

## DEMYTHOLOGIZATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF KARL RAHNER

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**K**ARL RAHNER'S theology includes a great deal of demythologizing. He gives two related reasons for this. One is apologetical, to remove unnecessary obstacles to faith on the part of those whose science-formed worldview inclines them to skepticism about miracles and angels and such. The second reason is that demythologizing is intrinsic to his theology. It is in particular the godness of God, the character of God as Absolute and Infinite Creative Mystery, that impels Rahner to demythologize ideas about God and God's activity. He does the same for that which is not God: all that is created, including what are called spiritual beings. An important aspect of this, as later sections will describe, is the place he gives to science in determining how to interpret religious beliefs about the created order.

### THE FACT OF DEMYTHOLOGIZING IN RAHNER

Rahner's way of speaking often makes his demythologization appear to be a side issue of apologetics not intrinsic to the theology itself. Because of this Rahner's demythologizing has received little attention. It would be hard to detect in most commentaries that Rahner demythologizes at all. Anne Carr, for example, in her thorough and competent analysis of Rahner's method, mentions his demythologizing in few places and makes only brief comments on it.<sup>1</sup> Mary Hines, in an introduction to Rahner's theology, passes over demythologization without mention.<sup>2</sup> This is common to commentaries on Rahner. Karl-Heinz Weger notes that demythologization has a significant part in Rahner's Christology, but says that Rahner does not ask that Catholic theology in general demythologize as he does.<sup>3</sup>

Rahner's demythologizing is obscured by the fact that he often sounds very traditional in his interpretation of the Christian beliefs he affirms. Unlike Schleiermacher, he declares that Jesus is literally the

<sup>1</sup> See Anne Carr, *The Theological Method of Karl Rahner* (Missoula: Scholars, 1977) 188, 217, and 265.

<sup>2</sup> Mary E Hines, *The Transformation of Dogma: An Introduction to Karl Rahner on Doctrine* (New York: Paulist, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Karl-Heinz Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 6.

incarnation of God in history, not just the human person with the greatest God-consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Karl Barth, he insists on the reality of eternal life, rather than settling merely for a confidence that our lives will have a lasting meaning in God.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Bultmann, he asserts that the history of the cosmos as described by science is literally the history of salvation, with no need to fall back on a desperate "nevertheless" to affirm God in spite of science.<sup>6</sup> Rahner likewise sounds like a traditional Catholic in his affirmation of purgatory, indulgences, and the intercession of the saints. These affirmations, however, are interpreted by him in a way that he himself often indicates is a form of demythologization.

Rahner also often speaks in such a way as to seem to avoid what he otherwise would call demythologizing. When, for example, he mentions miraculous cures and other miracles done by Jesus, he describes these miracles as though he took the gospel stories as simple historical truth.<sup>7</sup> The reader has to remember that Rahner prefaced these statements with a cautious and complex analysis in which he defined "miracles" as nonmiracles, so to speak. And as is so often the case he articulates his demythologization in the sort of complex formulations with which readers of Rahner are familiar.

In view of these reflections perhaps we may say: a miracle takes place in the theological sense, and precisely not in the sense of a preternatural marvel, when for the eyes of a spiritual person who is open to the mystery of God the concrete configuration of events is such that there participates immediately in this configuration the divine self-communication which he already experiences "instinctively" in his transcendental experience of grace, and which on the other hand comes to appearance precisely in the "miraculous," and in this way gives witness of its presence.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) 377-424.

<sup>5</sup> Barth says, e.g., "One day we shall cease to be, but even then He will be for us. Hence our future non-existence cannot be our complete negation" (*Church Dogmatics 3/2: The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Harold Knight et al. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960] 611).

<sup>6</sup> For an instance of Bultmann's position, see his remarks on how God acts in history, in *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner's, 1958) 60-73. Yet Rahner appreciates aspects of Bultmann's project; see *Theological Investigations 9*, trans. Graham Harrison (New York: Seabury, 1975) 40-41. (In citing individual volumes in this series, translator, publisher and date will generally be given at the first occurrence; subsequent references will cite only the abbreviated title, *Investigations*, followed by the volume and page numbers.)

<sup>7</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 263-64.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 261.

A good way to make clear the meaning of such passages, how much Rahner demythologizes, and the place this has in his overall method is to review major representative instances. Seen separately, the occasions when Rahner demythologizes can appear as a few ad hoc reinterpretations, perhaps due only to apologetical purposes. But when many instances of his demythologizing are lined up, they can be seen as part of a thoroughgoing program. Before giving those specific instances, however, some general explanation of what "demythologization" means for Rahner will be useful.

