

## THE GRAMMAR OF GRACE: KARL RAHNER AS A WATERSHED IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

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**T**O DESCRIBE the thought of any theologian of the recent past as a watershed seems dubious. For the theological scene today is marked not so much by one or two dominant "schools" as by a plurality of competing theologies. Yet among these the theology of Karl Rahner looms on the horizon as a massive, though highly variegated, mountain range. One can ignore it only with the help of a blindfold. Rahner has been called the Aquinas of the 20th century, or in deference to the Angelic Doctor, "the most brilliant theologian since Thomas Aquinas."<sup>1</sup> The cardinals dubbed him the "Holy Ghost writer" of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>2</sup> As if to rub salt in the wounds of lesser mortals, Martin E. Marty remarks: "Compared to Karl Rahner, most other contemporary Christian theologians are scrub oak."<sup>3</sup>

We could go on for some time citing accolades heaped upon Rahner, scanning the thousands of bibliographical items linked to his name, or tallying the millions of copies that his works have sold. But enough. Rahner's stature is beyond dispute. Given his stature and brilliance, and given the profound way in which he has addressed the core of theology, i.e. the meaning of grace, any theologian worth the name must come to grips with his thought. In that sense it functions as a watershed in contemporary theology. In this essay I explore this thesis by first examining Rahner's conception of grace in its radical distinction from and inextricable unity with nature. Then I examine two opposite directions in which the theological waters flow in response to Rahner and seek an explanation for the contrary assessments of his thought implicit in these opposite moves. Finally, I entertain the possibility that these diverging assessments point to a basic tension within Rahner's thought. This

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following abbreviations are used for Rahner's collected essays: *ThI* = *Theological Investigations*, 20 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1961-83); *STh* = *Schriften zur Theologie*, 16 vols. (Zurich: Benziger, 1954-84). When the German edition is cited first in a footnote, the author provides his own translation because of inaccuracies in the English text.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Sheehan in *New York Review*, Feb. 4, 1982, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Rahner, *I Remember: An Autobiographical Interview with Meinhold Krauss* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 82.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Eugene Kennedy, "Quiet Mover of the Catholic Church," *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 23, 1979, 22.

suggests that the full riches of his insights may come to even fuller fruition when the basic source of that tension is removed.

#### SELF-COMMUNICATION AND ITS CONDITION OF POSSIBILITY

The pivot around which the substance of Rahner's theology turns is his understanding of grace.<sup>4</sup> Rahner consistently defines grace as the self-communication of God. In fact, for Rahner the essence of Christianity is summed up in those two words: God's self-communication.<sup>5</sup> Rahner uses this term (*Selbstmitteilung*) in a very specific sense. In grace God does not merely do something, effect something, outside the divine being. Rather God bestows God's very self to human beings. God gives God's self *as God*, i.e. as infinite being. God gives the very reality, the inner, divine, Trinitarian life. God bestows the internal essence of divine being upon human beings. In keeping with this conception of grace as the communication of God's own being, Rahner insists that God's self-communication is an *ontological* process. This process effects the divinization of the human person. Redemption, he says, "is the communication of divine grace; it occurs in the ontological reality of God's self-communication; it is in any case the continuation and accomplishment of that ontic (*seinshafte*) process which consisted from the very beginning in the supernatural bestowal of grace (*Begnadigung*) and divinization of humanity."<sup>6</sup>

The full significance of Rahner's understanding of grace becomes apparent only when it is understood in contradistinction to and in relation with its correlate, nature. After subjecting the classic teaching on nature and grace to a thorough critique, Rahner sets his hand to an innovative reconstruction of this framework. It is pervasively present in his work. Rahner has written seminal essays in which he sets forth his understanding of the traditional framework.<sup>7</sup> Usually it is only hinted at

<sup>4</sup> In concentrating on the substance of Rahner's theology, I am leaving aside what could be called the more formal pivot of his theology, his "transcendental anthropology." For an exposition of the latter, see Peter Eicher, *Die anthropologische Wende: Karl Rahners philosophischer Weg vom Wesen des Menschen zur personalen Existenz* (Dokimion 1; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1970); Gerald McCool, "The Philosophy of the Human Person in Karl Rahner's Theology," *TS* 22 (1961) 537-62; Andrew Tallon, "Personal Becoming," *Thomist* 43 (1979) 1-17.

<sup>5</sup> *ThI* 6:51-52 (*STh* 6:68-69); *ThI* 9:36, 41 (*STh* 8:53, 60).

<sup>6</sup> *STh* 5:216; *ThI* 5:187, where *seinshafte* is inaccurately translated as "existential." "Ontic" catches Rahner's emphasis here in that he insists that the self-communication of God lies in the order of being, but it must not be understood in contrast to "ontological" (see *ThI* 4:177 [*STh* 4:223-241]). In the translation *Begnadigung* is rendered as "pardon-ing," a possible but unlikely translation in this context.

