to our experience and metaphysics and indeed our "naturally known" God. (This is treated in my section "Transcendental Method" and notes 72–74.) The problem here is that symbols must express themselves and *are* dependent on the conditions necessary for their functioning (see section "Direct Knowledge"). Rahner's problem here is that he thinks that nature is an inner moment of grace, reason is an inner moment of revelation, and creation is an inner moment of incarnation. See, e.g., "Philosophy and Theology," *TI* 6, 71–81, at 72: "just as the concrete reality of grace includes nature as an inner moment within itself, so also in our question . . . philosophy is an inner moment of theology." This results from his belief that natural reason and revelation cannot contradict each other because their ultimate source is God (*ibid.*). How can grace be free on this view? Rahner writes: "Grace exists . . . by being the divinising condition [of the person], and hence presupposes and incorporates into itself the whole reality of this person

condition of the possibility of this manner of human thinking is the fact that

God himself through his own act of self-communication upholds this act of hearing as an intrinsic principle. And this is precisely what we are accustomed to call the supernatural grace of faith. Although there may be no conscious reflection on this, such statements are, in the nature of the case, statements of transcendental theology . . . the answer to any such enquiry . . . is arrived at not simply *ab externo* . . . it derives from this actual question of transcendental theology. For it is from the limitless *a priori* transcendentality of knowledge and freedom in themselves that we come to know what is really meant when we speak of God as absolute being and absolute good, recognizing . . . something that is present all along and in its very origins, albeit without being recognized as a conscious theme of thought.⁸²

Christological Implications

Accordingly, Rahner necessarily presupposes that man is a "being who is orientated towards an 'absolute Saviour' both *a priori* and in actuality (his essence having been elevated and set in this direction supernaturally by grace)" in order to understand who and what Christ was.⁸³ Hence

Christian anthropology is only able to fulfil its whole purpose if it understands man as the *potentia oboedientialis* for the "Hypostatic Union." And Christology can only be undertaken from the point of view of this kind of transcendental

as the *condition of its own possibility* and makes it part of the factors of its own concrete being" (TI 6, 73, emphasis mine). Philosophy is described as a "condition of the possibility of theology" (TI 6, 71). The problem is, for Rahner God *needs* an addressee and recipient of His grace: "grace, understood as the absolute self-communication of God himself, must always presuppose as a condition of its own possibility (in order to be itself) someone to whom it can address itself and someone to whom it is not owed. . . . Accordingly, it must be said that since revelation is a moment in this free self-opening-out by gratuitous grace, it presupposes as a condition of its own possibility the one to whom this revelation remains unowed" (TI 6, 75). He says the same about creation: ". . . the creation, considered as the constitution of the non-divine 'out of nothing,' is revealed as the prior setting and condition for the supreme possibility of his imparting himself" ("Christology in the Setting of Modern Man's Understanding of Himself and His World," TI 11, 215-29, at 220). If God is really free, then the fact that there are recipients of His revelation is and remains a miraculous creation of His free love. It cannot, therefore, be described symbolically as an instance of creaturely being at all. Once again, if revelation is free, then these distinctions (among natural revelation, transcendental revelation, and categorical revelation) are spurious because, by describing creation and revelation "symbolically," Rahner actually makes both free acts subject to our experience and metaphysics and finally to our "naturally known" God. All this once more proves the point of this article: philosophy and theology do not reach the same conclusion about truth.

⁸² "Reflections on Methodology" 92.

⁸³ "Theology and Anthropology," TI 9 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 28-45, at 29-30.

anthropology; for in order to say today what the "Hypostatic Union" is without being suspected of merely reproducing no longer feasible "mythologies," the idea of the God-man needs proof of a transcendental orientation in man's being and history under grace.⁸⁴

What validates Rahner's transcendental method, then, is his assumption that transcendental revelation exists and can be described directly from one's spiritual experiences.⁸⁵ Therefore "God is revealed every time man enquires into anything that exists."⁸⁶ Indeed, Rahner insists: "Our proposition about the comprehensibility of being in itself did indeed arise from the fact that in the first question about being *every possible object of cognition is already anticipated under the general aspect of being in general*. There can, therefore, be no existent thing that does not automatically and objectively fit into the context of being in general. For this very reason every thing is comprehensible."⁸⁷ Rahner assumes the truth of this analysis because in "the self-communication of God, strictly as such, which *must* take place by means of quasi-formal causality, we find ourselves faced with the absolute mystery, since then God as his own very self *must* penetrate into the non-divine region of the finite."⁸⁸

Clearly, the heartbeat of Rahner's transcendental method is the idea that man can reflect on himself, posit the absolute, and in that very way come to real knowledge of God's transcendence and real presence in history. This line of reasoning is the crux of Rahner's theology. Without it there is neither knowledge of man nor of God.⁸⁹ This is why Rahner writes that proofs for God's existence are valid only as "the outcome of an *a posteriori* process of reasoning as the conceptual objectification of what we call the experience of God, *which provides the basis and origin of this process of reasoning*."⁹⁰ The theme of Rahner's inquiry, then, is

⁸⁴ "Theology and Anthropology" 28-9.