### *The Nature of Demythologization in Rahner*

The definition of "myth" varies. For the skeptical, the word can stand simply for false beliefs. "Demythologization"<sup>9</sup> might then stand for exposing the falsity of such beliefs in order to reject them. But demythologization as practiced by theologians takes two other forms closely related to each other. First, "myth" may stand for the use of what are literally untrue beliefs about how the world operates in order to express some deeper truth. Thus Bultmann rejects as false the three-story universe of the New Testament that the Gospel writers may have taken as literal truth about the way the world is constructed.<sup>10</sup> But Bultmann rejects that picture of the universe in order to get at what he sees as the deeper existential truth contained in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The second but closely related form of demythologizing appears in the observation of Rahner and Vorgrimler that any concept attempting to express the metaphysical reality of the Infinite God will necessarily be a limited, categorial conception, and in that sense will be a "myth."<sup>11</sup> In this case the emphasis shifts away from saying that a "myth" is false and towards identifying merely what is inadequate in the expression of a truth. Any concrete human statement about the infinite Mystery, such as when this Mystery is said to be loving, creative, and so forth, is a "myth" in the sense not of being false but of being inadequate. Thus Rahner, in contrast to Schleiermacher again, for example, will assert that the Incarnation is itself literally true. In Jesus God has truly joined the divine reality to creation. The human understanding of this will always be inadequate because the divine Mystery remains mystery.

<sup>9</sup> Roger A. Johnson provides a general history in his *The Origins of Demythologization* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., *Jesus Christ and Mythology* 20.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, trans. Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 303.

As is to be expected in a body of theological writings covering many decades, Rahner's use of the concept of demythologizing includes different possible meanings in different contexts. His position can be summed up in this way: there are doctrines in Christian tradition that are both quite true and central to Christian faith but which nonetheless are often interpreted in ways that are not merely inadequate but false. They can be false on either of two grounds. Doctrines are interpreted falsely when they state something contrary to the truth about God as infinite Mystery, as though God were less than infinite Mystery. They are also interpreted falsely when they state something contrary to the truth about creation as not-God, when they treat the created as though it were in some way exempt from the created order of secondary causality with which God has endowed creation. More specifically it is when God is described as though God were a demiurge or a lower-case god, or when creation is described as though it were a realm of preternatural deeds by invisible beings, that Rahner most often uses the label "mythological." Together these two categories, God and creation, cover all traditional doctrines. So the range of ideas to be demythologized is potentially a large one.

### *The Purpose of Rahner's Demythologizing*

Rahner did much of his demythologizing in an era of "secular theology" and "death of God" theology. These theologies often seemed to remove God and the supernatural from the world, to create more distance between heaven and earth, as it were, in order to give more room for human autonomy in a desacralized world. The word "demythologize" may even connote an unreligious or antireligious stance. Rahner's purpose, however, is the opposite. He demythologizes in order to bring the Godness of God closer. His goal is to fortify human awareness that God's active presence in the world is not restricted to the specific sort of events that could be attributed to limited beings like gods or a demiurge. The creative power of the Absolute Mystery is not a here-or-there, now-or-then sort of activity; it is instead a here-and-there-and-everywhere, a now-and-then-and-always activity.<sup>12</sup> It is in the context of that mindfulness of God that Rahner also demythologizes belief in spiritual beings. I shall describe below the consistent way he addresses belief in the souls of the departed, the human soul in general, and angels and demons, by distinguishing these created beings from the Uncreated Mystery.

Where secular theology sought more room for human autonomy in

<sup>12</sup> *Foundations* 82.

a nonreligious world, some theologians today seek to safeguard religion by segregating religious faith from other aspects of life, including science. Norman Malcolm, in a move reminiscent of Schleiermacher, declares that religion is noncognitive;<sup>13</sup> Lindbeck uses Wittgensteinian ideas to make religion a community's way of life as opposed to an intellectualist set of truth claims;<sup>14</sup> Avery Dulles appeals to Polanyi's thought to argue that the community of faith, like the community of science, has its own criteria for the validity of its beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

Rahner also makes divisions, but not in a way to segregate the sacred from the secular. Rahner relies on transcendental experience as the moment where faith has its foundation, on philosophical reflection to elucidate the religious meaning of this experience, on the history of traditional Christian doctrine to discover how to articulate what is implicit in the religious experience, as well as on the human sciences, both natural and social, to know how God's creative presence is working itself out in history. Thus, transcendental experience, Catholic tradition including both Scripture and dogma, philosophy, and science are integrated to shape Rahner's theology.