<sup>7</sup> "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," *ThI* 1:296-317 (*STh* 1:323-45); "Nature and Grace," *ThI* 4:165-88 (*STh* 4:209-36); "The Order of Redemption within the Order of Creation," *Mission and Grace* 1, 59-113 (*Sendung und Gnade* 1, 55-88); *Nature and Grace and Other Essays* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

in the qualification of grace and all it entails as “supernatural.” Often Rahner brings the nature-grace schema to bear explicitly on the theme under discussion. In an essay published towards the end of his life, he vigorously defends it as a nonnegotiable for Roman Catholic theology.<sup>8</sup>

In distinction from grace as God’s self-communication, nature comes into being when God creates *other-than-self*.<sup>9</sup> Rahner calls the distinction between nature and the supernatural “essential and radical.”<sup>10</sup> He contrasts the two realities as involving two different types of causality. Nature results from a unique (divine) mode of *efficient* causality by which God constitutes something wholly other than self, creates the nondivine.<sup>11</sup> Grace on the other hand, is a special instance of *formal* causality. By speaking of formal causality, Rahner indicates that grace does not effect a new reality but fundamentally affects existent reality. In grace God imparts God’s inner being as form of created reality, thus becoming its destiny and end.<sup>12</sup>

To present this clean distinction between grace and nature is not to suggest that Rahner deals with them as two separate realms. Indeed, he has channeled considerable energy into the attempt to overcome what he has called the “extrinsicism” of traditional school theology. Such extrinsicism assumes that a person’s everyday life takes place by and large in the realm of nature. The realm of grace is conceived of as a mystery-laden superstructure that for all practical purposes hovers above the concerns of daily life, except that God commands that we believe and accept the mysteries of faith.<sup>13</sup> Rahner’s major contribution to the discussion of nature and grace lies in developing a conceptual framework in which this extrinsicism is overcome. He does so by turning the entire framework upside down, as it were.

Instead of beginning with nature as a reality that exists as such and can therefore be known in itself, and then proceeding to another order described as supernatural, Rahner begins with grace as God’s self-communication. This entails a special instance of a general principle concerning plurality in unity. The real unity of a plural reality exists, Rahner maintains, when “something, in order to be able to be itself,

<sup>8</sup> *STh* 15:241. See Leo J. O’Donovan, “A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner’s Last Years,” *TS* 46 (1985) 625.

<sup>9</sup> At one point Rahner says that grace and nature is not simply the equivalent of order-of-redemption and order-of-creation. Grace and nature are adequately distinguishable realities, whereas the orders of creation and redemption are not. See *Mission and Grace: Essays in Pastoral Theology* 1 (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 62–64; *Sendung und Gnade: Beiträge zur Pastoraltheologie* 1 (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1959) 53–55.

<sup>10</sup> *ThI* 4:66 (*STh* 4:91).

<sup>11</sup> *ThI* 4:65–66 (*STh* 4:90). Cf. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 77–78.

<sup>12</sup> *ThI* 1:325–46 (*STh* 1:354–75); *ThI* 4:65–66 (*STh* 4:90); *Foundations* 120–21.

<sup>13</sup> *ThI* 1:298–300 (*STh* 1:324–25); *ThI* 4:166–68 (*STh* 4:210–13).

creates something other, distinct from itself, as its own presupposition, sets this other over against itself, and retains this posited other in its otherness in unity with itself."<sup>14</sup>

The significance of this general principle concerning plurality in unity will become clear when we examine in what way humanity, or the world, is the self-expression of God. At this point it is important to note how Rahner applies this principle to the relationship between grace and nature. Creation, he says, is "the distinct presupposition which the reality of redemption itself creates in order to be able to be itself."<sup>15</sup> The unifying principle of this plurality is the acting God. Rahner proceeds, then, from God's decision to communicate the divine self to something other than self, i.e. to the nondivine. The presupposition for such communication is the existence of a recipient. This recipient must be other than God. God is able simply to create something other than self, without communicating the divine self. In fact, however, nature exists for the sake of the possibility of grace. Thus, in self-communication, God creates nature as the condition of the very possibility of such communication.<sup>16</sup> In the order of God's acts—of which the Trinity is the ontological paradigm—the primordial possibility, the foundational phenomenon is not the creation of something other than self, but the communication of self.<sup>17</sup> The world, Rahner maintains, "comes into being in the process of the self-communication of God" outside the Trinity.<sup>18</sup> God creates in order to communicate the divine life to the nondivine. God communicates the divine life and thus creates the nondivine. Creation is the condition for the possibility of self-communication *ad extra*. Greater integration of the plurality of nature and grace is hardly thinkable.