⁸⁵ See section "Direct Knowledge."

⁸⁶ HW 7-8. Obviously, God cannot possibly be free on this view, because his essence arises necessarily as man posits the idea of God which, in Rahner's thought, is identical with the Unoriginate Origin or the One transcending the many. For the same idea worked out in connection with the *Vorgriff*, see HW 63-64. This is why Rahner writes: "It is always possible that primitive Revelation and rational, monotheistic reflexion may have contributed to the forms of Zeus and Jupiter. Something of true monotheism was really alive . . . wherever men simply prayed to God . . . wherever . . . as in the philosophy of Plato or Aristotle an attempt was made to discover an absolute and supreme *One*, transcending the Many" ("Theos," TI 1, 91). See also my section "Christological Implications."

⁸⁷ HW 96, emphasis mine.

⁸⁸ "The Concept" 62, emphasis mine.

⁸⁹ See, e.g., "The Concept" 72. Here, as elsewhere in Rahner's theology, man can know transcendental revelation only if he has had an experience of the kind Rahner describes in his transcendental method: an experience of "longing for the absolute being" ("Nature and Grace," TI 4, 169).

⁹⁰ "The Experience of God Today," TI 11, 149-65, at 149, emphasis mine.

“to reflect upon an experience which is present in every man . . . to discover this experience . . . to admit it and to accept it . . .”⁹¹ He concludes that “The experience of God which we are pointing to is not some subsequent emotional reaction to doctrinal instruction about the existence and nature of God . . . it is prior to any such teaching, underlies it, and has to be there already for it to be made intelligible at all. This experience of God . . . is present in every man . . .”⁹² Rahner’s transcendental method appeals to this experience and in that way investigates God.⁹³

Identity of the Immanent and Economic Trinity

Thinking this way, Rahner naturally assumes that the immanent Trinity (the inner divine essence which Basil and others in the tradition maintained was in fact hidden from us) is identical with the economic Trinity (the Trinity as we know it analogously in the historical events of God’s revelation). He writes: “For according to a Catholic understanding of grace God does not apply a saving ‘something’ to man, but gives his very *self* as our salvation in a most radical manner, so that God-in-himself and the God-of-our-salvation are strictly identical.”⁹⁴ Christ himself is Rahner’s validation here. Accordingly, Rahner describes the hypostatic union as the most radical form of creaturely self-transcendence.⁹⁵ Its content, he believes, is the same as the absolute discovered by philosophy.⁹⁶ As the union of divinity and humanity, the hypostatic union is fully realized when human knowledge of the created spirit of this unity with the Word comes about.⁹⁷ “Hence the hypostatic union necessarily fulfils its own being in what we call (in neo-Chalcedonian terminology, if you like) the inner divinization of the human nature of Christ in grace and glory.”⁹⁸

All of this means that “God has given himself so fully in his absolute self-communication to the creature, that the ‘immanent’ Trinity becomes the Trinity of the ‘economy of salvation,’ and hence in turn the Trinity of salvation which we experience *is* the immanent Trinity.”⁹⁹ Rahner continues: “This means that the Trinity of God’s relationship to us *is* the reality of God as he is in himself: a trinity of persons.”¹⁰⁰ This, because the immanent Trinity already is contained in an experience of

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 150–51.

⁹² *Ibid.* 153.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 154–55. For the same idea, see his “Experience of Self,” *TI* 13, 123 ff.; also his “Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise ‘De trinitate,’” *TI* 4, 77–102, at 87 ff.

⁹⁴ “Observations,” *TI* 9, 130.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ “The Concept” 69.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 69.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 67.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 68.

Jesus and of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰¹ But why exactly does Rahner identify the immanent and economic Trinity in his doctrine of God?

This identification follows logically from Rahner's idea that man has a direct relation with God and may know and experience God as He knows and experiences Himself. He believes that this identification avoids a merely formal reconciliation of one and three in considering the Incarnation and grace.¹⁰² Moreover, his so identifying emphasizes that the Trinity and its two processions, together with the two self-communications of God *ad extra* in a "real formal causality corresponding to the two processions," do not come between our natural knowledge and the absolute mystery of God.¹⁰³ These are not mysteries which exist behind the God of natural theology, because our "experience of the Incarnation and grace" forces us to think this way. This assumption by Rahner is the weakness of his method by which he attempts to define God's inner essence first by reason (metaphysics) and only then by revelation.¹⁰⁴ If, with Rahner, we insist that the Trinitarian self-revelation conform to the efficient cause known from reason, then the criterion of true knowledge here must be man in his experience of the nameless. It cannot be one who is and remains free. It cannot be the revelation of the one God attested in the NT, whose revelation actually contradicts what man considers reasonable.¹⁰⁵

In summary, all of this epistemological and metaphysical analysis is intended to prove that knowledge of God and of his revelation can only take place as man illustrates its possibility and actuality from an experience of his horizon and interprets it accordingly.¹⁰⁶ This accounts for Rahner's dogmatic assumption of identity of the immanent and economic Trinity and allows him to describe God's presence to man in terms of the six necessities mentioned above.

