

A JOURNEY INTO TIME: THE LEGACY OF KARL RAHNER'S LAST YEARS

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WHEN KARL RAHNER in 1976 published *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*,¹ he made it clear that he intended the book neither as a complete systematic theology nor as a summary of his own thought. The *Introduction* was just that, nine ways through a basic course in theology that consistently asked two interrelated questions at a first level of reflection: What do we actually believe as Christians, and how is that intellectually responsible in today's world?² But the massive, marvelous, puzzling book has in many ways been received just contrary to its author's wishes. Above all, the attention given it and its various translations³ has largely diverted interest from the prodigious and complex series of publications that Rahner authored between 1976 and his death on March 30, 1984. Reading that production in its entirety evokes new admiration not only for Rahner's overall achievement but also for the development of its last years.

What, after all, was one to expect? After five years living in retirement in Munich, would Rahner simply repeat or would he vary his theological repertoire? Without regular faculty status or membership on any significant ecclesiastical committees, would he find the same audiences he had previously addressed? In a world of diminished resources and increased illusions, could his project of theological anthropology continue to invigorate our religious imagination and social responsibility?

"The old schoolmaster," as he now often called himself, knew these questions and their pain. But he cared still more for larger questions—and wrestled with them to the end. And so there appeared in these last years four further volumes of his *Schriften zur Theologie*, collecting his occasional essays and lectures. With the expert and imaginative editorial support of Paul Imhof, S.J., two of these volumes appeared while Rahner

¹ Freiburg: Herder, 1976. ET: *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, tr. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978).—All references in my article will be to the German original, with the relevant ET cited in brackets; other English translations will be mine.

² Cf. my review in *Religious Studies Review* 5 (1979) 194–99. For an extended critical discussion of the book's methodological status, see Max Seckler, "Das eine Ganze und die Theologie," in Elmar Klinger and Klaus Wittstadt, eds., *Glaube im Prozess: Christsein nach dem II. Vatikanum. Für Karl Rahner* (Freiburg: Herder, 1984) 826–52.

³ The *Grundkurs* has also been translated into Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish, and has been published in East Germany.

was still living in Munich,⁴ another two after his final move to Innsbruck,⁵ where he also enjoyed the unusually capable and judicious secretarial assistance of Frau Elfriede Oeggel ("the best secretary I've ever had," he told me once).

But the four volumes of the *Schriften* were merely the centerpiece, so to speak, of Rahner's last years. A new and expanded edition of the *Kleines theologisches Wörterbuch*, coauthored with Herbert Vorgrimler and Kuno Füssel, appeared in 1976,⁶ and there were several lengthy essays on prayer, the love of neighbor, and the love of Jesus in 1977, 1981, and 1982 respectively.⁷ An adroit apology for contemporary faith, with reflective questions posed by Karl-Heinz Weger and extended responses offered by Rahner, was published in 1979.⁸ In 1983, together with Heinrich Fries, Rahner wrote the 100th volume in the *Quaestiones disputatae* series, proposing a provocative challenge on the real possibility of church reunion today.⁹ And then there were the major anthologies: above all, *Rechenschaft des Glaubens* (1979),¹⁰ a superb reader edited by Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt from the whole breadth of Rahner's writings; *Praxis des Glaubens* (1982),¹¹ compiled by Lehmann and Raffelt as a "handbook of contemporary spirituality" but easily adaptable also

⁴ *Schriften zur Theologie* 13: *Gott und Offenbarung* (Zurich: Benziger, 1978); henceforth S. 13. ET (of first four sections): *Theological Investigations* 18: *God and Revelation*, tr. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983). For comment on the ET, see John P. Galvin, *Heythrop Journal* 25 (1984) 366-67. *Schriften zur Theologie* 14: *In Sorge um die Kirche* (Zurich: Benziger, 1980); henceforth S. 14. ET: *Theological Investigations* 20: *Concern for the Church*, and *Theological Investigations* 19: *Faith and Ministry*, tr. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981, 1983). *T.I.* 19 also contains three essays from S. 13. For comment on the ET, see Daniel Donovan, *Cross Currents* 33 (1983) 391.

⁵ *Schriften zur Theologie* 15: *Wissenschaft und christlicher Glaube* (Zurich: Benziger, 1983); henceforth S. 15. *Schriften zur Theologie* 16: *Humane Gesellschaft und Kirche von morgen* (Zurich: Benziger, 1984); henceforth S. 16.

⁶ Freiburg: Herder. ET: *Dictionary of Theology*, tr. R. Strachan, D. Smith, R. Nowell, and S. O'Brien Twohig (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁷ *Ermutigung zum Gebet*, with J. B. Metz (Freiburg: Herder, 1977) 41-110. ET: *The Courage To Pray* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 29-87. *Wer ist dein Bruder?* (Freiburg: Herder, 1981) and *Was heisst Jesus lieben?* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982) have been translated together by Robert Barr as *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

⁸ *Was sollen wir noch glauben? Theologen stellen sich den Glaubensfragen einer neuen Generation* (Freiburg: Herder). ET: *Our Christian Faith: Answers for the Future*, tr. Francis McDonagh (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁹ *Einigung der Kirchen—reale Möglichkeit* (Freiburg: Herder). ET: *Unity of the Churches—An Actual Possibility*, tr. Ruth C. L. and Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia/New York: Fortress/Paulist, 1985).

¹⁰ *Rechenschaft des Glaubens: Karl Rahner-Lesebuch* (Freiburg: Herder).

¹¹ *Praxis des Glaubens: Geistliches Lesebuch* (Zurich/Freiburg: Benziger/Herder). ET: *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

as a general introduction; *Gebete des Lebens* (1984),¹² a moving collection of prayers from various periods of the author's life; and two vivid and lively collections of interviews, *Karl Rahner im Gespräch* (1982, 1983).¹³ In addition, of course, Rahner continued his editorial position in the *Quaestiones disputatae* series and became one of the founding editors of the 30-volume *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft*. To take account of the Festschriften and major secondary literature dedicated to him would be a task in itself, but I should at least mention the continuation of the comprehensive Rahner bibliography in *Wagnis Theologie*¹⁴ and *Glaube im Prozess*.¹⁵ Nor will any student of religion in our time want to miss the unusually frank autobiographical reflections that appear in *Karl Rahner: Bekenntnisse. Rückblick auf 80 Jahre*¹⁶ or in the even lengthier television-interview text of *Erinnerungen*.¹⁷

Through all these pages the remarkable continuity of Rahner's thought impresses once again. There is much repetition, of course, both from earlier writings and within this last period itself. Distinctions and arguments are seldom as exact or developed as in the early years. Few of the essays have the explosive force of the preconciliar period. And yet, in significant ways, Rahner does reconceive his audience as well as some of his most cherished themes. Repeatedly he remarks on the relativistic scepticism of the time,¹⁸ implicitly redirecting the center of his thought to respond to this growing wound in the Western consciousness. As he seeks God's patient Word through history, he comes into deeper discussion with the Enlightenment. In service to the Roman Catholic Church's dialogue with history as newly begun at Vatican II,¹⁹ he presses questions about the unity and outcome of history, the possibility of interreligious dialogue, the possible social contributions of a reunited Christianity. Each year more acutely aware of his own mortality, he speaks of the cross of Christ with new urgency and before it confesses that he finds this a wintry time for both church and society. We Christians, he adds,

¹² Freiburg: Herder. ET: *Prayers for a Lifetime* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

¹³ Ed. by Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (Munich: Kösel). Early in 1986 Crossroad will publish a selection of interviews from these two volumes: *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, ed. Harvey Egan, S.J.

¹⁴ Paul Imhof and Heinrich Treziak, "Bibliographie Karl Rahner 1974-1979," in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Wagnis Theologie: Erfahrungen mit der Theologie Karl Rahners* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979) 579-97.

¹⁵ Paul Imhof and Elisabeth Meuser, "Bibliographie Karl Rahner 1979-84," in *Glaube im Prozess* 854-71.

¹⁶ Vienna: Herold, 1984.