### *The Two Major Aspects of Rahner's Demythologization*

As was indicated above, there are two major categories of beliefs which undergo a demythologization in Rahner's theology. The first is beliefs about God's activity in the world. The second is beliefs about created spirit—angels, demons, and human souls. This division into two major categories arises from his division of all that exists into two categories. The first is the reality of the infinite divine Mystery called God, which is the only supernatural reality in the strict sense of the word. This supernatural reality is the proper matter of theology. The second great category of all that exists is that which is not God. This is the category of all creation. This, strictly speaking, is the "natural," whatever is other than God.

The language here is awkward. Rahner's universe is not simply natural; it is from the first and most basically the recipient of the divine self-communication, which has always made the universe graced, "supernaturalized" in a sense. But the word "natural" is also the opposite of "supernatural" and thus can stand for everything that

<sup>13</sup> Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief," in Stuart C. Brown, ed., *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1977) 143–57.

<sup>14</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrines: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Avery Dulles, "Foundational Theology and the Dynamics of Conversion," *The Thomist* 45 (1981) 175–93.

is not God. Using the word in this way indicates Rahner's conviction that all that is not the eternal Mystery itself can be known through natural knowledge, including that of the natural sciences. This is often an element in Rahner's demythologizing, as we will see.

#### DEMYTHOLOGIZING GOD'S ACTIVITY IN THE WORLD

Rahner's understanding of the relation between God and the universe establishes the context for his analysis of God's activity in the world. Rahner begins his theology with the human person as a self-transcending being, whose consciousness is open to the infinite and always presupposes an infinite mystery "beyond" the horizon of what is known in any act of knowledge. This mystery is not a bounded area of what happens to be unknown. It is the unbounded context of everything. It lies "outside" the categorial; it is fundamentally different from all beings or events inasmuch as every being or event is categorial—bounded, finite, determinate.<sup>16</sup>

The infinite mystery might, theoretically at least, be grasped by the person as an ultimate emptiness or darkness in which all meanings and values could disappear and fade into nothingness, thereby rendering all human thought and freedom meaningless in the end. Precisely because this mystery is infinite, it could radically threaten the validity of human existence as a reflexively conscious and therefore free being.<sup>17</sup> But in fact human beings show themselves empowered to use reflective consciousness and the freedom it includes to affirm an ultimate value and meaningfulness in human existence. Human persons are able to make free commitments to the well-being of others, even without hope of reward, to love others by free commitment as though such love were ultimately meaningful, to thereby dispose of their own lives by giving them in loving trust and assurance, by stepping, as it were, into the infinite mystery with a faith that this mystery is salvation, eternal life, God.<sup>18</sup>

Whether a theologian begins with an experience of the mystery as Mystery (God), or whether one begins with traditional Christian doc-

<sup>16</sup> See Rahner's three lectures on "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," in *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smith (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 36–73. Even in the beatific vision "God remains incomprehensible, and the object of vision is precisely this incomprehensibility" (ibid. 41).

<sup>17</sup> See "The Human Question of Meaning in Face of the Absolute Mystery of God," in *Theological Investigations* 18, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 89–104.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," in *Theological Investigations* 6, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969) 231–49.

trines, the doctrine and the transcendental experience match and illuminate each other in accepting God as infinite Mystery.<sup>19</sup> Rahner always seeks a theological understanding that exposes intrinsic rather than merely extrinsic connections between God and creation, between the Mystery and human freedom, between the supernatural and the natural. He relies on the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* to infer that the sole cause of the universe is the divine power, which is identical with the being of God. The universe is that divine power when it becomes not-God. So the universe is what God becomes when God becomes other than God. Rahner expresses this also by constantly saying that the universe is divine self-communication. The universe is God's gift of self. Thus the connection between God and the world is not something added to the world but is intrinsic to it from the start.

This fits both with the traditional doctrine of grace, Rahner claims, as well as with the human experience of being empowered to relate positively to the infinite mystery as God. All the universe, including human persons, is the self-communication of God externally. Grace is a traditional name for the self-gift of God. God is in fact "uncreated grace," which establishes the recipient of this gift in a salvific relation to God. The power every person seems to have to relate positively to the Mystery as God is salvific power. This self-gift or self-communication of God to every person is a specific form of the general self-gift of God that *is* the universe, which is called creation.