Critical Analysis

In none of this analysis has Rahner actually shown that he has described anything other than a human experience which he then uses

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 70 and "Remarks" 98-99.

¹⁰² "The Concept" 71.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 72.

¹⁰⁴ See nn. 13 and 16 above.

¹⁰⁵ On this point see Tripole's convincing argument that "There seems little point in trying to present a basis in the Scriptures for an understanding of man that is consonant with Rahner's philosophical anthropology" ("Philosophy and Theology" 49). Gerald McCool, S.J., ed., *A Rahner Reader* (New York: Seabury, 1975), also notes that this is the most vulnerable part of Rahner's system (xxv).

¹⁰⁶ I do not dispute the actuality of such experiences; I simply ask whether the object of this experience is really God or man.

to validate his dogmatics. Methodologically, he assumes that we have direct knowledge of the immanent Trinity by knowing the form (the economy) in which God freely encounters us. Accordingly, he thinks that theology can be done seriously by substituting our experiences of what we call God, i.e., the Unoriginate Origin, for the reality of the triune God who transcends both the experience and the idea of such an *arché*. The triune God in fact remained hidden for the tradition and was accessible only to faith. Because Rahner thinks this way, he cannot maintain, with the tradition, that we know God indirectly only and he cannot answer the truth question, i.e., he cannot show that his concept corresponds with a reality essentially different from man. This, because the objective referent of his investigation is what man "calls" God on the basis of his experiences of himself. Thus what one investigates in Rahner's theology is an experience present in everyone which he assumes is an experience of the triune God. But the question here concerns whether man can name God at all or whether he needs God's revelation and grace to do that. For Rahner, the experience of the absolute (unoriginate) is already an experience of revelation and grace. But then God's revelation cannot in fact be free since, as Rahner says, God is actually revealed every time man inquires into anything that exists. And indeed, the object (God) is now subject to the a priori structures of human knowledge, as Rahner maintains.¹⁰⁷ A God who is so subject, however, cannot possibly be free. Knowing this truth led the tradition to reject the direct knowledge of God embraced by Rahner. Rahner's epistemological solution to the problem of God's relation with the world leads directly to a pantheist position typical of Stoic monism and of Neoplatonism. It is literally impossible and unnecessary for Rahner to distinguish God from man. The problems involved here must still be made more precise.

Symbolic Necessity

I shall explore briefly the first of the six ontological necessities and show how it operates in connection with Rahner's doctrine of God and Christology. Then I shall criticize this proposition based on the assumption that God's transcendence and presence to another can be maintained only by distinguishing dogmatically between the immanent and economic Trinity and by applying the above-mentioned patristic assertion that we cannot in fact know God directly. I am contending that Rahner's presuppositions falsely suppose that reason and revelation must come to the same conclusion about truth.

¹⁰⁷ See my section "Transcendental Method."

Doctrine of God

Applying his symbolic ontology to the inner-Trinitarian relations, Rahner says: "It is because God 'must' 'express' himself inwardly that he can also utter himself outwardly. . . ." ¹⁰⁸ This, because he believes that his general conception of symbolism, which states that "All beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature," ¹⁰⁹ and that "The symbol strictly speaking (symbolic reality) is the self-realization of a being in the other, which is constitutive of its essence," ¹¹⁰ can explain God's inner-Trinitarian relations. Thus man's self-knowledge cannot contradict the knowledge he gains from revelation. Symbolic reality, as man perceives it in the cosmos, is relatively analogical to symbolic reality in God, which is the absolute instance of symbolic reality. ¹¹¹ Hence Rahner writes: "Being *as such*, and hence *as one* (ens as unum), for the fulfillment of its being and its unity, emerges into a plurality—of which the *supreme mode* is the Trinity." ¹¹² Naturally, Rahner must describe the inner-Trinitarian relations in this way because of his transcendental method, which states that "every possible object of cognition is already anticipated under the general aspect of being in general. . . ." ¹¹³ But because he actually identifies the inner-Trinitarian relations with the "being" of his symbolic ontology, he cannot describe the inner relations in the Godhead as free but as necessary occurrences conforming absolutely to "symbolic reality" recognized by the metaphysician. This conception of symbolic reality leads Rahner to believe that "The Logos is the 'word' of the Father, his perfect 'image,' his 'imprint,' his radiance, his self-expression . . . the Word—as reality of the immanent divine life—is 'generated' by the Father as the *image* and *expression* of the Father . . . this process is *necessarily given* with the divine act of self-knowledge and without it the absolute act of divine self-possession in knowledge cannot exist. . . ." ¹¹⁴

That the triune God "must express" Himself like all other beings confirms that Rahner is consistent in his method. He believes that between God and man there is a common symbolic reality ¹¹⁵ within which man's being differs only in degree but not in kind.