¹⁷ *Erinnerungen: Im Gespräch mit Meinold Krauss* (Freiburg: Herder, 1984). ET: *Karl Rahner: I Remember*, tr. Harvey Egan, S.J. (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

¹⁸ See, e.g., *Was sollen wir noch glauben?* 9 [ix]; S. 14, 27 [16], 197 [130], 313 [98]; S. 15, 106, 177; S. 16, 63-65; *Einigung der Kirchen* 9 [1].

¹⁹ S. 14, 329 [111].

are those who should know best how perplexing the human condition is and how ignorant we are of what might truly solve our hearts. But the solution cannot be a private one. In these last years he deepens and broadens his thought on the relations between theory and practice and on the daily conduct of the Christian life.²⁰

Let me try to profile the range of these concerns in three stages, discussing (1) the doctrine of God, (2) questions about the Church, and (3) issues centering on history and society. Typically, the questions cross-refer, and we might well treat them in exactly the reverse order. Likewise, I can scarcely hope to reproduce the special tone of these last writings with their bold and unrepressed fidelity to tradition, their restless yet serene spirituality, their sometimes even angry love. They are generally more essayistic than strictly systematic, often critical of institutional religion, remarkably more autobiographical than in any comparable earlier period. A further radicality of questioning emerges, with a repeated concern to address questions from the actual historical experience of Christian people—"from below," as the unfortunate catchphrase has it. And Rahner allows himself a strikingly new range of literary genres: imaginary letters, dreams, dialogues, catalogues of character types. But perhaps by focusing the major concerns of these last years, I can help readers to discover for themselves the felicities of their style and the force of their substance.

AT THE CENTER

To the end, Rahner's thought remained unmistakably and centrally a theology, a courageous effort to indicate, somewhat less inadequately, the origin and ground and goal of human life in our universe. His later essays speak of his lifelong project less often as a theological anthropology—not, I think, because he had in any way abandoned the notion but because he had expanded and nuanced it so considerably. In the last years, his fundamental correlation is not simply between God and humanity but rather between God as the world's most inner entelechy and the whole history of humanity. This ever-bolder conception clearly risks saying so much that it can be taken for sheer speculation. But in fact it addresses the question of meaning in human history and offers it a home in the consistent conception and acceptance of the loving mystery of the incomprehensible God.

Our time needs a living and practical way into this mystery, and Rahner continued to insist on the urgency of a modern mystagogy.²¹ Though he saw this as a future project, he did provide significant sketches

²⁰ For a survey of the practical dimension in Rahner's theology as a whole, see Karl Neumann, *Der Praxisbezug der Theologie bei Karl Rahner* (Freiburg: Herder, 1980).

²¹ James J. Bacik presents a lucid and creative discussion of the topic in *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery: Mystagogy according to Karl Rahner* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1980).

and instalments of it—for example, in a moving essay on whether dialogue with God is possible,²² or in the “Speech of Ignatius to a Jesuit of Today,”²³ which he several times referred to as his personal testament. He continued to hold that arguments for the reality of God have validity—he even spoke of “proofs”—but in their various forms they in fact interpret and explicate a constant, fundamental experience of humanity discovering that the loving incomprehensible God’s approach to our history has opened new depths in us, transforming us from being open to the infinite into being now embraced by it. To sustain this view, Rahner continued to insist on the distinction between nature and grace, nature understood as creation’s intrinsic openness to God which is then taken up dialectically in grace as the salvific self-bestowal of God’s own life.²⁴ The structural notion of the supernatural existential continues to

²² S. 13, 148–58 [122–32].

²³ S. 15, 373–408. Originally published in K. Rahner and P. Imhof, *Ignatius von Loyola* (Freiburg: Herder, 1978) 9–38, with ET by Rosaleen Ockenden in *Ignatius of Loyola* (London/New York: Collins, 1979). On the ET: Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., in *TS* 40 (1979) 754–56.

²⁴ A recent article by Paul D. Molnar, “Can We Know God Directly? Rahner’s Solution from Experience,” *TS* 46 (1985) 228–61, has accused Rahner of a philosophical reductionism which denies the radical distinction between God and the world as taught by Scripture and tradition. However, despite laudable concerns to preserve God’s transcendent freedom and to distinguish clearly between philosophical and theological truth claims, the author nowhere establishes unambiguously that Rahner in fact maintains the “direct knowledge of God” against which he polemicalizes (without ever stating unequivocally what he himself means by such direct knowledge).

Still more important, (1) Molnar does not give a coherent account of Rahner’s analysis of human cognition. No operative distinction between thematic and unthematic knowledge is recognized, nor is there any explanation of the relation between the transcendental and categorical dimensions of knowledge. (2) Rahner’s theology of nature and grace is mistakenly interpreted as an assertion of what must absolutely be the case, rather than as an analysis of how nature may be understood as the freely created realm to which God still more freely chooses to communicate divine life. Ignoring any distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity, the author reads Rahner as holding, without qualification, that God *must* create, that the Word *must* become incarnate, and that the immanent Trinity *must* become an economic Trinity. But Rahner’s whole effort was to respond to the Christian confession of salvation in Christ by seeking some understanding of the dynamics of creation and redemption in the actual order. *If* God wishes to grace a world, *then* the structures of created reality necessarily enter into the execution of God’s plan. But nothing in Rahner’s theology or philosophy, least of all his theology of symbol, assumes that God must make such a plan *in order to be God*.

Numerous other inaccuracies of interpretation are to be found in the article cited: e.g., that the mystery of the triune God may be “defined” (233, n. 18); that the idea of “pure nature” has no practical significance (238); that a symbolizandum and its symbol are “identical” (258). It is yet another question whether the author seriously believes that Scripture and tradition support his own position that “we cannot provide reasons for faith” and indeed that reason and revelation can contradict each other (whether actually, possibly, or in principle is unclear to me from the text). Other critics have argued against what they considered reductionistic aspects of Rahner’s thought, but few seem so rigorously to have excluded philosophical reflection from the theological enterprise.

appear, but it functions less analytically and more concretely. God's gracious self-communication is presented as the most fundamental concept of Christianity;²⁵ it is the basic pattern of history rather than simply of individual experiences. What had been a thesis built on neo-scholastic foundations has here become a theological development of basic themes from Vatican II.

Rahner did not seek to relate his position on nature and grace to recent biblical discussions concerning the interrelation of creation and redemption, nor did he compare its implications with current approaches to divine causality and agency. He did, however, explicitly reject the dilemma of a God who acts either by singular interventions in time or by transcending it altogether. His essentially symbolic view of transcendental causality continued to employ the distinction between the efficient causality of creation and the quasi-formal causality of redemption. Since the two are moments in a unitary process, the world may be viewed as called into being by God in time so that it might be invited to communion with God for eternity. The position showed its flexibility and depth in essays that interpret human persons as words expressed by God,²⁶ that see the vastness of the universe immersing us in a radically new way in contingency,²⁷ or that understand the great world religions as concretizations of human ways to the center possessing both inherent relation to Christ and enduring validity in themselves.²⁸ Unless I am mistaken, some version of this theory of transcendental causality is ultimately presupposed by most current authors who argue for God's genuine immanence to world process as well as real transcendence of it.

To the end, Rahner's doctrine of God was resolutely monotheistic. To charges of modalism and neglect of the historical Jesus he responded indirectly by insisting that the Christian Trinitarian confession is a radicalization of monotheistic faith.²⁹ "Radicalization" does not mean partial correction, much less mere refinement of a previously established position. It means the discovery of new depths of possibility through unforeseen historical experience. For Rahner, faith in the self-bestowing God of radical communion and forgiveness occurs with certitude and is possible for all men and women only through encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, who is the historical appearance of the full promise of God to which the Spirit awakens every time and culture. Of Jesus alone, with the Spirit's guidance, can we say that he is the concretely absolute evidence of God's eternal love for the world. But because of Jesus we can

²⁵ Cf. S. 14, 56 [10].

²⁶ S. 13, 154-58 [127-31].

²⁷ S. 15, 55-58.

²⁸ Cf. S. 13, 341-50 [288-95]; S. 14, 389-90 [160-61].