Rahner links other traditional doctrines with this general assertion of the self-communication of God to creation: The beatific vision, sanctifying grace, even the Incarnation.<sup>20</sup> Each of these is an instance of the general truth about all that exists: the supernatural reality which is God has created that which is not God, but which is always intrinsically related to God because it is God's gift of self. Once again, this is not something added to creation: it *is* creation. Contrary to the abstract and theoretically postulated universe which would be somehow bereft of God, the universe is intrinsically God-blessed.

There are various traditional Catholic beliefs about how God acts in the world that would seem to add more specific divine activity to the general activity of making the world to exist with its own order of causality, as God's external self-communication. A list would include miracles in general, the creation of the human soul, inspiration and revelation, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the Incarnation of God in

<sup>19</sup> For a source in Rahner for the summary of his thought given in this and the next two paragraphs, see *Foundations* 178-98.

<sup>20</sup> *Theological Investigations* 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963) 319-46; also see *Foundations* 198-203.

the historical figure of Jesus, along with other beliefs. Rahner offers an interpretation of all these beliefs, however, that supposes no additional action, no special intervention, on the part of God. In a word, Rahner demythologizes them.

*Miracles as Special Interventions by God*

Rahner's most elaborate statements on miracles are two sections of his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, under the heading "God's Activity in and through Secondary Causes,"<sup>21</sup> and "Miracles in the Life of Jesus and their Weight in Fundamental Theology."<sup>22</sup> Following Aquinas, Rahner understands the events of the world to be part of an all-embracing chain of secondary—created—causes. These causes are the determinate or finite aspects of the patterns of nature. God is not such a cause, not one cause among other causes. God is instead the underlying Cause or Ground of the ongoing existence and power of the created or secondary causes. "Thomas . . . says that the chain of causality has its basis in [God], but not that by his activity [God] inserts himself as a link in the chain of causes as one cause among them."<sup>23</sup>

Because of this God cannot be discovered immediately, i.e. as the direct cause of the specifics of an event in place of some secondary cause. It is human consciousness of the Infinite Mystery as the Cause or Ground "embedded in" all events that makes it true to say that the events of the universe are caused by God. Each event is a particular instance of the general causality. Any event which is called an "intervention" by God, therefore, is not literally an intervention. It is called this because human awareness of the general presence of God has focused on this event and identified it specifically as a manifestation of God's power. A fuller and accurate theology would recognize it, according to Rahner, not as "intervention" but as a particular instance of the general truth.

A special "intervention" of God, therefore, can only be understood as the historical concreteness of the transcendental self-communication of God which is already intrinsic to the concrete world. . . . Consequently, every real intervention of God in his world, although it is free and cannot be deduced, is always only the becoming historical and becoming concrete of that "intervention" in which God as the transcendental ground of the world has from the outset embedded himself in this world as its self-communicating ground.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, in a relatively late writing Rahner says that theology must avoid thinking "anthropomorphically of the relation between God and

<sup>21</sup> *Foundations* 86–89.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 255–64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 87.

the world." God is the "free cause of the world and not a particular part of reality." "Any special intervention of God inside the world which is both distinction [distinct] from worldly realities and yet in some way belongs to them must be rejected as a merely mythological idea."<sup>25</sup>

### *The Creation of the Human Soul*

An instance where Rahner applies his general notion of the miraculous is the case of the creation of the individual human soul. Traditional theology declared that God creates each soul directly.<sup>26</sup> Rahner reinterprets this in such a way as to reject the idea that God intervenes. God is "not a demiurge whose activity is carried on inside the world," "not a cause side by side with others in the world." Rahner makes clear that his conclusion is based on the overall nature of the relation between the world and God:

As a principle of method, the case seems to be that everywhere that an effect is observed in the world, a cause within the world is to be postulated, and such an intramundane cause may and must be looked for precisely because God (rightly understood) effects everything through secondary causes.<sup>27</sup>

Rahner's conclusion is that each whole person, body and soul, is produced by the parents. God is indeed the direct and immediate cause of this soul, and also of the body and of the parents and of all of creation at once, as part of the general ongoing empowerment of the universe by God to have its own effective order of secondary causality.<sup>28</sup> (Similarly the first human souls can be said to have evolved from earlier material states of the universe; see below.)