¹⁰⁸ "The Theology of the Symbol" 236.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 224.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 234.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 234–35.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 228, emphasis mine. Rahner does exactly the same thing in his philosophy of religion, *HW* 49.

¹¹³ *HW* 96. This, of course, is the sixth necessity noted above.

¹¹⁴ "The Theology of the Symbol" 236, emphasis mine.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 234–35.

If we simply let this symbolic interpretation of the inner-Trinitarian relations stand alone, it might appear fairly innocuous even with its monistic overtones. But in his Christology, which Rahner himself considers the "supreme form" of his ontology of the symbol,¹¹⁶ he draws conclusions that clearly reflect the difficulties involved in his assumption that there is indeed "a link between a symbolic reality within and without the divine."¹¹⁷ Knowledge of this link, of course, is "necessarily given with the general concept of beings and being—as the 'unveiled' figure of the most primordial 'truth' of being. . . ."¹¹⁸

Christology

First, Rahner believes that the Logos is the necessary other in whom the Father expresses Himself. Second, he believes that God's expression of Himself in creation is a continuation of that immanent necessity *ad extra*. Therefore, Rahner assumes that we should reinterpret the Chalcedonian *unio naturarum* to indicate that Christ's humanity, as the real symbol of the immanent Trinity, not only participates essentially in the life of the immanent Trinity but has the capacity in itself and as such to render present the divinity. This, because "the symbol renders present what is revealed."¹¹⁹ Therefore, the innovative feature of Rahner's Christology is his belief that Christ's human nature as such discloses the Logos.¹²⁰

Christ/Creatures

Rahner concludes that all creation has received a symbolic extension because of God's inner expression *ad extra* and the overplus of meaning that attaches to symbolic realities. For this reason all creaturely realities in some sense participate quasi-formally in the inner life of God. The fact that God must express Himself is, for Rahner, another validating factor for asserting the identity of the immanent and economic Trinity. As noted above in connection with the ontology of symbolic realities, expression is the factor which allows an original one (in this case the unoriginate origin) to posit itself in multiplicity and yet remain ontologically in agreement with itself. Expression refers to the very structure of the being of God, without which He would not be God. The appearance (expression) is constituted by the divine essence and at the same time remains distinct as its symbol.¹²¹ In Rahner's thinking, then, Christ's

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 235, and esp. "Remarks," *TI* 4, 94.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 237.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 234–5. For the exact same notion, see *HW* 63.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 239.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 239 ff. See also Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 32–33.

¹²¹ "The Theology of the Symbol" 227–29 and 251.

human nature is the real symbol (expression) of God (the unoriginate) in the world.¹²² As such, it comes about as God expresses Himself into the void.¹²³ God's act of positing the Logos simultaneously results in the exteriorizing of the divine *esse*.¹²⁴ This happens because the symbol (the expression, the human nature) is full of what is symbolized (i.e., God, the unoriginate). For that reason we have in Christ's humanity as such the very being of God.¹²⁵ To say that the man Jesus is full of what is symbolized is the same as saying that the immanent and economic Trinity is identical. The humanity is the "appearance" which allows God to be present to that which He is not. As it is full of what is symbolized, it has the ability to render present God Himself.¹²⁶

Critical Analysis

It was imperative for the tradition that we distinguish clearly between the immanent and economic Trinity in a Christian doctrine of God in order to see the positive fact of God's actual transcendence and immanence. Rahner's methodological starting point (the experience of the absolute) assumes that his concept of symbolic expression describes God's inner-Trinitarian relations. This leads to his inability to distinguish God's "necessary" internal expression (between Father and Son) from his movement *ad extra*. So he describes the Incarnation as a continuation of God's necessary inner symbolic movement (expression—which all symbols must do) *ad extra*. This is why Rahner explains creation as follows: "It is because God 'must' 'express' himself inwardly that he can also utter himself outwardly; the finite, created utterance *ad extra* is a continuation of the immanent constitution of 'image and likeness.'" ¹²⁷ Yet the obvious problem here is that if one is necessary, then so is the other. Creation can no longer be seen as a free act of the triune God. It is necessary, as is all symbolic expression. From this insight Rahner concludes that Christ's humanity can render present the divinity and that the union of natures is both necessary and coalesces into a symbolic

¹²² "On the Theology of the Incarnation," *TI* 4, 115.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 115.

¹²⁴ "The Theology of the Symbol" 238. See also "Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas," *TI* 3, 24–34, at 32, where Rahner boldly states where this logic leads him: "For if creation in the real order of things occurs originally as a moment of that divine divestment into something alien which *he must project for himself in advance so that he might have something into which he can really give himself away . . .*" (emphasis mine). Obviously, as God Himself is subject to the expression of symbolic reality, He must create simply because all reality necessarily expresses itself. This idea is exactly what was rejected by the tradition in connection with Meister Eckhart's thinking. See also "Remarks," *TI* 4, 93–94.