#### GRAMMAR AND SYMBOL OF SELF-COMMUNICATION

The foregoing provides the groundwork for understanding the notion of the grammar of God's self-expression. The combination of grammar and self-expression captures, I believe, the heart of Rahner's thought, and specifically the achievement of a high degree of integration of nature and grace. Grace is God's self-communication outside of God's self. Rahner sometimes refers to the condition that makes this self-expression

<sup>14</sup> *Sendung und Gnade* 59; *Mission and Grace* 1, 70.

<sup>15</sup> *Mission and Grace* 1, 76 (*Sendung und Gnade* 1, 63).

<sup>16</sup> See *ThI* 6:74–78 (*STh* 6:95–96).

<sup>17</sup> *ThI* 4:114–15 (*STh* 4:148); *ThI* 9:225 (*STh* 9:237); *Foundations* 222–23. According to Rahner, the possibility of God's free acts *ad extra*, creation and self-communication, have as their ontological ground the necessary acts *ad intra*, i.e. positing the intra-Trinitarian distinctions and the communication of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see *ThI* 4:114–15, 226–27, 235–37 (*STh* 4:149, 280–82, 292–93); *Foundations* 222–23.

<sup>18</sup> *ThI* 11:224 (*STh* 9:237).

possible as its "grammar." God, he says, "projects (*entwirft*) creatures by His creative power in that He establishes (*einsetzt*) them from out of nothing in their own nondivine reality as the *grammar of God's possible self-expression*."<sup>19</sup> Although Rahner uses the notion of "grammar" infrequently, its significance is elaborated in his profound reflections on the meaning of symbol. Symbol may be seen as grammar *in actu*, and grammar as the condition of possibility of symbol. It is not surprising, then, that the notion of symbol plays a crucial role in Rahner's understanding of the relationship between nature and grace.<sup>20</sup>

In speaking of symbol, Rahner does not concern himself with an arbitrary, conventional sign that designates a reality that is entirely extraneous to its symbol. Instead, Rahner focuses on what he calls a real-symbol. "All beings are by their nature symbolic," he says, "because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature."<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, this approach to symbol again involves the phenomena of plurality and unity, or otherness and identity. This can be illustrated by this essay. These letters and words are distinct from me. It would be false to say these words constitute me. Yet neither can I dissociate myself from them; they are part of me and in that sense "one" with me. I express *myself* in *them*. I express myself in this otherness by claiming it, in its distinctiveness, as my own. This concatenation of letters on paper is my symbolic self-expression.

In a similar way, Rahner conceives of the world, centered in the human person, as the grammar or symbol of God's self-expression. More specifically, as the condition of possibility of self-communication, the world may be understood as grammar; in *actual* self-communication the world is the symbol of God's self-expression. The paradigmatic focal point and epitome of divine self-expression is the Word-become-flesh. As Logos, Jesus Christ is "the absolute symbol of God in the world, filled unsurpassably with what is symbolized." He is the irrevocable expressive presence of God's free grace in the world.<sup>22</sup> To underscore the intrinsic relationship between nature and grace, Rahner insists that the humanity of Jesus is not an arbitrary sign which God happens to have chosen to make Himself audible and visible. "The humanity of Jesus is not to be considered as something in which God dresses up and masquerades—a mere signal of which he makes use, so that something audible can be

<sup>19</sup> *Foundations* 223; cf. *ThI* 4:115 (here *Grammatik* [*STh* 4:149] is rendered "paradigm"); *ThI* 9:134 (*STh* 8:174).

<sup>20</sup> John M. McDermott calls Rahner's understanding of symbol a "central insight of his system"; see "The Christologies of Karl Rahner," *Gregorianum* 67 (1986) 88.

<sup>21</sup> *ThI* 4:224 (*STh* 4:278).

<sup>22</sup> *STh* 4:293–94 (*ThI* 4:237).

uttered about the Logos by means of this signal." Rather, it is a real-symbol: the humanity of Jesus is "the self-disclosure of the Logos itself, so that when God, expressing himself, exteriorizes himself, that very thing appears which we call the humanity of the Logos."<sup>23</sup>

Although Christ is unique in being the foundation and himself the embodiment of God's irrevocable grace, the self-expression of God in him is not essentially different in content and substance from what God intends for all. Therefore, Rahner can define the human being as the "product," so to speak, of God's self-communication: "Man is the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God."<sup>24</sup> Or, formulating the same idea more succinctly, he says: "When God wills to be non-divine, the human person comes to be."<sup>25</sup> In other words, human beings exist because God wishes to become incarnate, to express God's self in the world. Humanity is designed and projected as the medium of God's self-expression. Humanity is created as the grammar of God's self-utterance. Moreover, by virtue of the intrinsic unity of humanity and the creation, the self-expression of God in the humanity of Jesus entails the divinization of the entire world. In Christ "God becomes world" (*Weltwerdung Gottes*) and the world is divinized.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in the humanity of Christ the world may be seen as the grammar and symbol of God's self-expression.<sup>27</sup>