### *Inspiration, Revelation, and Grace*

In *Foundations of Christian Faith* Rahner describes a modest instance of "inspiration." He is struck, he says, with a good idea which turns out to be accurate and helpful. He is obliged to attribute the good idea to secondary causes, to his physiology and psychology, to his personal history and the history of his culture, even to the history of the world.<sup>29</sup> So it would seem that he cannot attribute this "inspiration" to any special intervention of God. But then he reminds himself that the

<sup>25</sup> *Theological Investigations* 19, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 243.

<sup>26</sup> Rahner cites Pius XII's encyclical "Humani generis" in *Hominisation: The Evolutionary Origin of Man as a Theological Problem*, trans. W. T. O'Hare (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 94. The encyclical declared: "anima enim a Deo immediate creari Catholica fides nos retinere jubet" (Denziger-Schönmetzer no. 3896).

<sup>27</sup> *Hominisation* 95.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 98-101.

<sup>29</sup> *Foundations* 88.

entire history of the concrete world is God's self-communication, that every event in it is "willed" by God to be positively related to God. So this one good idea is another instance of the general activity of God, and if freely accepted as such it can be called an "inspiration."

Rahner also speaks here, however, in such a way as to seem to leave room for genuine intervention by God in the case of real revelation. He declares that his way of describing an event as inspiration is perhaps not a model adequate for all modes of divine "intervention," especially higher forms of it,<sup>30</sup> and that this everyday "good idea" form of inspiration does not have the same status as revelation. Nonetheless, Rahner's subsequent description of the nature of revelation also eliminates any notion of God as a causal link in a chain of events, any notion of a miraculous intervention.

There are two aspects to divine revelation, according to Rahner. The first is the general fact of God's self-communication which constitutes the world, the history of the world, and human freedom in and part of the world. Rahner called this "the transcendental aspect of creation."<sup>31</sup> The second aspect is the sum of the concrete historical forms that this general self-communication takes. Rahner calls this "the categorical, historical aspect of revelation."<sup>32</sup> These forms "mediate" the general self-communication. Rahner declares simply that this mediation of God's self-communication *is* revelation, whether it is given a religious form or not.<sup>33</sup>

Traditional theology, Rahner notes, has tended to treat all this as "natural" revelation,<sup>34</sup> thereby allowing for a different "supernatural" revelation. Rahner rejects this form of the distinction. For Rahner a "natural revelation" would be one in which the *God-question* appeared only as an open mystery.<sup>35</sup> But in the actual history of humankind (and the world), what in fact has been given is God's self-communication, as *answer* to the infinite question that the human person is. In the concrete moments of the history of the world, God's grace (i.e. God's self-communication) *is* God's self-revelation. The history of the world as the mediation, the concrete and categorical forms of this gracing, is itself God's graced revelation.<sup>36</sup>

All religions have made their attempts to grasp this revelation through reflection and to express it in propositions, though with only partial success. When these attempts are especially pure and powerful,

<sup>30</sup> *Foundations* 88.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 172.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 170.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 173.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 171.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 173.

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

and when these propositions have achieved official public church-approved status, then we have what we are accustomed to call "revelation" in an absolute sense.<sup>37</sup> Rahner has summed it all up vividly in a different place:

What we are accustomed to call, in Christian terms, the history of revelation is nothing else than the developing process, taking place within history, by which man reflects upon this transcendental experience of the self-bestowal of God, a reflection which, of course, in its process of historical development, cannot be achieved by the individual as such taken in isolation, but is rather sustained by the history of reflexive thought discernible within the history of mankind as a whole, right from its origins, and is reflected upon anew at a merely secondary level in the discipline which we call theology.<sup>38</sup>

There is no intervention here. Revelation is the transcendental experience of the self-bestowal of God.

In the course of all these statements, Rahner's language is not entirely consistent. He adds some significant qualifications that would make it seem that he is, perhaps, allowing for a special intervention by God. He says, for example, that the historical process of revelation is "directed by God himself in the dynamism of his divine self-communication in such a way that it remains pure."<sup>39</sup> In keeping with his usage elsewhere, one would perhaps expect Rahner to put quotation marks around the word "directed" to indicate that he does not mean that God directs the dynamism in the way a being among beings, a cause among other others, a demiurge, etc., would act. But his overall approach to revelation makes quite clear that he rejects such a form of "direction." Later Rahner will say flatly that belief in the Christian revelation "does not postulate an additional miraculous intervention of God, but rather, in the realm of our experience, actually occurs freely wherever the spirit's unlimited transcendentality is present."<sup>40</sup>

### *The Resurrection of Jesus*

The context of Rahner's understanding of Jesus' resurrection is his general theology of the resurrection of the body and eternal life. It begins with the human person as open to the infinite. Because of this capacity for the infinite, an everlasting life after death in which a person continued, as in this life, to live sequentially through event

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 173–74.