¹²⁵ "The Theology of the Symbol" 238.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 239.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 236–37.

identity.¹²⁸ Accordingly, he can maintain that an encounter with the humanity of Jesus is not only an encounter with the Logos but knowledge of it.¹²⁹ From this he concludes once more that the immanent and economic Trinity is identical.

Freedom of God

But if God is really transcendent as described above by the tradition and if He remains recognizable as God in the events of creation and incarnation, then this analysis by Rahner has not described the action of the immanent Trinity in history at all. Instead, it describes a general (Neoplatonic) concept of symbolic oneness necessarily emerging into threeness and applies this to the triune God who actually transcends both such a concept and the knower because He is free. Yet, any such transcendence (freedom) is denied by the presuppositions of Rahner's method, since he fails to see the necessity of distinguishing the immanent and economic Trinity at precisely that point. He obviously believes his symbolic ontology has described the oneness of God as the absolute instance of being as such seen by the metaphysician. This is particularly precarious, since we are then left to choose between the unoriginate origin (the efficient cause known by reason) and the triune God of Christian revelation confessed at Nicaea and at Chalcedon.¹³⁰

Given the fact that there really is an immanent Trinity known in faith, however, we certainly cannot know it directly from experience and

¹²⁸ Ibid. 238; also "Remarks" 94.

¹²⁹ "The Theology of the Symbol" 239. Obviously, this insight is the validation for Rahner's theory of the anonymous Christian, which Tripole correctly rejects as the reduction of theology to anthropology ("Philosophy and Theology" 54).

¹³⁰ Rahner would argue (e.g., *TI* 1, "Current Problems in Christology") that the human nature exists via the Logos' *esse* and it is anhypostatic. Yet, by explaining how the Logos functions according to the principles of his symbolic ontology (e.g., *TI* 1, 164–65, 169, esp. n. 3, 170–71), Rahner proves once again that you cannot in fact see the freedom of God intended by the patristic *anhypostasis* as long as you think, with Rahner, that the Chalcedonian *asugchutos* can be described as a symbolic unity in which sign and thing signified are mutually and necessarily related.—Rahner actually maintains the notion that the Logos "can" change because of the human nature. Again, this denies His freedom, because the truth is that if God can change without ceasing to be God, then He does not need the "other" to do it. Symbols, however, do have this need. See esp. *TI* 1, 182. This leads to Rahner's concept of mutual conditioning again: "Christology is at once the beginning *and* the end of anthropology, and that for all eternity such an anthropology is really theology" (*TI* 1, 185). The same idea is repeated in *TI* 4, "On the Theology of the Incarnation" 116–17. Rahner's conception of the unity between the Logos and human nature in Christ as symbolically expressive leads to his idea that "Christology is the end *and* beginning of anthropology. And this anthropology, when most thoroughly realized in Christology, is eternally theology" (*TI* 4, 117). All of this reverses what the *anhypostasis* intended, i.e., the irreversibility of the Logos and human nature of the Creator over creature.

ontology as Rahner thinks, unless we confuse God's transcendent *esse* (freedom) with the necessary movements of history at the outset. Then the problem of God's relation with the world as Creator and Reconciler will have to be solved pantheistically.¹³¹ The problem here centers on the fact that God cannot really be free (and not subject to the movements of the world) if His inner and outer being and action conform to the symbolic necessities described by the philosopher.

In his doctrine of God Rahner is actually caught in a logical dilemma by describing God's inner life symbolically. He may say, on the one hand, that God "must" "express" Himself and that creation is a continuation of that immanent necessity *ad extra*. Then he must admit that this view is, in fact, the pantheist position rejected by the early tradition for reasons indicated above (i.e., God cannot really be free and independent of the world). It denies the *creatio ex nihilo*, which is not a datum of reason but of faith. On the other hand, he may say that God freely exists as Father, Son, and Spirit and that creation represents a new and different action which is in no way necessitated by God's inner being. Then Rahner would have to say that the finite and created world has no independent being (which can be explained philosophically) and that creation in fact is distinct from and completely dependent upon its Creator known in faith and from revelation alone. He would then have to deny that the finite created utterance is a continuation of the immanent symbolic constitution of image and likeness *ad extra* in order to maintain that creation results from a free new action of the immanent Trinity, in no way necessitated by His being as God. Thus he would have to jettison his symbolic theology as an adequate explanation of creation. But Rahner cannot logically say that God is free and that, like all symbolic reality, He must express Himself *ad intra* and *ad extra*. It is this ontological presupposition which has disastrous consequences in Rahner's dogmatics, because it allows him to think that the relationship between the Creator God and creatures is a mutually conditioning relationship as described above.¹³²

¹³¹ This is obviously why Rahner accepts a modified version of pantheism in K. Rahner and H. Vorgrimler, "Pantheism," *Theological Dictionary*, ed. C. Ernst (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 333-34.