With respect to the central theme of the relationship of nature and grace, Karl Rahner's achievement is both imposing and far-reaching. It is imposing because of the profound integration achieved, far-reaching because, dealing with the heart of theology, it affects all else. His understanding of the relation of nature and grace informs his treatment of grand themes such as the relation of salvation history to world history<sup>28</sup> and the place of Christology within an evolutionary world view,<sup>29</sup> as well as his reflection on "everyday things" such as getting about, sleeping, and sitting down.<sup>30</sup> So prominent and central is Rahner's achievement that the key thesis of his theology constitutes a significant watershed for contemporary theology.

<sup>23</sup> *ThI* 4:239 (*STh* 4:296: "wenn Gott, sich selbst aus-sagend, sich selbst ent-äussert...").

<sup>24</sup> *Foundations* 116.

<sup>25</sup> *STh* 4:150 (*ThI* 4:116).

<sup>26</sup> *STh* 5:205, 187 (*ThI* 5:177, 161); *Foundations* 197, 181.

<sup>27</sup> Rahner describes the world as the "prolonged bodiliness of the Logos when He expresses Himself in the nondivine" (*STh* 9:231).

<sup>28</sup> *Foundations* 142-61; *ThI* 5:97-114 (*STh* 5:115-35).

<sup>29</sup> *Foundations* 178-203; *ThI* 5:157-92 (*STh* 5:183-221).

<sup>30</sup> See *Belief Today: Theological Meditations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967) 13-43.

## OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS: KÜNG AND MOLTSMANN

Since water parts ways at a watershed, I shall present opposite directions in which two prominent theologians, Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, move with respect to the substance of Rahner's theology. In presenting two directions that move away from Rahner, I pass over the widespread affirmation and further elaboration of his basic position. Insofar as one may speak of a Rahner school, it simply extends the watershed that his theology constitutes.

Küng's divergence from Rahner becomes apparent in his first book, *Justification* (1957).<sup>31</sup> While deeply indebted to Rahner's thought, Küng implicitly parts ways with it in substance. I use the terms "implicitly" and "in substance" advisedly, for at first glance the two theologians hold much in common. Küng often uses terminology that harks back to thought-forms akin to those of Rahner. When he deals with the creation as a salvific event,<sup>32</sup> Küng's thought appears to have great affinity with that of Rahner. Küng too emphasizes that the factual creation has its existence in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, he grants the legitimacy, even necessity, of speaking of the supernatural character of the order of salvation. For that reason, he insists, we must distinguish between a double gratuity, namely, "creation and creation in Christ."<sup>33</sup> He maintains that, although all things subsist in Jesus Christ, this "in Christ" has different levels or gradations (*Stufen*).<sup>34</sup>

Despite this apparent affinity to Rahner's thought, a significant difference in approach makes itself felt. In the first place, although Küng uses the "natural-supernatural" distinction, it does not play a decisive role. When he considers, for example, whether the reality of humanity being "in Christ" is natural or supernatural, he calls this a largely terminological and therefore secondary question.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, Küng maintains that the strictly supernatural character of the present order can be adequately safeguarded simply by maintaining that another order, one not created in Christ, is *possible*.<sup>36</sup> Thus he suggests that the question concerning the orders of nature and grace is largely terminological, and insofar as it points to something more, i.e. the gratuity of grace, it suffices to posit an order of nature simply as a *hypothetical* possibility. In

<sup>31</sup> *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1964).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 135-47.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 144.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 145.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 143.

substance, Küng abandons the nature-grace framework and, following Barth, elaborates redemption in terms of covenant and creation.<sup>37</sup>