²⁹ S. 13, 129-47 [105-21].

also say that such love addresses all human beings in the utter specificity of their lives. We may say that the God of Israel is revealed in a radically new way by the life and preaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Or we may say that the prophetic ministry and paschal mystery of Jesus unveil the mysteries of God's intentions hidden from eternity. But we cannot name one univocal center, a single midpoint, for Christian faith.³⁰ If there is any center to Rahner's theology, it is the dynamic mutuality of love between Jesus and God into which we are all invited and towards which the Spirit guides us. Neither time nor eternity alone can encompass this exchange of love but only an eternity which bears time within itself, in the form of fulfilment, as its enduring fruit.

While the basic pattern of Rahner's monotheistic starting point remained constant, his Christology shows perhaps the most marked variation in his later thought. A tension between so-called Christologies from above and from below is clearly evident in *Foundations*. Two years earlier, in fact, in a discussion with students at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, he had wondered whether his earlier speculative theology of the Incarnation as the self-expression of God was really congruent with his later reflections on the life of Jesus as embodying the human quest through history which encounters God's eternal guarantee of divine communion in grace. Rahner thought it possible that an ascending Christology "could, in a certain, careful sense, be shown ultimately to imply a Logos Christology." In his early writings, he said,

there was present an almost pantheistic . . . speculative enthusiasm for unity between the world and God, and in the second period the question at the beginning was rather: Can I believe, while looking at Jesus, the crucified and risen one, that I shall not fall into the absolute abyss of meaninglessness?³¹

In any case, several late essays recommended that Christology begin with the historical Jesus, while other passages emphasize the need for a more unified correlation between fundamental and dogmatic theology, Christology and soteriology, the understanding of Christ for us and in himself.

However, the distinction between theologies from above and from below can be quite misleading. The former, if they are to be more than mythological, indispensably require historical verification. The latter, if they are to avoid positivist relativism, must acknowledge their interpretative presuppositions. It thus seems more appropriate to speak of a radically historical Christology as our genuine need, and Rahner's change of perspective may be taken either as a diagnosis or as a promise—or

³⁰ *Karl Rahner im Gespräch* 2, 58. ET: L. J. O'Donovan, "Living into Mystery: Karl Rahner's Reflections at 75—An America Interview," *America* 140 (1979) 177–80, at 180.

³¹ *Karl Rahner im Gespräch* 1, 241.

both. For the really significant aspects of his later Christological essays lie not so much in their literal starting point as in the room they open for reflection (as was also the case for the early essays): reflection, for example, on the definitive character of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the interrelation of the moments of seeking and finding him, the radical solidarity he effects among us and with God.

The last Christological essays speak not only of God's presence in time through Christ; they tell of the trial of Jesus' trust on the cross and God's vindication of the preacher of the kingdom whom early Christians came to call God's eternal Son. With a strongly Pauline accent, Rahner's late Christology spoke powerfully of our following Christ most of all by dying with him.³² Here faith in the resurrection as God's definitive acceptance of the suffering Jesus provides a theology of glory only to the extent that it continually returns us, in actual practice, to the theology of the cross. If Rahner emphasizes a universal, searching Christology of hope for someone in whom God's care for the world would be irrevocably announced and available, he also confessed a Christology which fully found what it sought only at the cross of Calvary.³³ As Rahner himself approached death, he seemed to see the cross ever more clearly focusing the solidarity of Christ with men and women throughout history and with the God who in history offers life to them all. This theme of solidarity echoes resoundingly, especially in *Schriften* 15. It even seems to become a new way to describe the saving work of Christ, as Jesus *makes himself solidary*³⁴ with all humanity and with his God, showing categorically that they belong together.

In effect, these perspectives in Christology help to constitute a new view of the whole Christ in a unitary history which is yet to be fully realized. What Augustine had spoken of as the *totus Christus* Rahner reconceived as the Word of God promising to hold history together in its entirety. Perhaps it was the boldness of the conception which led him to insist he was guided by, and saying implicitly the same as, the definition of Chalcedon. (He repeatedly warned against the possible imbalance of neo-Chalcedonianism.³⁵) Perhaps the breadth of the view, as well as various more socially activist interpretations of Christology, led him to

³² S. 13, 188–203 [157–70].

³³ S. 13, 168–70 [140–42], 176–81 [146–51]. Throughout his life, but on the cross above all, Jesus opened his heart for all the suffering of humankind and thereby opened it wholly to the Father. For Rahner's continuing reflections on devotion to the heart of Christ, see S. 16, 305–20; for commentary, Annice Callahan, R.S.C.J., *Karl Rahner's Spirituality of the Pierced Heart: A Reinterpretation of Devotion to the Sacred Heart* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1985).

³⁴ S. 14, 82 [31]; the German expression is stronger than the ET indicates.

³⁵ Cf. S. 15, 210–11; *Was heisst Jesus lieben?* 40–45 [30–33].

insist frequently that our personal relationship to Jesus could be described in terms of the most intimate friendship.³⁶ In any case, in a world of almost indescribable pluralism and all but unlimited historical variation, he turned very specifically and personally to the man from Nazareth as the way to whole truth.

Accompanying this thoroughly historical Christology, as I would call it, was a quiet development of the author's pneumatology. The doctrine of grace, of course, already held a central place in his thought, but in the last volumes of the *Schriften* the identification of grace with the gift of the Spirit becomes even more pronounced. God given precisely as Holy Spirit deepens and heals our own spirits for life in the divine milieu; grace in its root meaning is the outpouring of Holy Spirit for the inner renewal and outward reorientation of every person, society, and time. As created gift, human life experiences a transcendental openness to the "ever-greater God" which can only be fully realized through historical activity. When the Giver's own life becomes gift to us, God's renewed covenant with humanity is experienced as (1) the radicalization of our transcendentality, opening it to its most profound possibility through the gift of the Spirit at the very center of our lives, and (2) the historical anchoring of those lives in history through the message and mystery of Jesus as the Christ.³⁷ In a forthright fashion that may require further analysis, Rahner here uses his fundamental conception of historical transcendence as a scheme for understanding how, through the twofold mediation of Word and Spirit, God communicates divine life in the economy of salvation. The Trinitarian expression is almost credally concise: "In this Trinity of the economy of salvation, God as unoriginated and permanently sovereign is called Father, as personally communicated to history Logos, and as personally communicated to human transcendentality Holy Spirit."³⁸

If pneumatology, Christology, and theology are inseparable, they are nevertheless also necessarily distinguishable, and Rahner came to speak of a "universal pneumatology" that might precede Christology in the full development of a historical theology.³⁹ The classical approach has, of course, discussed Christ before the Spirit, but from the perspective of a world-historical consciousness it is promising to consider the world's search for communion with God initiated through the Spirit and coming only gradually to acknowledge the historical ground of its hope in the

³⁶ S. 13, 184–87 [154–56]; *Was heisst Jesus lieben?* 25–28 [22–24]; S. 15, 224.

³⁷ Cf. S. 14, 100 [46–47].

³⁸ S. 13, 141 [115]. Cf. S. 13, 146 [120]; S. 14, 15–16 [7]; S. 15, 157; *Karl Rahner im Gespräch* 1, 280–81.

³⁹ S. 14, 56 [10]; S. 15, 102–3.

figure of Jesus (ultimately understood, as we have seen, as “the whole Christ of history”). If such a desire stirs everywhere in time, then it is legitimate to speak of a universal pneumatology, and new prospects open up for dialogue with the great world religions. Here the analogy used to reach some understanding of the triune God is not merely a psychological or social one, in the usual sense of an analogy based on individual cognitive processes or interpersonal community. I would call it rather an analogy of historical communication and note that it can be considered a Western, more historical version of the East’s typical approach to the Trinity, which considers it not so much one topic among others but rather the form and outline of theology altogether.

Reflection on the center of Rahner’s theology naturally raises questions about his method in the late writings, but let me postpone that topic for a while and turn instead to his extensive writing on the Church.