¹³² Just as Rahner really believes he has successfully maintained the freedom of God and of creatures in defining God, revelation, and grace, he would hold that his view that God "must" express himself within the divine also maintains God's freedom. Rahner believes that as long as he says God does not have to express Himself outside the divine, it is perfectly acceptable to reinterpret the free action of the Logos symbolically. But herein lies the central problem raised by this article. Rahner's dilemma is that by describing the Logos as the highest instance of symbolic being, he must describe creation as a continuation of the Logos' necessary expression *ad extra*. This is in conflict with the tradition. Rahner

In connection with this point, it is enough to show that Rahner's theological method places him in the very unpleasant position of having to choose between the affirmations of the tradition and his philosophy of being.¹³³ For instance, if the unoriginate origin which he and all philosophers have discovered in one way or another throughout history is really God, then it is possible to know the reality of God without His revelation as it is complete in Jesus himself.¹³⁴ But if this unoriginate is really God, then it cannot also be true that the triune God alone is the one God, since it is entirely plausible that one might reason to the existence of the unoriginate as Rahner does¹³⁵ without ever confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord and that his Spirit alone is the Holy Spirit. Thus Rahner's philosophy of the symbol leaves him a difficult choice here. If he maintains that God is the original one unfolding necessarily into the many, then he cannot exist eternally as triune, but first as the one and only then as triune. The problems with this thinking are obvious.¹³⁶ If, however, Rahner maintains, with the tradition, that God

frequently says that God is free (e.g., *Foundations* 78) but his theology bears no hint of this as he grounds it in the fact that God, like all being, must express Himself and constitute another. Here is another good example of the problem. Rahner writes: "this humanity of Jesus constitutes an element in the world as a whole, while conversely this world constitutes in a very radical sense the environment, the concomittant setting, indeed the very physicality demanded by the Logos in its act of uttering itself into the non-divine" ("Christology," *TI* 11, 220, emphasis mine). So, while John's Gospel and Paul also talk about the creative function of the Logos, there is no hint that the world played this role in their thinking. It does for Rahner because all symbols must express themselves and creation and incarnation are seen by him as continuations of this original necessary internal expression within God ("On the Theology of the Incarnation" *TI* 4, 115; also *TI* 4, 113-14, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World" 157-92, at 177 ff.; also "Christology," *TI* 11, 225). Rahner even states that "man is the event of God's self-communication" (*Foundations* 127) and that "God's creative act always drafts the creature as the paradigm of a possible utterance of himself. And he cannot draft it otherwise, even if he remains silent. For this self-silencing always presupposes ears, which hear the muteness of God. . . . The immanent self-utterance of God in his eternal fullness is the condition of the self-utterance of God outside himself, and the latter continues the former . . . the ontological possibility of creation can derive from and be based on the fact that God, the unoriginated, expresses himself in himself and for himself and so constitutes the original, divine, distinction in God himself. And when this God utters himself as himself into the void, this expression speaks out this immanent Word. . . ." (*TI* 4, 115, emphasis mine).

¹³³ See my sections "The Problems" (esp. nn. 7-13) and "Symbolic Necessity: Critical Analysis."

¹³⁴ This difficulty is raised by Tripole when he asks: "Why should anyone bother to listen to the Christian proclamation, if it has nothing more to say to people than what they already know?" ("Philosophy and Theology" 53).

¹³⁵ "Theos" 133-34.

¹³⁶ The Fathers insisted on three key points which Rahner either denies or ignores to avoid this problem: (1) *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*, (2) perichoresis, and (3) appropriation.

eternally exists in the freedom which is His alone as Father, Son and Spirit (as *triune*) and in no other way ever, then he would have to reject his own method. He would have to say that knowledge of the unoriginate origin discovered by philosophers *directly* and by some theologians, is not real knowledge of the one true God at all, since one is not also compelled by the reality so discovered to *believe* in the eternal divinity of the Son and Spirit. This particular problem obviously results from Rahner's insistence that all being must be explicable by man's general metaphysics.¹³⁷ But this dilemma shows that the being of God revealed and recognized by faith leads to quite a different explanation of the God/world relationship than the being of God discovered by naming the nameless ground of one's being and explaining that symbolically.

Christ/Creatures

Rahner's Christological assumption not only misses God's transcendence (freedom) in this way but ascribes to Christ's humanity as such something that makes it more than human, namely, the divine power to render present God Himself. This places Rahner in another logical dilemma with respect to the tradition. Either he may apply consistently his symbolic ontology and maintain that Christ's human nature has the capacity to render present the Godhead: this position, once again, solves the problem of God's relation with the creature (in Christ this time) pantheistically. Or he may maintain, with the tradition, that Christ's human nature has its meaning exclusively from the power of the Word (from the immanent Trinity) and thus not in itself. But he cannot say that God is and remains free in se and that through the Incarnation Christ's humanity has the capacity to render present the divinity.