That an important difference between Rahner and Küng manifests itself at this point is corroborated by Rahner's comments on Küng's book. Rahner criticizes Küng's minimalization of the distinction of nature and grace. He maintains that if the eternal covenantal will is to be achieved, God *must* create the distinction, the gradation, of nature and grace within the created order. The reason for this conditional necessity is that without it grace would not be grace, would not be gratuitous. Rahner insists that human beings as *existent* must be able to experience grace in its gratuity.<sup>38</sup> For that reason he considers Küng's affirmation that God could have created an order that does not subsist in Christ entirely inadequate to safeguard the gratuitous character of grace. Not a hypothetical order but the present order must be such that creation as nature has sufficient autonomy and independence to receive and experience grace in its uniqueness, i.e. as a supernatural gift, as something not required for the existence and realization of nature as such.<sup>39</sup> Only then can God's self-communication be experienced as grace.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, Rahner considers Küng's affirmation that there are grades of "being in Christ" to be inadequate. He insists that the gratuitousness of grace itself has real gradations or levels. The retention of the free will, he explains, may be described as "grace of Christ" in so far as it has its ground in God's resolve with respect to supernatural self-communication in Christ and in the forgiveness it entails, but the free will as such is the "grace" of creation and not "in itself" the grace of Christ. The two relate to each other as lower and higher levels, the lower being the condition of possibility of the higher.<sup>41</sup> By insisting on the real distinction and existential reality of nature vis-à-vis grace, Rahner has put his finger on the crucial point at which Küng's thought diverges from his own.

One could say that from Küng's point of view Rahner's theology maintains too great a discontinuity between nature and grace. Moltmann moves in a diametrically opposite direction. He criticizes Rahner for allowing too little room for a basic discontinuity. In a recent essay, he voices his concern about the nonderivable newness and particularity of the revelation of Jesus Christ. In Moltmann's view, Rahner seems to detract from this newness by presenting the Christ event as the explica-

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-95. For a similar emphasis, cf. the Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Piet Schoonenberg, *Covenant and Creation* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968) esp. chaps. 2 and 3.

<sup>38</sup> *ThI* 4:212-15 (*STh* 4:267).

<sup>39</sup> *ThI* 4:212-13 (*STh* 4:264-65).

<sup>40</sup> See *ThI* 1(312-13 (*STh* 1:339).

<sup>41</sup> *ThI* 4:215-16; *STh* 4:268-69.



tion of what we already are by virtue of grace or as the "reflective expression of the gracious revelation which a human being already experiences unreflectively in the depth of his being."<sup>42</sup> In this way, Moltmann claims, "Being human becomes the universalization of the particularity of being a Christian and being a Christian becomes the particularization of the universality of being human." Grace is then regarded as the fulfilment of nature, and Christianity as the fulfilment of humanity.<sup>43</sup>

Moltmann is concerned not only about maintaining a degree of discontinuity *within* salvation history. He further insists on a discontinuity between salvation history and the eschaton. Reflecting on the traditional thesis "Grace does not destroy but presupposes and perfects nature," Moltmann accepts the first half but rejects the second, for "it does not expressly distinguish between grace and glory, between history and new creation, between the church and the kingdom of God, between being a Christian and the fulfilment of being human."<sup>44</sup> This approach, he argues, leads to triumphalism and eschatological presumption because glory is assumed to lie hidden in grace. It demands too much of grace, the Church, and the Christian because each is expected to accomplish that which as yet lies beyond reach.<sup>45</sup> Moltmann proceeds to recast the classic formula regarding the relation of nature and grace as follows: "Grace does not perfect nature, but prepares it for eternal glory. Grace is not the perfection of nature, but the messianic preparation of the world for the kingdom of God."<sup>46</sup> While Moltmann agrees with Rahner that Christ did not become incarnate only because of the Fall but also because of the original creation of human beings in the image of God, he does not want to leave it at this continuity. The Incarnation is also a promise of God's future. The one who is in Christ is a new creature. Within Moltmann's conception of futurity this means that one is not human in order to become Christian, but one is Christian in order to be human.<sup>47</sup> Although the last half of this statement could be interpreted in a Rahnerian sense, for Moltmann it marks a stark discontinuity between the terms "Christian" and "human." He claims that the real content of what it means to be human lies in the eschaton. In the present we are confronted with

<sup>42</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, "Christsein, Menschsein und das Reich Gottes: Ein Gespräch mit Karl Rahner," *Stimmen der Zeit* 203 (1985) 624.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 625. This view, he fears, harbors an implicit imperialism. It in principle rules out true pluralism, one that gives room for religious freedom in a neutral state and for the diversity of religions in the world.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 626.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 628–29.

Christians, Jews, and the peoples of the world. What is not yet present, he claims, is human, or humane, human beings (*menschliche Menschen*) as members of a human community.<sup>48</sup>

Moltmann's criticism is summarized in his observation that in Rahner's thought the medieval framework of nature and grace is reinterpreted in contemporary terms but is not basically altered.<sup>49</sup> The alteration Moltmann advocates is the injection of a strong dose of discontinuity between nature and grace, and between grace and the eschaton.