A SACRAMENT FOR ALL

Church and sacraments constituted a second major focus for Rahner’s last writings. His major texts on the subjects appeared in *Schriften* 14: *In Sorge um die Kirche* (1980), which Crossroad published as two volumes in Edward Quinn’s final effort⁴⁰ of Rahner translation: *Theological Investigations* 20: *Concern for the Church* (1981), and *Theological Investigations* 19: *Faith and Ministry* (1983). (The latter also includes two Mariological essays from *Schriften* 13.) Considerable attention has been paid to the first English volume, but the two belong together, and, in particular, five essays on priesthood (from 1976–77) in the second volume should be read as a complement to the essays on church life and its future. Related writings worthy of special attention include the two ecclesiological chapters in *Our Christian Faith* (1979); *Einigung der Kirchen—reale Möglichkeit* (1983); and several essays in *Schriften* 16 (1984). While drawing on all these texts, I shall concentrate especially on the full German version of *Concern for the Church*.

One notable development occurs in Rahner’s essay on the origin of the Church from the death and resurrection of Jesus. The new position represents a considerable advance over *Foundations* in terms of scriptural, sociological, and ecumenical perspectives. School theology’s traditional approach to the founding of the Church left the fundamental theology of the Church as a juridically constituted society relatively unrelated to a properly soteriological, dogmatic ecclesiology. Rahner suggests *Herkunft* (provenance or derivation) from the paschal mystery as a conception that can interpret (and not simply replace) previous

⁴⁰ Cf. E. Quinn, “Farewell to Rahner,” *Downside Review* 101 (1983) 177–81.

usage.⁴¹ Neither Jesus' apparent expectation of an imminent arrival of the kingdom nor the earliest Christian communities as we know them from the New Testament make it plausible that Jesus established major social structures for the duration of history. And yet his redemptive death and resurrection would not be fully realized without the awakening of a socially embodied faith in the world's reconciliation to God. In other words, "the church as the eschatologically final and yet historical, one community of faith is the abiding presence precisely of God's eschatological and eschatologically victorious self-promise to the world in Jesus Christ."⁴² Conceiving the origin of the Church in this way, one may then see subsequent development of basic church structures as falling within the community's God-given power to determine itself in a binding and normative manner which is, by implication, *juris divini*.⁴³ As Rahner states briefly in this essay and repeatedly elsewhere, the future of the Church is a truly open one; much that marks the institution now may appear quite differently in the year 2000 or 2500.

Wherever the Church exists, for Rahner it is the fundamental sacrament of the world's salvation.⁴⁴ Continuing to center his ecclesiology on this theme from Vatican II, he turns it over in his mind on various occasions to let its richness emerge. As sacrament of the salvation of the world (not merely *in* the world), the Church is "the primordial baptism"⁴⁵ of the world as a whole. Even though it is becoming smaller in proportion to the world's entire population, it will continue to promise God's grace, to mediate its offer, and attest its victory.⁴⁶ As before, this conception clearly entails an intimate connection between grace, church, and sacraments. Rejecting what he considered Augustine's pessimism, Rahner insisted increasingly on Christianity's justified hope for universal redemption.⁴⁷ If God's presence is everywhere interior to the world ("nature

⁴¹ There are frequent references to the idea in S. 13–15, but the key essay is "Heilsgeschichtliche Herkunft der Kirche von Tod und Auferstehung Jesu," S. 14, 73–90 [24–38]; an ET of this essay had earlier appeared in K. Rahner and Wilhelm Thüsing, *A New Christology*, tr. David Smith and Verdant Green (New York: Seabury, 1980) 18–31. For discussion see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 91–98.

⁴² S. 14, 82 [32, revised]; = *A New Christology* 26.

⁴³ To my knowledge, Rahner nowhere responds to American discussion on *jus divinum*. Cf. Carl J. Peter, "Dimensions of *Jus divinum* in Roman Catholic Theology," *TS* 24 (1973) 227–50, and Avery Dulles, "*Jus divinum* As an Ecumenical Problem," in *A Church To Believe in: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 80–102.

⁴⁴ Cf. L. J. O'Donovan, ed., "A Changing Ecclesiology in a Changing Church: A Symposium on Development in the Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner," *TS* 38 (1977) 736–62.

⁴⁵ S. 14, 83 [32].

⁴⁶ S. 14, 320 [104].

⁴⁷ Cf. M. Carmel McEnroy, *A Rahnerian Contribution toward an Orthodox Theology of Apocatastasis* (unpublished doctoral dissertation at Toronto School of Theology, 1984).

is because grace should be"⁴⁸), then the history of the world is God's own history and what the Church celebrates in its liturgy is "the symbolic presentation of the liturgy of the world."⁴⁹ With regard to all sacramental activity, "we should think not so much that God is 'breaking into' a profane world at particular points but rather that the most interior and always present grace of a world endowed with God's own self is 'breaking out' into history."⁵⁰ It is not so much that now and then God intervenes, sacramentally or otherwise, to change the course of things; rather, we live, in grace, by anticipating God's revelation and gift of self in the one long conversation that is meant to draw all the world home.

Here again the Spirit leads, but never past the cross. Instinct with a call towards its creator, creation is invited still more interiorly to recognize the redemption of its time, to follow the prompting of God's own Spirit enabling it to reach out to the holy mystery which is always reaching towards us. As we seek to identify more clearly this dynamic of salvation, we seek in fact an intelligible life in which it may be truly represented, a Word given us to be believed in forever (if we have found Christ) or to be sought for just as long (if he waits for us still). At the suggestion of the Spirit, we turn towards God by accompanying human life as the body of Christ.

But towards the end of his life Rahner saw this project more and more as a matter of faithful following, not as a plan for steady progress. What he said by implication of himself, and directly of Thérèse of Lisieux, he said in effect for us all. In maturity we may hope to regard ourselves not as become more perfect but rather as having been guided by the providence of God through the adventure of a whole life we could never have calculated in advance.⁵¹ For the Church, too, the way of discipleship does not necessarily assure a more perfect community; it does promise that our accomplishments in common and our surrender in dying may be understood as given into the hands of the God of life who raised Jesus from the dead and, with him, raised the first community of true faith from a scattered band of hopeless men and women.

Among Rahner's late ecclesiological themes, his notion of the world Church may have been the most striking and influential. In several lectures during the late 70s, among them a frequently remarked 1979 address at Weston School of Theology, he proposed that the most fundamental significance of Vatican II lay in its being at least in an initial way the first historical manifestation of a genuinely world Church

⁴⁸ S. 14, 229 [143, ET misleading].

⁴⁹ S. 14, 232-33 [146].

⁵⁰ S. 14, 230 [143, revised]; cf. S. 14, 43 [29], 117-19 [61-62].

⁵¹ S. 14, 202 [134].

acting through the mutual influence of its various parts.⁵² Previously the Church had been characteristically Western both in its style at home and in its missionary effort. But in an epoch-making way the Council intimated a basically new experience of church. Its bishops came for the first time from their own countries in every part of the world. The Constitution on the Liturgy enabled the vernacular to replace Latin liturgically. The doctrinal decrees show an effort to speak in a more generally understandable, less rigidly neo-scholastic language. *Gaudium et spes* acknowledges the entire Church's responsibility for the coming future of humanity. A much more positive evaluation was made of other world religions, and repeated references to the universal salvific will of God laid foundations for genuine dialogue with them.

Rahner even compared this event to the transition from a purely Jewish Christianity to one that included the mission to the Gentiles. We are moving, he insisted, from a time of the Church centered culturally in Europe and North America to a period in which its life unfolds in the world as a whole. This will require as profound a reassessment as accompanied the early Church's realization that the gospel was meant not only for Israel but for all peoples. While most consequences of the development may be as yet unforeseen, Rahner thought it had major implications for the manner and conceptuality of evangelization, for variation in liturgical forms, and for real pluralism in church law and practice. One may ask whether "world Church" is the best term for what he intuited. He himself recognized the great question posed by China, with a quarter of the world's population relatively impervious to Christianity—not to mention the general systematic problem of translating a religious heritage from one cultural context into another. But the issue itself and the force with which he put it seem among his most significant ecclesiological contributions.⁵³

Office in the Church was another major concern of his late ecclesiology. Emphasizing again the thesis that church office is essentially one, although susceptible of considerable historical variation,⁵⁴ he devoted special attention in these last years to the papacy and to priesthood. Participation of the laity in church life and church decisions; episcopacy, diaconate, and the emerging role of pastoral assistants (in Germany and

⁵² See S. 14, 287–302 [77–89], 303–18 [90–102], 319–32 [103–14], 333–54 [115–32]; also S. 16, 143–59. The Weston lecture, published in *TS* 40 (1979) 716–27, was an earlier version of S. 14, 287–302.