Rahner's symbolic interpretation of the Incarnation thus forces him to say that Christ's humanity as such discloses the divinity. This view cannot see that this power resides not in Christ's humanity as such but in the free action of the immanent Trinity (the Word in its union and distinction with the Father and Spirit).¹³⁸ As the God-man, then, Christ's

¹³⁷ See my section "Symbolic Necessity" and n. 113. This problem results from the sixth necessity mentioned in section "Six Ontological Necessities."

¹³⁸ Rahner's problem here is that he considers the Incarnation and grace with the "very dangerous" assumption that he can seriously do so with no consideration at all of "the Word of God as he is in himself" ("On the Theology of the Incarnation" *TI* 4, 106). And he is certainly true to his method by never really considering the immanent Trinity in its union and distinction with man in the economy of salvation. Because Anselm and others in the tradition recognized this truth, i.e., that the Word perceived in faith is the criterion of true understanding here, they held that it was necessary first to believe in Jesus as God's revelation and only then to understand the truth of that confession. This is why the priority of the action of the Logos was so clear in the Christology of Athanasius.

humanity must be distinguished from his divinity; and our creaturely response must be distinguished likewise from Jesus, who was in fact unique as true God and true man. Yet, once a distinction like this is made, we would have to admit, with Scripture and the tradition, that an encounter with Christ's humanity as such and an encounter with our own humanity cannot in themselves and as such be described as indications or experiences of God's free act of revelation. This, because our humanity always remains distinct from the action of the immanent Trinity and cannot be confused with it as in a philosophy of symbolic reality. On his presuppositions Rahner cannot distinguish clearly between Christ and Christians precisely because he believes there is an underlying symbolic identity between them. Thus, for Rahner, we already analyze revelation whenever we analyze our experiences of self-transcendence, which experiences he thinks culminate in Christ. All of this follows from his methodological presupposition that God can be known directly.

Even the *unio naturarum* cannot be described symbolically without obviating this distinction which has been theologically decisive since Chalcedon. Rahner makes no such distinction because he is thinking about Christ's human nature in accordance with his philosophy of symbolic expression, which states that "being is of itself symbolic, because it necessarily 'expresses' itself."¹³⁹ Thus that which is expressed is ontologically identical with that which expresses it, since the appearance (symbol) is constitutive of the reality symbolized (the essence). In fact, as the Logos is necessary to the Father, so the humanity of Jesus is necessary to the Logos. This is obviously why Rahner thinks the two are mutually necessary and that he can investigate the humanity as such and know the truth about God and man.

If, however, we recognize God's actual transcendence and freedom *in se* and *ad extra*, then we cannot say that Christ's human nature and the rest of humanity became divinized (via a symbolic extension of primal truth). This view would be just as impossible as the Stoic monism in the early tradition. And to maintain it in Christology simply confuses Christ's uniqueness with the experiences of creatures. Finally, this thinking leads to Rahner's theory of the anonymous Christian. To be an anonymous Christian, for Rahner, is simply to live this "symbolic extension" of the Godhead. Yet, if this symbolic extension is nothing but a necessity inherent in being as such, then experiencing it hardly means we are experiencing God's grace revealed in Christ and the Spirit.

Faith, decision, and action with respect to Jesus are necessary for any experience of and recognition of God's grace and revelation. But they are not necessary in Rahner's thought, because he has already confused the

¹³⁹ "The Theology of the Symbol" 229.

experiences of the creature with real knowledge of the one transcendent God by assuming that they are one and the same. In doing this, Rahner leaves the theologian in the position of having to justify himself instead of recognizing his real justification in Christ and the Spirit.¹⁴⁰ In order to accomplish his feat, Rahner must actually deny the key patristic insight that we never actually know the immanent Trinity directly. Whenever we think we do, we have already confused the reality of God (the immanent Trinity) with the economy (history, experience, and idea) in and through which He freely makes Himself known to us as our God.

Rahner's symbolic interpretation of Christology catches him in another remarkable dilemma with respect to the tradition. As he maintains the logic of his method and of his ontology of the symbol, he is led directly to the subordinationist position articulated by Arius and rejected at Nicaea and Chalcedon. This would make his pre-Augustinian appeal to the early Logos Christologies more understandable.¹⁴¹ But it would also mean that theology today would have to abandon the entire Christological tradition which followed Chalcedon and define Christ's uniqueness as the highest instance of creaturely being with Rahner. Yet, if he maintains that Nicaea and Chalcedon were correct in following the Athanasian insight that "there never was a time when he was not,"¹⁴² he cannot appeal to the early Logos Christologies, which were in fact subordinationistic. In that case he would be forced logically to abandon his method once more and admit that the Christian creeds, drawn from the scriptural testimonies to "he who is," speak of one who is unique apart from creation and remains so antecedently in himself. Then Rahner could not describe Christ as the highest symbolic expression of created being, as

¹⁴⁰ See Tripole, "Philosophy and Theology" 42 ff. He points to the logical absurdity of this position vis-à-vis Scripture and tradition.