#### CONTRARY DYNAMICS

Although the two opposite directions in which Moltmann and Küng move in relation to Rahner's theology seem appropriate to the watershed metaphor, it is puzzling at the same time. From Küng's viewpoint Rahner's theology is too dualistic, from Moltmann's viewpoint not dualistic enough. Both cannot be right. Or can they? Perhaps two contrary dynamics assert themselves in Rahner's thought. On the one hand, the attempt to retain a real distinction between nature and grace comes to expression as an unresolved basic tension. When one focuses on it, Rahner's thought appears to be dualistic. On the other hand, precisely in the attempt to eradicate dualism, Rahner proceeds from a unitary ontological principle of explanation for the reality of nature and grace. When one focuses upon this dynamic, Rahner's thought appears to be monistic.<sup>50</sup> Let me follow this intuition.

First, the attempt to find a single ontological principle of explanation for the fundamental realities of nature and grace governs Rahner's use of the notion of symbol we examined earlier. He uses it to understand not only the nature of all creaturely beings (e.g., humans as consisting of soul and body), but also God's nature as triune being and God's relationship to the world as creator and redeemer. From the vantage point of the human person, this monistic dynamic is illustrated by Rahner's profound reflections on the notion of "mystery."

In a magnificent essay on the subject,<sup>51</sup> Rahner repudiates the ready recourse in theology and catechesis to a host of mysteries at the point where human thought no longer suffices to explain some aspect of the faith. Along that road, of course, mysteries have a way of proliferating.<sup>52</sup> Rahner fundamentally rejects this approach. He places mystery not at

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 629.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 625.

<sup>50</sup> In this essay the term "monism" is used not as a synonym for pantheism, which Rahner understandably combats, but in the restricted sense indicated above, i.e. as shorthand for the attempt to explain all of reality by means of a unitary ontological principle.

<sup>51</sup> "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," *ThI* 4:36-73 (*STh* 4:49-99).

<sup>52</sup> *ThI* 4:37-41 (*STh* 4:52-57).

the end but at the outset of the path of reflection. In fact, it is so fundamental that mystery comes before and conditions human reflection. The mystery of human existence is its infinite openness to God as absolute being. This fundamental reality is truly a mystery because it occurs behind one's back, as it were, since it is the ground of one's being. It is equally appropriate to say that it is ever ahead, beyond one's grasp, because it is the horizon within which every part of life, including the comprehending grasp, takes place. Mystery cannot be comprehended because every act of understanding presupposes a horizon. Thus the horizon is present, yet it is an elusive, receding presence. As absolute being, God is present, yet remote. This is the mystery of human beings considered as "nature." Thus Rahner can describe nature as "the reality of human beings as a unity of spirit and matter in self-transcendence towards God, insofar as this nature is the addressee of the self-offer of God, which on the one hand fulfils the human person by divinization, and yet cannot be demanded by nature."<sup>53</sup>

But this is not the deepest sense of mystery. The greatest mystery is not God as elusive, receding presence, but God's immediate proximity in self-communication, the bestowal of God's own being on the human person so that the inner being of God becomes—at least as offer—a constitutive principle of human life. When Rahner elaborates the relation of this mystery of grace to the mystery of the human person as nature, he emphasizes the congruity of the mystery of grace with that of nature. He does so by "defining" the human person as "openness," even boundless directedness, towards the infinite mystery of fulness,<sup>54</sup> or simply as emptiness. This is presented in such a way that no prior limits can be placed on this openness. As transcendental spirit, the human person is absolute openness to the fulness of being.<sup>55</sup> Thinking along these lines, Rahner posits a basic continuity between nature and grace. Grace is then projected as lying on a trajectory that is fully in line with that of nature. According to Rahner, the communication of grace is, from the viewpoint of nature as transcendence, conceivable as its appropriate and meaningful goal.<sup>56</sup> In fact, God's self-communication may be seen as the "absolute radicalization of the transcendental of the human spirit. . . ."<sup>57</sup> In other words, since a person is constituted as oriented to absolute being, it is conceivable, though not at all necessary, that God would communicate God's very self to this creature. In this way Rahner uses the notion of "natural" human transcendence at least to make plausible the "super-

<sup>53</sup> *STh* 14:92.

<sup>54</sup> *Foundations* 217.

<sup>55</sup> *ThI* 4:12 (*STh* 4:22).

<sup>56</sup> *ThI* 5:172 (*STh* 5:199).

<sup>57</sup> *ThI* 11:92 (*STh* 9:104).

natural" gift of God's gracious self-communication as the unsurpassable goal and destiny of the human person.