⁵³ For the influence of the theme, see Hubert Jedin and Konrad Reppen, eds., *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte 7: Die Weltkirche im 20. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979); Walbert Bühlmann, *Weltkirche* (Graz: Styria, 1984); and the *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, Vol. 39 (1984).

⁵⁴ Cf. S. 14, 127 [69], 136 [76–77], 191 [125].

elsewhere); the relation between traditional parishes and new grass-root communities; the relation of religious orders to the ecclesiastical hierarchy—all these attracted his searching questions. But, typically, it was the actuality of these two topics, priesthood and papacy, that particularly concerned him.

The papacy, he argued to the end, has enduring significance for the Church of Christ. At the end of the "Pian Epoch"⁵⁵ we may have become aware of how many questions about papal office are still open. We recognize the inappropriateness of a papacy exercised in the style of a Patriarch of the West seeking to extend the Church of the West over the whole world. But for Rahner the properly dogmatic understanding of the Petrine office will continue to affirm, with Vatican I and Vatican II, a primacy for the bishop of Rome which is both jurisdictional and doctrinal. The Pope's jurisdictional primacy is already subject to definite limits, however, and for the goal of a renewed and reunited Church, it could further limit itself—as it regularly does, for example, in concordats. Obviously limited by the general principles of Christian morality and also by its relation to a divinely instituted episcopacy (whose members cannot be understood simply as representatives of the pope), the papacy might well agree juridically that regional churches should determine themselves much more significantly in the choice of bishops, the shaping of liturgy, sacramental practice, and marriage law.⁵⁶

Similarly, with regard to papal primacy in teaching, the bishop of Rome might well propose clear and binding norms for inquiring among the whole world's churches how they understand a question of doctrine on which Rome is considering a statement. In his famous "Dream of the Church," Rahner (who confessed that he himself seldom dreamed) imagined a pope in 1985 making such a proposal to an ecumenical gathering of high church officials—for the sake of activating the ecumenical movement after ten years of stagnation. When we think of Roman teaching in the future, this unnamed pope insists, we should expect not so much further propositional refinements of the material content of Christian faith but rather new expressions of its fundamental substance in a way that truly addresses the spiritual situation of the world.⁵⁷ Realistic about his suggestions for such a development in the teaching and pastoral aspects of the papal office, Rahner ended: "But we may dream and hope."

Various practical issues in church life, in Germany and internationally, led Rahner also to address again the meaning of priesthood. His basic conception is clear, and a clear development on earlier essays: the priest

⁵⁵ S. 14, 302 [89, ET inexact], 334 [116].

⁵⁷ S. 14, 362–63 [104–5].

⁵⁶ S. 14, 340–41 [121].

is above all called *to be a pastor*, the leader of the Church in a particular place who serves it "in all the dimensions of its life, including the Eucharist as the culmination of the sacramental word in the Church."⁵⁸ Analogous to the role of a bishop, priesthood includes official representation of the larger episcopal Church and the Church as a whole. But this does not mean that the essence of priesthood should be conceived with the Eucharist (or the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation) *as a starting point*, or that priestly office can soundly be distinguished from other ministries in the Church primarily by reason of its exclusive full power with regard to Eucharist and reconciliation. Such reasoning reduces the priest in effect to a cultic functionary.⁵⁹ Presiding at the Eucharist is rather a partial function or articulation of the priest's fundamental pastoral role.⁶⁰ With ordination a priest is officially empowered to lead a community which most visibly and radically identifies itself in the Eucharist. The conferral of office, furthermore, should be considered itself a sacramental act *by reason of* the authority it establishes and the grace it promises for the exercise of that authority; it is not a sacramental consecration *over and above* the transmission of the powers involved.⁶¹ And "it acquires its ultimate truth and urgency in any case from that consecration [of all human life] which exists through [God's universally proffered] grace."⁶² Finally, should the Church continue to restrict the sacrament of ordination to celibate men, excluding from priestly ministry married men in the West and all women everywhere? These seemed to Rahner, at the very least, open questions which recent Roman official declarations have not definitively settled.⁶³

Ecumenism was a final major dimension of Rahner's late ecclesiology. Coupled with a growing concern for encounter with the great world religions, it was threaded in fact through all his thought. But he also addressed the matter in directly ecclesiological texts. None has attracted more attention than *Einigung der Kirchen—reale Möglichkeit*, coauthored with Heinrich Fries. Introduced as "a cry of distress," the book recalls that the unity of the Church is commanded by the Lord and is also an urgent question for basic human existence in a world where living faith is threatened on every side. Pessimistic about the leadership currently exercised in ecumenism, Rahner and Fries nevertheless write optimistically about the real possibility of unification. Causes of separation in the past concern them much less than prospects for a courageous coming together in the future. In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Eberhard

⁵⁸ S. 14, 195 [128].

⁵⁹ Cf. S. 14, 137 [78], 139 [79–80].

⁶⁰ S. 14, 140–41 [81].

⁶¹ Cf. S. 14, 128–29 [70].

⁶² S. 14, 125 [68].

⁶³ Cf. S. 14, 208–23 [35–47].

Jüngel began a lengthy review by asserting that all celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth would have missed the mark if the challenge of this book were overlooked.⁶⁴

Eight theses are presented (originally written independently by Rahner) and then provided with commentary by one of the two authors. Thesis 1 presents Scripture most fundamentally and then the Apostles' and Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds as the original normative witnesses to the faith of the Christian community. To this statement on the fundamental truths of faith thesis 2 adds a principle of practical agreement on faith: no particular church will formally reject a position held as binding doctrine by another church, but no church is bound expressly to confess any doctrine of another church which goes beyond the content of Scripture and the Nicene Creed (according to thesis 1). Rahner's commentary here emphasizes the necessity of epistemological tolerance in our contemporary situation and also develops the distinction between erring formally in matters of faith and simply reserving assent. Theses 3-5 maintain respectively: "particular churches" may in a united Church largely maintain their previous structure and discipline; the pope exercises a Petrine ministry and should in the future use his teaching authority in a clearly regulated manner conformable to a general council of the entire Church; all particular churches will have bishops at their head, though not necessarily chosen according to current Roman Catholic practice. Rahner's commentary on thesis 3 emphasizes the legitimate pluralism of particular churches according to standard Catholic ecclesiology. Regarding thesis 4b on papal *ex cathedra* statements, he argues that it is desirable to codify juridically what has actually been practised in the past through consultation of the world episcopate. Thesis 6 deals with "a reconciled diversity" in the churches as promising mutual enrichment. Thesis 7 treats the reciprocal recognition of church office. Thesis 8 proposes conditions for community at pulpit and altar. Commenting on the thorny question of ordination, Rahner tries to cut the Gordian knot by suggesting, among other things, that if in every church a validly ordained bishop were to co-operate at future ordinations to office through prayer and laying on of hands, then Roman Catholics need not have any difficulty with the question of validity.

This last point, as Jüngel has pointed out, exemplifies a peculiarly Catholic issue that could be estranging for other Christians. And yet, if we agreed to concentrate on actual concord in faith while entrusting further consensus to the future, we might well have the basis for much

⁶⁴ "Ein Schritt voran: Einigung der Kirchen als reale Möglichkeit," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* no. 226, Oct. 1-2, 1983, 126.

greater union than is presently realized. Rahner and Fries's book is also more sensitive to Orthodoxy and to the churches of the Reformation than to other Christian churches. Much of what their commentary proposes may already be found in their general ecclesiological essays. While the volume frequently contrasts the utopian vision of fully realized union with what might practically be accomplished now, its own suggestions may seem to some readers to be overly hopeful or even impractically contrived. But the authors' care for the basic issue itself, their appeal to moderate (neither minimalizing nor maximalizing) interpretations of dogma and church history, and their courage in reimagining terms for union, recommend their book as an indispensable text for the ecumenical future.