¹⁴¹ See "On the Theology of the Incarnation" 106 ff. and *The Trinity* 11-12, 32, and 86 for Rahner's explanation of his thesis. See also "Current Problems in Christology," *TI* 1, 149-200, at 167. Rahner, of course, wishes to return to this position to validate his own Christology. He believes he has eliminated their subordinationistic tendencies in his theology of the symbol. But the question is whether, in returning to this position, we have anything but subordinationism. This is exactly what Rahner himself does by speaking of Christ as the Father's symbol or appearance and of the unoriginate origin as God's "proper reality." In his thinking it is literally impossible to maintain that God's proper reality is as Father, Son, and Spirit and that unless we see all three, we do not see the oneness of the reality of the transcendent God at all (see my section "Symbolic Necessity: Critical Analysis"). On this point see "Current Problems" 167 ff. and Paul D. Molnar, "Karl Rahner and the Pre-Augustinian Tradition" (M.A. thesis, St. John's University, 1974). Here Rahner finds himself at odds once more with the tradition which affirmed God's oneness in threeness.

¹⁴² See, e.g., Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 3, 28. Richard Norris, *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), translates the passage: "there was not a 'when' when he did not exist" (87).

all Arian and Pelagian theologies apparently wish to do. And he would have to admit that we actually have no a priori or a posteriori concept by which we can assess this particular revelation, since it is in fact unique. Its reality does not arise from and is in no way subordinated to history. Faith in Jesus would be a necessary prerequisite to grasping the distinction between Creator and creatures and between Christ and creatures. Rahner makes no such distinction and cannot do so on the basis of his ontological presuppositions. Instead, he insists that Christ cannot be an absolute point of departure for our thought.¹⁴³ Since Rahner's norm here is our direct experience of the "nameless," he cannot actually point to anything other than man in answering the truth question, i.e., which concept of God and Christ points to the realities of God and Christ and which points to an idol. And this obviously is no answer at all. It certainly is not the answer the tradition would give.

Summary and Conclusion

Since the God who is involved in human history knows and loves Himself as Father, Son, and Spirit prior to and apart from His action as Creator, as Savior, and as Redeemer, we must be able to distinguish His free action from the necessary expression which apparently pertains to all symbolic reality within the realm of creation. If we cannot so distinguish His action, then we have not spoken of the immanent Trinity at all, but of our direct perception of the created realm which, according to the tradition, in itself and as such is not transcendent simply because it is not and never becomes divine. Thus, of themselves (ontologically) creatures cannot know the immanent Trinity without first acknowledging the priority of God's free self-revelation in faith. This means, however, that we cannot describe God with Rahner as one who must necessarily express Himself and the Incarnation as a continuation of that immanent necessity *ad extra* without confusing Creator and creature at the outset. In connection with the doctrine of God, such a confusion leads logically to the idea that creation is necessary to God's inner life, and this leads to Rahner's use of the six ontological necessities discernible to the philosopher throughout his dogmatics. This, because he assumes that the immanent Trinity became identical with the ontology of creation in the Incarnation. In connection with Christology, it leads to the idea that the Incarnation continues that symbolic necessity into the world at large, thus giving humanity the inherent (philosophical) capacity of explaining its own truth and meaning symbolically. This is clearly the emanationism rejected by the tradition. And this thinking leads directly to the Chris-

¹⁴³ "Current Problems" 166: "Christology most certainly cannot and should not form an absolute point of departure for an ontology (and hence still less for an anthropology)."

tological idea which has always been the hallmark of Ebionite Christology, i.e., that Jesus' uniqueness can be described as the highest instance of human self-transcendence. Such a uniqueness is simply an apotheosis and not a real revelation of something new and different.

Rahner's method leads him to dogmatic conclusions that are at variance with Scripture and the tradition. In effect, this method leads him to confuse the movement of the world with God's free movement. The threat of pantheism or panentheism which Christians always wanted to avoid has thus become the determining element in Rahner's thought. Man's experiences are in fact indistinguishable from God Himself. And so Christ can only be the supreme instance of what we all experience ourselves to be. Not only does Rahner's position that we can know God directly manifest a rupture with traditional dogmatics (especially the importance of the *creatio ex nihilo*), but it leaves him in a position where he cannot answer the truth question which is the aim of all theological inquiry.

Rahner cannot show that his ideas of God and of Christ represent a content which is really divine, since he has grounded the reality of both in human experience, which in itself is and remains human. He assumes it is more than this. But therein lies the difficulty of all theology. Can we assume that humanity has the capacity for God without ascribing divinity directly to man? In a Christian doctrine of God and in a Christology that is in line with the tradition, the answer to this has always been a clear no. And this was always spoken in the interest of seeing the positive fact that we can really know the truth about ourselves and about God only by relying, in faith, upon God's grace and truth revealed in the historical Jesus. His grace and truth, in any case, are not identical with the world processes, as they are for Rahner.



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