<sup>38</sup> *Theological Investigations* 13, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Crossroad, 1975) 98.

<sup>39</sup> *Foundations* 171.

<sup>40</sup> *Theological Investigations* 21, trans. Hugh M. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 54.

after event, experience after experience, would be a kind of hell, because it would forever deny a full and final relation to the Infinite Mystery.<sup>41</sup> In fact, this relation, called eternal life, is begun already in every salvific act of the person, i.e. every act whereby the person accepts freely the self-communication of God, such as by acts of love towards others, as mentioned earlier here.<sup>42</sup>

In all this Rahner takes very seriously the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. This belief matches with, and helps to make sense of, the basic transcendental experience in which a person can become aware of the twofold aspects of all that exists: on the one hand the absolute and infinite Mystery of God, and on the other the finite or categorial character of all that is created by the self-communication of God externally. All that is not God belongs to the concrete categorial-historical. All that is not God, however, is also related to God by God's sustaining and dynamic presence in everything. In this context the division between created materiality and created spirit is a matter of degree, so to speak. Matter is frozen spirit; spirit evolves from matter.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, as a human person experiences everything as an embodied historical being, with all knowledge originating in some form in sensory experience of categorial being, the human way of life is intrinsically an embodied way of being.

Rahner's conclusion, derived from the double source of Christian belief in the resurrection of the body and of transcendental experience, is that at death every person enters into that person's full and final relation to God, and does so precisely as a person, which includes a bodily mode of existence. Rahner's particular twist to all this is to propose that at death a person not only enters into a new mode of bodily being but that this is a cosmic mode.<sup>44</sup> The person enters into a full relation to the whole cosmos, through the full and final relation to God and God's relation to the whole cosmos as the divine self-communication.

There is more that could be said to explain this relation to the cosmos in death. But the main point here is not to explain fully Rahner's

<sup>41</sup> *Investigations* 4.347.

<sup>42</sup> *Foundations* 438. See the thorough analysis of Rahner's treatment of eternal life in Peter Phan, *Eternity in Time: A Study of Karl Rahner's Eschatology* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University, 1988).

<sup>43</sup> *Hominisation* 92; see also *Investigations* 6.177.

<sup>44</sup> This is too large a topic to cover here; see *Foundations* 444–47. Compare also in various volumes of the *Investigations*, Rahner's statements on Christology and the eschaton (5.172–74), on God as absolute future (6.59–68), on consummation as including all history and the cosmos (10.266–67, 274–75), on the second coming (11.228), and on the eschaton as the collective fulfillment of all humankind (12.182).

theology of death and resurrection. It is only to indicate why even the bodily resurrection of Jesus does not presume belief in any miraculous intervention by God, according to Rahner's interpretation. For him, every person who has a positive relation to God (and that might be everyone as far as Rahner knows) undergoes bodily resurrection into eternal life at death, without any miracle required. This is true also of Jesus.

A wealth of quotations from different volumes of the *Theological Investigations* will help make clear that Rahner does indeed intend a nonmiraculous interpretation of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus "once had a history of his own, a history which he has now left behind him as that which has passed away. . . ." Now he possesses his own history differently, no longer a developing one but "completed and existing in eternity."<sup>45</sup> The resurrection of Jesus does not "in any sense constitute a return to this mode of existence."<sup>46</sup>

Even here it is not a question of a miracle of God being inserted into a spiritual situation. . . . The definitive state of man, his state of being redeemed and having attained to salvation, is basically speaking the same as that which we call the resurrection of Jesus and of man in general.<sup>47</sup>

Rahner says that "He is risen" has the identical meaning as this longer statement: "This crucified one is he who has been received by God in such a way that he, together with his fate and the decision which that fate involves, has been ratified by God as having an eternal validity."<sup>48</sup> Rahner clearly affirms as literally true the resurrection of Jesus, but as a nonmiraculous event, one not requiring a distinct active intervention of God into history.