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

Through the two previous sections, in effect, I have been arguing that Rahner's later thought sought an increasingly temporal and historical conception of God and the people of God. From the start, Rahner had seen the human spirit as existing only in a historical world and seeking God's Word precisely through the course of its history. In agreement with Aquinas, he had argued that we understand only by *conversio ad phantasma*, by grounding responsible intelligence in the imaginative expression of historical experience. Apologetically, he had wanted to show how revelation can emerge in the world, its history, ourselves; systematically, he had reconceived human history as the addressee of the absolutely free God's loving revelation and gift of self. In his last years we read a further phase of Rahner's journey into history. Nature and humanity are conceived as dialectically united in a single world-historical process; the Incarnation is firmly related to hope for universal redemption; and the paschal mystery of Christ becomes the central dynamic in enacting the full material meaning of time. These were, if you will, Rahner's final efforts at temporalizing the imagination, proposing a *conversio ad phantasma per tempus*. To a rising tide of relativism and scepticism he offered the gospel of a traditional faith newly conceived: the cross discovered throughout the course of history reveals and promises the incomprehensible God's power to gather all of time into the communion of eternal life.

From this perspective Rahner's anthropological focus on freedom acquires new historical and social dimension. Freedom is not only the graced capacity to become finally oneself before God; it is, more comprehensively, the shared human capacity to forge a common future. "For the present is always the fulfilment of a task, risking the future, carrying out the testament of the past exactly through what is new and not already

in an evolutionary way hidden in the old."⁶⁵ Rahner conceived this task most fundamentally as a dialogue or conversation, the "unrepeatable history of the freedom of God and of humanity in an unrepeatable dialogue."⁶⁶ The dialogue is conclusive inasmuch as it has entered a stage in which the assurance of grace is irreversible.⁶⁷ But it is decidedly inconclusive inasmuch as we cannot know, apart from Jesus, Mary, and the most obvious saints, who wins the victory of life, where, or when. Indeed, whereas historians today refuse to speak of history as a unity, Christian faith asserts a unity for its origin, course, and goal.⁶⁸ But in his later years Rahner realized more sharply: such a unity may indeed have been initiated, but it is still much more invoked than realized.⁶⁹ It is the unity of a human creative possibility prepared and projected but still decidedly at issue for the multiple subjects of freedom. Today it may be possible to sketch a more adequate theological periodization for the course of history, as Rahner sought to do in his reflections on the world Church. It may be true that all theological statements about the world's origin dialectically include an understanding of its ultimate destiny, and vice versa.⁷⁰ But the material outcome of the world's history remains radically shrouded for us in the mystery of our own human freedom as well as in God's.

Rahner's critical traditionalism insisted on an unforeseeable future as the final cause for human activity. Whatever faith or reason may tell us about the future, however important history or futurology may be for preparing it, the future must be recognized as radically open. Every attempt to predetermine it should be unmasked as ideology, whether philosophical, political, or ecclesiastical. Only an open future assures a genuinely historical world, just as, for Rahner, only the eternal God can provide an absolute future for time. If God alone is indeed the absolute future, then all our forms and formulas are at once relativized and radicalized, revealed as thoroughly conditioned by history even when they most profoundly point beyond it to eternity.⁷¹ From this perspective

⁶⁵ S. 15, 183; cf. S. 16, 77-79.

⁶⁶ S. 15, 191; cf. S. 14, 389 [160].

⁶⁷ Cf. S. 15, 222 and passim.

⁶⁸ This theme occurs frequently in Rahner, especially in his earlier essays on Christianity and the evolutionary perspective; cf. L. J. O'Donovan, "Der Dialog mit dem Darwinismus: Über Karl Rahners Einschätzung der evolutiven Weltsicht," in *Wagnis Theologie* 215-29.

⁶⁹ As is frequently the case, the published ET fails to render the stylistic finesse of Rahner's distinction between *vorgegebene Einheit* and *aufgegebene Einheit*; cf. S. 14, 383 [155].

⁷⁰ S. 14, 103-5 [49-51]. Technically, protology implies eschatology; this fundamental assertion of Rahner's thought from the earliest period should be borne in mind in any consideration of the adequacy of his eschatological perspective.

⁷¹ Cf. S. 14, 280-81 [71-72], 419-21 [184-86]; S. 16, 46-52.

the identity of the Christian Church through time, the continuity of its faith amid vast cultural changes, its enduring promise to startlingly new civilizations, all these raise questions which Catholic theological hermeneutics has only begun to address.

Rahner's last writings do not directly respond to the frequent criticism that he supposedly neglected sin and suffering. But nothing is more fundamental to his view of history and society in the last years than a sense for its dark sorrows and inescapable failures. "The cross remains erected over history. Even within the world, in fact, ascents are always paid for by falls."⁷² For all his enduring concern to relate Christianity and evolutionary thought, he clearly rejected every scheme of inevitable or even steady progress. (Indeed, his last major essay on the evolutionary world view is notably more radical in its admission of the frustrations and failures in nature and history.⁷³) "The theology of history," he wrote in 1982, "may not be finally seen under the schema of an ascending development. Rather, history always offers new but in the last resort equally valuable ways to realize what it means to be human and to be related to God."⁷⁴ Cultures die as much as individuals do, and their disappearance signifies their inner contradictions as well as their genuine hope for transcending mortality.⁷⁵ If this view qualifies better as "paschal" than as classically "tragic," it allows room for both tragic and comic dimensions in the phenomenon of death, which, for Rahner, had always summarized best what we know and do not know, do and cannot do, about sin and suffering.⁷⁶ Even here his searching mind discovered new questions, as he wondered towards the end of his life whether Christian eschatology really implies a literal end of physical time.⁷⁷

⁷² S. 15, 20.

⁷³ S. 15, 55-59.

⁷⁴ S. 15, 19-20. Cf. S. 14, 202 [133-34].

⁷⁵ Cf. S. 16, 85.

⁷⁶ On sin, suffering, and death, the major late texts are: "Das christliche Sterben," S. 13, 269-304 [226-56]; S. 14, 60 (on the *Grundkurs*) [13]; "Kleine theologische Bemerkungen zu dem 'Status Naturae Lapsae,'" S. 13, 91-109 [39-53]; "Warum lässt Gott uns leiden?" S. 14, 450-66 [194-208]; "Versöhnung und Stellvertretung," S. 15, 251-64; and, with Albert Görres, *Das Böse: Wege zu seiner Bewältigung in Psychotherapie und Christentum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982) 201-29. The most substantial recent critique of Rahner's views on suffering and death is presented by Gerd Neuhaus, *Transzendente Erfahrung als Geschichtsverlust? Der Vorwurf der Subjektivität an Rahners Begriff geschichtlicher Existenz und eine weiterführende Perspektive transzendentaler Theologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1982). Neuhaus argues that Rahner does not do justice to the suffering of the innocent, nor to the negativity of death in general; the result would be the lack of a real theology of the cross and an inability to promote genuine responsibility for the world. Neuhaus himself draws on Walter Benjamin's analysis of mourning to present what he considers a more adequate transcendental starting point.

⁷⁷ See S. 15, 13, 17, 39. A good many other texts, however, seem to assume the traditional position; e.g., S. 14, 249 [52], 330 [112]; S. 16, 126, 265.

Despite the unpredictability of the future and the mortality of all human achievement, Rahner insisted that Christians have not less but all the more reason to prepare a strategy for promoting a new faith consciousness, to develop more creative relations between particular churches and the Church as a whole, to leave behind the consumer mentality of a bourgeois church and turn to renewed responsibility for the world in which Christianity will likely be present in an increasingly diaspora situation.⁷⁸ This perspective on world-wide planning is new, at least in its explicitness,⁷⁹ and it was accompanied by new interest in social process. Not that he engaged in any serious study of sociology. But his developing historical sense of society did lead him to reflect more seriously on some of its key dynamics.