While the monistic tendency to which Moltmann objects is present in Rahner's reflection on mystery, the dualism that appears from Küng's vantage point lies just beneath the surface. The human person, according to Rahner, is by nature related to absolute being as infinite horizon. Human existence consists of this mystery. But this mystery—identified as horizon—collapses, so to speak, when he explains that in grace that which is beyond the horizon—the being and nature of God—becomes the innermost constituent principle of human existence. It is constitutive of "nature" for the human person to be related to God as to an elusive horizon, but by grace God becomes the inner constitutive principle of human existence. Thus the constitutive relation of human beings to God as remote, elusive horizon seems to be violated when God comes through the horizon in absolute proximity. Rahner seems to admit indirectly the incongruity of the natural mystery of the human person and the bestowal of grace when he defends the gratuitous, supernatural character of grace. At that point he insists that the mystery of grace can be known only by (positive) revelation. Revelation is needed for a knowledge not only of the facticity but also of the very possibility of such divine self-communication. In fact, for Rahner grace seems to qualify as a *mysterium stricte dictum* by virtue of its incomprehensibility. Indeed, Rahner's own descriptions of the mystery of grace at times suggest that the bestowal of the infinite itself upon the finite—or, as he also puts it, "the penetration of God himself in the non-divine realm of the finite as such"—is an ontological impossibility.<sup>58</sup>

At the very heart of Rahner's profound understanding of mystery a tension-laden dualism asserts itself between the mystery of nature and the mystery of grace. Moreover, instead of banishing the understanding of mystery as simply "riddles" that come at the end of one's ontology, Rahner seems to have retained it, though reducing it to a single riddle. For, from the viewpoint of nature, grace appears as an ontological riddle, i.e. something that does not fit within the ontology of human nature as described by Rahner.

Similar tensions between nature and grace come to the fore at other levels. They become evident whenever Rahner stresses the gratuity—and therefore unique extra—of grace vis-à-vis nature. As Rahner himself confirms in reaction to Küng's presentation of covenant and creation, nature must have a degree of independence if grace is to be experienced existentially as a free gift. The distinction between nature and grace, which Rahner himself has called a "remainder concept,"<sup>59</sup> is in fact far

<sup>58</sup> See, e.g., *ThI* 4:67, 72–73 (*STh* 4:92, 98–99).

<sup>59</sup> *ThI* 1:301–2, 313–15 (*STh* 1:327–28, 340–42).

more than that. It is not merely a conceptual construction about a hypothetical order of "pure nature," i.e. an order apart from grace. Though nature is not present except within the dynamic of grace, that dynamic itself demands that there be a kind of substratum that is sufficiently free and autonomous with respect to grace both for God not to be obligated to communicate God's own being and for the recipient to be able to say yes or no to this gift.<sup>60</sup> Thus, even prescinding from the content of grace, its gratuity demands an ontological distinction and, more than that, an ontological discontinuity between it and nature. When Rahner's understanding of the content of grace is considered, this duality again comes to the fore. Nature is the mere *subsistence* of a creature in God, in Christ; grace *consists* of the very nature of God communicated to human beings, divinizing them.<sup>61</sup>

The problem of the dualistic and monistic dynamics in Rahner's thought can also be summarized by returning to the notion of the world, and specifically humanity, as the grammar of God's possible self-expression. Rahner chooses this metaphor to convey the intrinsic unity of nature and grace, of creation and salvation. Yet, if one were to take only this metaphor as one's guiding star, one would go wrong. Human beings are not simply the grammar of God's possible self-expression in any straightforward sense. One can hardly conceive of the human person as a mere medium of God. God is not a ventriloquist. A person is created to exercise his or her own responsibility before the face of God, to respond to the divine call. Rahner fully acknowledges this, to the point of claiming that God's salvation occurs through human self-salvation.<sup>62</sup> At this point the problems of the gratuity of grace and of the freedom of the human person, problems that arise when the integral unity of grace is in focus, are warded off by an equally strong assertion of their duality.

We could go on citing formulations by Rahner that appear to reflect a monistic dynamic and contrast these to statements asserting a seemingly dualistic vision.<sup>63</sup> One could write this off as simply an inconsistency or a subterranean faultline in an otherwise magnificent system. One could go on and trace these contrary dynamics to a twofold source: the monistic philosophical dynamic of Fichtean vintage,<sup>63b</sup> and the dualistic theological dynamic of the scholastic tradition. However illuminating such analysis might prove to be, much would be lost if one were to be satisfied with

<sup>60</sup> See *ThI* 4:213, 218 (*STh* 4:265, 271); *ThI* 6:75-76 (*STh* 6:96-97).

<sup>61</sup> *ThI* 4:216 (*STh* 4:269).

<sup>62</sup> *STh* 15:237, 261.

<sup>63</sup> For a more extensive examination of these two dynamics, see my *Original Sin: Two Major Trends in Contemporary Roman Catholic Reinterpretation* (Washington, D.C.: Univ. Press of America, 1981) 107-44.