### *The Incarnation of God in Jesus*

Of all the acts of God in history it would seem that Christian belief must interpret the Incarnation not as another instance of the general self-communication by God to the world but as a special and unique intervention, a miracle if nothing else is. Yet Rahner is consistent. He explicitly rejects the idea that there is first a world with its own order of causality, a "finished world," and that God then interjects the divine self into that world. This interpretation, says Rahner cautiously, would be "in danger of seeming to be something mythological."<sup>49</sup>

A belief so central to Christianity as the doctrine of the Incarnation is important and complex enough as to require frequent and extensive

<sup>45</sup> *Investigations* 8.16.

<sup>47</sup> *Investigations* 11.206.

<sup>49</sup> *Investigations* 1.164; see also *Investigations* 6.170.

<sup>46</sup> *Investigations* 7.70.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 207.

analyses by Rahner, much more than can be presented here. So we will not attempt to explain how Rahner maintains belief in the unique and definitive and redemptive presence of God in Jesus. On the limited topic of demythologization, however, Rahner is clear.

Jesus is the Incarnation of God inasmuch as Jesus is the moment in history where the general truth of God's self-communication to "divinize" the world in a final and full relation to God finds its definitive and irrevocable explicit presence, in such a way that historically this Jesus of Nazareth is in fact the one through whom the self-communication of God is recognized as such.<sup>50</sup> What is unique about the presence of God in Jesus is not that it is the sole occasion in which God, as though by a special intervention, has communicated the divine self, whether as Logos/Son or not, to creation. Such self-communication has from the beginning constituted the entire cosmos in its existence and power. The redemptive uniqueness of God's self-communication in Jesus lies not in the fact that it is the sole instance of such a divine self-communication, but rather that it is *this* historically definitive and redemptive instantiation of the general truth of the self-communication of God, one which requires no mythological mode of divine intervention. "Chalcedonian Christology," Rahner warns, "can also easily fall under the suspicion of being mythological." Reformulations of the Incarnation are helpful if they will "not so easily awaken the impression that fairy tales or mythologies are being narrated."<sup>51</sup>

Filling out and confirming this is Rahner's claim that the Second Coming of Christ is the same event as the First Coming, a single event still in process. This is the process of the "irrevocable self-bestowal" of God upon the world which constitutes the world as creation as well as its whole history.<sup>52</sup> The Christian belief most highly mythological of all in its usual expression, perhaps, is the apocalyptic return of Christ in power. That belief here has also been demythologized. "The man of today," in fact, will find it "both justifiable and necessary" to "demythologize" apocalyptic ideas and translate them into the kind of eschatology Rahner describes.<sup>53</sup>

#### DEMYTHOLOGIZING BELIEF IN SPIRITUAL BEINGS

The previous section has described the first large category of beliefs which Rahner demythologizes, that of the strictly supernatural—God—and beliefs about God's activities in the world. The other large category is what in casual parlance is also often called the supernatural—demons, angels, souls of the departed, and perhaps even human

<sup>50</sup> E.g. *Investigations* 5.175.

<sup>52</sup> *Investigations* 11.228.

<sup>51</sup> *Investigations* 21.229.

<sup>53</sup> *Investigations* 5.148.

souls in general. As was said, however, Rahner calls attention to the fact that all such entities, if that is the correct word for them, are part of the created order, part of the God-endowed "natural" order. The significance of this becomes more apparent through a review of specific beliefs and the way in which Rahner demythologizes them also.

Perhaps it is part of his general willingness to listen to science about the contents and structure of the universe that Rahner also bases many of his ideas on angels, souls, and so forth, on a consistent rejection of "spiritualism," as will appear frequently below. He does not take any pains to justify this rejection of spiritualism. He seems rather to take for granted that this is not a reasonable belief and tends to attach to his rejection of it words like "mythological" or "magical." This rejection perhaps fits, however, with his emphasis on the fact that all of creation, all that is not God, shares in the common condition of being the self-gift of God outside of God. The ontological distance from rocks to angels, so to speak, is nothing as compared to the ontological difference between creation and the Infinite Mystery.