Recognizing how restrictive it is to conceive the meaning of history from a merely individualistic perspective,⁸⁰ Rahner continued to propose his familiar thesis on the emerging unity of human society. As we have seen, he nuanced this view significantly by arguing that Christ plays an exemplary or symbolic role in the quest for human solidarity. But he also deepened his basic view in several ways. Reminiscent of Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he spoke more and more insistently of "the interdependence of all human beings on all others."⁸¹ A 1983 essay on the future of Europe offers a pointed new formulation on the dialectic of individuality and sociality, "two fundamental determinations of humanity, whose unity and difference are equally primordial and which in this difference in unity and unity in difference refer finally to the mystery of the one God, in whose transcendent unity the possibility of unity in diversity is grounded."⁸² To this fundamental truth the Church must provide living witness, for in it, too, the individual exists personally only through being "an individual in a society."⁸³ In fact, the deepest experience of faith today, Rahner suggested several times, will be acquainted equally with solitude and with solidarity.⁸⁴

Friction naturally accompanies this abiding tension between independence and interdependence. An essay of 1982 conceives authority

⁷⁸ Cf. "Perspektiven der Pastoral in der Zukunft," S. 16, 143-59.

⁷⁹ For an earlier introduction of the point, see *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* 2/2, 19-24.

⁸⁰ Cf. S. 15, 21-22.

⁸¹ *Wer ist dein Bruder?* 27 [77]. A few years later, Rahner wrote similarly: "I never stand alone before God, even though I am the absolutely individual one before God and God's grace, but I always belong to others, and everyone is significant for everyone else" (*Entschluss* 37, nos. 7/8 [1982] 8).

⁸² S. 16, 68-69.

⁸³ S. 15, 124.

⁸⁴ See S. 14, 160-65 [98-102], 374-79 [148-52].

analogously as "the morally legitimated qualification of a person to regulate and determine binding social relations between members of a society"⁸⁵ among whom such friction exists. Rahner developed his position by arguing that authority basically arises in a society through the selection of those who will exercise it for the good of society as a whole. This does not automatically imply that the bearers of formal authority have the greatest value in a given society. "Judged according to the essential meaning of a society, the highest place in this sense (if in fact one wishes to arrange a society according to above and below) is occupied by those whose activity contributes most to realizing this essential meaning."⁸⁶ In the Church, for example, these are not necessarily the officeholders but rather the saints. Not the privilege of position but the promotion of freedom provides the final criterion for social value, and in this respect, as in the balancing of freedom and authority in general, the Church is called to provide secular society with a viable example.⁸⁷ Against a priori or sacralizing accounts of authority, Rahner's conception favors a more historically processive view.

In its responsibility for preserving and developing the sense of historical identity among members of a society, social authority must promote both freedom of opinion *and* "a basic stock of common convictions."⁸⁸ But in the spiritual crisis of our present time, each side of this equation faces serious threats. In response, Rahner certainly did not offer any theory of the state or of culture. But he insisted that political decisions should be understood as more than merely "the results of a synthesis between always and everywhere valid (and finally moral) principles ('human rights' etc.) and the particular pressures of circumstance which can be ascertained scientifically and by public-opinion research."⁸⁹ Political decisions are that, but also more: the creative exercise of "a collective (*shared*) freedom."⁹⁰ For the legitimation of authority and the proper functioning of a democratic consensus, there must be participation in decision-making, and the conditions for genuine freedom of decision must be secured in advance. Both church and society should resist the tendency to reduce concern for public consensus to the level of material conditions and needs.⁹¹

The later volumes of the *Schriften* repeatedly raise the question of Europe's role in an emerging world civilization. As "the old world"

⁸⁵ S. 15, 334.

⁸⁶ S. 15, 339.

⁸⁷ Cf. S. 14, 403-4 [171-72].

⁹¹ Cf. S. 16, 98. Society materializes the common good by identifying it with prosperity; the Church materializes grace by identifying it with the supply of sacraments.

⁸⁸ S. 14, 257 [58].

⁸⁹ S. 16, 82.

⁹⁰ S. 16, 82-83.

surrenders its Eurocentric conception of history, it should nevertheless remain faithful, he thought, to the actual contribution it has made to a self-consciously unified humanity and to the spread of the gospel throughout the world.⁹² European theology, whether centered in Rome or not, should also continue to exercise significant critical, mediating, and integrating functions—perhaps even more so, oddly enough, in a time when inculturation of faith challenges Christianity as never before.⁹³

If “movement into the future is always also a movement into its incalculable mystery,” “then this dark situation also demands of the acting person certain virtues without which such movement cannot be accomplished worthily and practically.”⁹⁴ Rahner’s last years offer a veritable anthology of these virtues, on topics ranging from concupiscence to courage. Freedom, as we have seen, remains pivotal in his thought. Discussion of the theological virtues reveals its religious depth, and hope acquires perhaps even more centrality than before.⁹⁵ Dimensions and issues of justice receive much less attention, though there are passionate appeals for justice and some moving examples of the just person. Several essays discuss moral reasoning and the dignity of conscience.⁹⁶ But the most precious pages of all deal with parts of the heart such as Christian maturity,⁹⁷ anxiety and trust,⁹⁸ “blessed resignation,”⁹⁹ the “unnamed virtue” one needs today to sustain the tension between theory and practice.¹⁰⁰ Resolute in his optimism for the world’s salvation and ready to speak of “faith as courage,”¹⁰¹ Rahner can still write a probing piece on “Christian pessimism” and portray the radical perplexity of a life of faith.¹⁰² A slightly earlier essay, originally delivered on the occasion of receiving the Leopold Lucas Prize in Tübingen, reflects in a similar vein on the special need in contemporary life for intellectual patience with oneself.¹⁰³ Then again, though he insists that ministers in the Church should be theologically reflective, he also evokes for them the joy of openly professing the faith.¹⁰⁴ On directly social questions he emphasizes

⁹² Cf. S. 16, 66–75.

⁹³ S. 15, 98–101.

⁹⁴ S. 16, 79.

⁹⁵ Cf. S. 13, 310 [262].

⁹⁶ S. 13, 93–107 [74–85]; S. 16, 11–25.

⁹⁷ S. 15, 119–32.

⁹⁸ S. 15, 267–79.

⁹⁹ “Selige Resignation,” in F. Boll, M. Linz, and T. Seiterich, eds., *Wird es denn überhaupt gehen? Beiträge für Walter Dirks* (Munich/Mainz: Kaiser/Grünewald, 1980) 252–54.

¹⁰⁰ S. 15, 298–302.

¹⁰¹ S. 13, 252–68 [211–25].

¹⁰² S. 16, 206–14.

¹⁰³ S. 15, 303–14.

¹⁰⁴ *Wer ist dein Bruder?* 63–68 [95–98]. Cf. S. 14, 318 [102].

the centrality of dialogue and tolerance¹⁰⁵ and recalls the necessity of compromise in all efforts for peace.¹⁰⁶ Or, speaking quite directly for himself, he considers what the experience of old age can contribute to bridging the differences between generations.¹⁰⁷

In his last years Rahner the moralist grew ever more convinced that "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or not a Christian."¹⁰⁸ He seemed to see new depths to the interpenetration of contemplation and action¹⁰⁹ and wrote often of the gracious power of genuine indifference (*Gelassenheit*), that engaged patience which looks to God alone finally to solve the ineradicable dialectic between personal commitment and critical distance, social responsibility and eschatological hope.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the late Rahner offers some of his most powerful pages on how God can only *let us* be truly ourselves if we are willing to *let God* be truly God. "The other, whom we love, is indeed the sacrament in whom we receive God."¹¹¹ But in the final analysis it is not God who exists for us, but we who exist for God. Love of God for God's own sake is woven through all Rahner's final appeals for a more human world.¹¹² His unsparing concern for the neighbor always knew how to spare time still for prayer and adoration. And thus the hidden liturgical center of his thought remained discreetly present, or perhaps even more vibrant, through the last years of his life.

¹⁰⁵ S. 16, 26–41.

¹⁰⁶ S. 16, 57–62.

¹⁰⁷ S. 15, 315–25.