<sup>63b</sup> Regarding the Fichtean legacy, see, e.g., Eicher, *Die anthropologische Wende* 205-8, 210, 307 n. 5.

wielding merely the dissecting knife. Rahner's thought is not simply the confluence of problematic philosophical and theological legacies. Both the monistic quest and the dualistic safeguard reflect authentic biblical-theological concerns: the integral unity of creaturely life in relation to God on the one hand, and the "otherness" of God and the gratuity of grace on the other. Rahner's thought is too profound and too sensitive to the multifarious dimensions of creaturely life simply to exchange dualism for monism.

In assessing Rahner's thought, therefore, care must be taken not to fix one's critical sights one-sidedly on the dualistic or on the monistic dynamic in his thought. Such simplistic diagnosis of some of the problems encountered in Rahner's thought suggests an equally simplistic remedy: to move in the opposite direction. This, however, hardly represents an advance; for, rather than moving beyond Rahner, in this way one merely moves opposite one side of Rahner's thought. In other words, critics of Rahner can diverge from him in diametrically opposite directions, and yet become entangled in problems all the more acute because they are no longer held in check by a contrary dynamic. Either way, one loses something of the profundity of Rahner's thought.

#### WITH RAHNER, BEYOND RAHNER

One can also move in a third direction, which on the one hand is more critical than either of the responses we have considered, yet paradoxically retains more of the riches of Rahner's probing thought. This third direction would involve calling into question the ontological framework within which Rahner does his theology. I am not referring first of all to his transcendental anthropology, which lies beyond the scope of this essay,<sup>64</sup> but more specifically to his ontology of divine self-communication. Many of the problems that suggest monism from one viewpoint and dualism from another may well be rooted in the attempt to get within one's ontological grasp that which is by definition beyond such grasp, i.e. the mystery of God and of grace. This attempt at constructing an inclusive ontology is reflected in the notion of grace as the communication of God's inner being, God's nature, God's triune life. Such language presents no major problems when it is understood as an attempt to convey the fact that in Jesus Christ we are truly dealing with the creator of heaven and earth, that in grace we are truly placed in the most intimate communion with the covenant God, that through the Holy Spirit God goes so far as to set up housekeeping among human beings. But the moment the reality of this intimacy is translated into an ontology of grace—whereby grace is understood as the communication of God's own being in such a way that the recipient is divinized—major problems

<sup>64</sup> See n. 4 above.

erupt. Either one stresses the continuity between this ontology and the ontology of nature, at the cost of the unexpected newness of God's acts in salvation history, or one stresses the discontinuity of nature and grace, at the peril of the integrality of life in this world before the face of God.<sup>65</sup>

This impossible dilemma suggests that the drama of salvation history cannot be captured in an ontology of grace. In any case, the attempt to construct an ontology that embraces grace inevitably faces one with the question of its integration with an ontology of the created order. When Rahner stresses the integral unity of nature and grace, as he predominantly does, he seems to jeopardize the dramatic newness of grace or the eschaton. When he stresses the duality of nature and grace, which he does whenever this danger becomes apparent, the integral unity of nature and grace, human history and salvation history becomes problematic.

Perhaps Rahner's groundbreaking theology will yield its full fruit when his profound reflections on the mystery of God and grace are (to use one of his favorite terms in this context) radicalized. Rahner rightly maintains that human thought cannot encompass the mystery of existence because this mystery itself envelops human thought as its ground and horizon. Yet the description of grace as the communication of God's inner being which results in the divinization of the human person presupposes that the core of grace can be grasped by human thought and thus translated into an ontological conception. Would it not be more in keeping with this fundamental and profound insight to shrink back from any attempt to unravel this mystery by means of an ontology of God's act of creation and bestowal of grace? If God is truly the mystery presupposed by our being and our thinking, grace cannot be grasped by an ontology, i.e. by a human logos of divine being. When this critical limit of human thought and ontology is respected, both are liberated from the tensions that are built into the nature-grace framework to safeguard it against the conflation of God and human creatures.

The "radicalization" of the mystery of God and of grace may entail the abandonment of the entire framework of nature and grace as it has been handed down to us through the ages. Perhaps that is the true watershed in contemporary theology with which one of its most brilliant practitioners confronts us. Moving on, however, need not mean an impoverishment of theology, for to explore and re-explore this watershed is to fructify the theological enterprise with the full potential of Rahner's thought.

<sup>65</sup> John McDermott wrestles with a similar problem in Rahner's Christology: "On the one hand, it is difficult to see how a finite nature can receive an infinite act of existence utterly out of proportion to itself. On the other hand, ascribing a subordinate, finite *esse* to Christ leads to a conundrum: either the finite *esse* introduces an ultimate duality in activity and a possible opposition to the divine *Esse* or its total subjugation to the divine *Esse* renders it superfluous" ("The Christologies of Karl Rahner—II," *Gregorianum* 67 [1986] 309–10).