¹⁰⁸ The phrase seems to have been one of its author's favorites. For an excellent, synthetic commentary, see Harvey Egan, S.J. "Rahner's Mystical Theology," in *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner, S.J.*, ed. William J. Kelly, S.J. (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ., 1980) 139–58.

¹⁰⁹ In "Über das kontemplative Leben," in *Karmel in Deutschland: Teresa von Avila—400. Todestag*, ed. Ulrich Dobhan, O.C.D. (Munich: Kaffke, 1981) 11–16, Rahner comments: "The 'contemplative' (life) should penetrate the active (life) ever more in a guiding way, and the humble yielding to activity which can never be fully regulated by contemplation should slowly become an 'exercise' of that contemplation which yet again loses itself. And in the individual life the never-entirely-calculable but rather 'disposed' unity of both elements is a part of that silent, matter-of-course life's obedience through which human beings seek not themselves to possess the obedience of their lives but to allow it to be hidden in God."

¹¹⁰ Although not indexed, *Gelassenheit* as a contemporary form of Ignatian *indiferencia* is a frequent and pivotal theme in S. 13–16.

¹¹¹ S. 14, 280 [71].

¹¹² Cf., above all, "Die unverbrauchbare Transzendenz Gottes and unsere Sorge um die Zukunft," S. 14, 405–21 [173–86]. Note that "inexhaustible" in the title of the ET does not wholly render Rahner's theme that we cannot in the final analysis *use* God's transcendence for our purposes.

*Conclusion:**The Concrete Dialectic of Historical Transcendence*

Rahner's essays on the virtues reveal again his lifelong concern to reintegrate Christian spirituality, moral thought, and doctrine. As much by style as by argument he shows how fundamental dispositions live through the choices that continually face us in a world that we are called to reimagine as God narrates it in Christ. He sought to root a concrete sense for life and the ethical imperative to protect and foster life in a graced return to the vision of the world granted us in Christ. His central philosophical insight continued to be the personal relatedness of all reality, his central theological insight the self-gift of God to a world history whose very existence is also gift. These integrating perspectives ground the relativity of our ethical judgments and spiritual practice in two absolutes: first, the epistemological absolute of imaginative experience to which we must continually turn if we are to understand and act responsibly; second, the religious absolute of a God transcending time who calls us towards eternity. Rahner's last works, if not in a decisively new way, then at least with growing insistence, emphasize the *conversio ad phantasma per tempus* and the even more profound *conversio cordis ad Deum* which all philosophical and theological reflection is meant to serve.

If this interpretation is correct in its general lines, then clearly it is inadequate to characterize Rahner simply as a transcendental theologian. His essays on ethical questions as well as his general reflections on history and society obviously have a transcendental interpretative component. But as with his writings on God and the Church, existential structure is always essentially related to historical embodiment.¹¹³ Whether discussing the prospects for peaceful coexistence in a culturally pluralistic world, the call of a world Church to ecumenical unity, or the promises of God for all time, Rahner's concern is not merely the abiding, essential truth but rather truth discovered in a historical world of grace. Most clearly of all in his Christology, but undeniably also in ecclesiology and practical theology, he sought to communicate not merely the timelessly true but rather the historically more comprehensive truth of *concrete universality*, the truth of ongoing human converse in time that opens out to—and from—converse with eternity.

¹¹³ As Anne E. Carr exactly puts it, in Dean G. Peerman and Martin E. Marty, eds., *A Handbook of Christian Theologians: Enlarged Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), "(T)ranscendence, for Rahner, is always transcendence in history, or history as transcendent. This dual structure implies a dual method: an examination of *both* the essential human structures implied in Christian revelation *and* examination of the historical, concrete data of Christian revelation itself. Essence *and* existence, transcendence *and* history are simultaneous, concomitant realities; one is not had without the other" (524).

How, then, might one hazard a summation of the method profiled with new clarity in these last years? I have suggested elsewhere that Rahner pursues a concrete dialectic of historical transcendence.¹¹⁴ In these last writings, in fact, references to dialectic multiply remarkably. Often dialectic indicates Rahner's method of developing a position located midway between two contrary extremes. Frequently it was the way he spoke of unity in difference, whether epistemologically or ontologically.¹¹⁵ Still more often dialectic refers to the fruitful tension between permanent polarities of historical existence in its various forms (e.g., psychologically: between freedom and necessity; socially: between the individual and society; religiously: between law and righteousness; ecclesiastically: between theology and teaching authority). Most basically of all, however, dialectic is his way to conceive identity in history, acknowledging both continuity and discontinuity through the passage of time and recognizing that finite reality must change in order to remain itself.

Rahner gives no extended discussion of what he means exactly by dialectic. But his usage in context clearly relates him to both Hegel and Marx in seeing dialectic as a historical process. At the same time, his usage distinguishes him sharply from their view of that process as a necessary movement. For Rahner, on the contrary, the human world is freely called through time towards God's own life, in such a way that eternal value is concretely at issue in all the struggles of life. Through the passage of time, with its achievements and its losses, we become the persons and societies whom God has created as a body ready for holy anointing. Not rational necessity but the mystery of creative love grounds this process, both in time and in eternity, and no understanding of events within it arises without being called to be transformed into love.¹¹⁶ The love that unifies time transcends all reasons for living in time. But it also engenders new reasons for living and is thus the innermost dynamic of redemptive passage through time.

What was one to expect from this period of Rahner's late retirement? His vaunted consistency certainly marks the period, but, as we have seen, there is considerable originality as well. Although his style is sometimes hasty and frequently repetitious, it is still more often startling in its vigor and disarmingly straightforward. To a wintry time he brought once again

¹¹⁴ *Religious Studies Review* 5 (1979) 198-99.

¹¹⁵ See John Honner, S.J., "Unity-in-Difference: Karl Rahner and Neils Bohr," *TS* 46, no. 3 (September 1985) 480-506. Honner searches out several significant similarities in our application of ordinary language to the subatomic and supernatural realms. He casts light on Rahner's vision of the mutuality of matter and spirit, nature and grace, the human and the divine.

¹¹⁶ S. 14, 385-86 [157-58]. Cf. L. J. O'Donovan, "Orthopraxis and Theological Method in Karl Rahner," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, Vol. 35 (1980) 47-65.

a renewed sense for the urgency of faith, and unflagging bravery for its conversation with the contemporary world. Without responding in detail to critics of his thought, he does periodically assess their basic theses on revelation (Eberhard Simons) or Christology (Walter Kasper) or Trinity (Jürgen Moltmann). Some essays from these years will rank among many readers' favorites, even if a good many others qualify less comfortably for inclusion in the *Schriften*.

What was one to expect? It might not be far from the mark to say: a continuing effort to be understood, in service to the gospel. Even what was not new or especially well expressed was, in these years, not merely repeated. It was proposed, in new circumstances, as a reasoned and resolute faith, a theology which sought to the end to understand and to be understood. Writing not as a tactical theologian or a church politician but rather as a dogmatic theologian, he expressed doubt late in life that his fundamental approach had been grasped. Repeatedly he commended J. B. Metz's political theology and showed strong sympathy as well for liberation theologies. But he himself continued from his own perspective to press for the meaning of this world of grace for which we have been made responsible. "One should never stop thinking too early,"¹¹⁷ he said in an interview for his 75th birthday. The task he thus continued to accept in his last years was more than bridgebuilding. It offered a monumental model for theology in a culturally pluralistic world, a new kind of systematic theology pursued dialectically not only in its formal method but just as much with regard to the material questions it treated. The whole faith was his concern, without any pretense to grasp it wholly; a whole world was his hope, without any illusion that time alone could achieve that wholly. Typically modern in its incompleteness, like the late paintings and water colors of Paul Cézanne, Karl Rahner's thought was engaged more and more with a world of almost immeasurable change. But all the while, as his last published book of prayers again shows, it also became ever more clearly centered in love and adoration, bowing before the God whose grace in Jesus Christ offers us the courage to reach out to our neighbor in need—where alone we can find ourselves.

¹¹⁷ *Karl Rahner im Gespräch* 2, 59 [*America* 140 (1979) 180].