#### *Background Theology of Cosmic Evolution*

As part of his method Rahner accepts the conclusion of the natural sciences that the whole universe has been evolving, that this evolution has produced life, and that life has produced consciousness. Rahner declares, as was noted earlier, that human self-reflexive transcendently open consciousness is a product of the evolution of matter.<sup>54</sup> Distinguishing the method proper to the natural sciences from that proper to theology, Rahner says that theology has no objection to the claim of biology that living systems develop "from below," without need of any created vital principle or entelechies to explain it.<sup>55</sup> He thinks that the natural sciences have established that through evolution "a genuinely more comes from less, including the evolution of the human soul from matter."<sup>56</sup> All that theology must do in this case, while accepting natural science's conclusions, is to preserve recognition of spirit or human soul as "an absolute openness to being as such" and to clarify what this means in contrast to mere materiality considered in itself.<sup>57</sup>

Rahner's acceptance of the implications of scientific knowledge of the world provides a context for interpreting transcendental experience and Catholic tradition. Science seems to say that what is called

<sup>54</sup> The major source for this is *Hominisation*. The analysis he gives there is used and reaffirmed in other works, such as "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World," in *Investigations* 5.157-92.

<sup>55</sup> *Investigations* 21.40.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 38-39.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

soul or mind evolved from matter. Transcendental experience in human reflective awareness rests on the sensory experience of the embodied self. As noted earlier, the doctrine of bodily resurrection means that materiality is included in the eternal destiny of the self. All these aspects together—science, transcendental experience, Christian tradition—are correlated by Rahner to achieve an integrated theological understanding. An aspect of that understanding is an explicit rejection of ideas which he calls mythological concerning the human soul and its destiny and concerning other “spiritual” beings, namely the souls of the departed, angels, and demons.

### *The Human Soul*

We have already seen that Rahner demythologizes what can be said about God’s activity in the production of the soul: God does not intervene miraculously to do this, like some sort of demiurge.<sup>58</sup> A second aspect of Rahner’s thought is that the soul is also part of the natural order, natural here meaning whatever is not God. The soul is a product of the history of matter. The body is likewise the “pre-history” of the soul.<sup>59</sup> Matter exists as the self-communication of the absolute Spirit (God) and is thus itself a kind of “solidified spirit.”<sup>60</sup> While the soul does not arise from materiality considered solely as material, from temporal-spatial limitedness,<sup>61</sup> it nonetheless arises from matter as it actually exists as the self-communication of God: “Matter in its whole nature and being can be traced back to the creative act of God who is termed a ‘spirit’.”<sup>62</sup> Matter can do what it could not do in itself because it has infinite being as its transcendent ground.<sup>63</sup> Matter is empowered by God, as general sustaining and energizing cause, as it were, to have the particular history it has had of actively transcending itself to become life and eventually soul in the form it takes in humans.

The soul’s relation to the body is so intimate as to make the distinction between them less than their unity. Rahner affirms the close interconnections of soul and body even in intellectual and spiritual activity: “To put it somewhat crudely: even the most sublime stirrings of a most supernatural love for God in the innermost depth of the spiritual person still depends on (and at the same time changes) electrochemical processes in the brain.”<sup>64</sup>

It is in the context of this understanding of the human soul that Rahner denies any miraculous intervention by God as the cause of either the first human souls or each new human soul. The soul is

<sup>58</sup> *Hominisation* 66, 68, 95, 99–101.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 92.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 55.

<sup>64</sup> *Investigations* 2.120.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 57.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 76.

thereby "naturalized." It is a product of cosmic history. Parents are parents of the whole person, not just of the body. They are parents of the whole person not only in the obvious sense that their union leads to the birth of a whole person, but in the fuller sense that their union produces soul as well as body. God's part in this remains the general causative power which makes it possible for secondary causes, the parents in this case, to create a true "becoming." Just as the evolution of matter was a process by which matter actively transcended itself to become more than mere matter, so in human generation the sperm, egg, and subsequent zygote transcend their materiality through a process of becoming, in this case a human person, body and soul.<sup>65</sup>

### *Angels and Demons*

Rahner applies this same line of thought to belief in angels and demons and arrives at conclusions that demythologize the belief. He worries that, on the one hand, the Fourth Lateran Council seems to have declared formally that angels do exist,<sup>66</sup> but that, on the other hand, this belief appears too easily to be mythological.<sup>67</sup>

The Bible is unclear, Rahner says, acknowledging one of his sources for theology, Christian Scriptures. In the Bible there sometimes are beliefs based on "primitive ideas," that are urgently in need of demythologization." In saying this, of course, he is relying on modern beliefs and methods of biblical interpretation. He continues to appeal to Scripture, though, to make the further point, that *if* there are angels and demons they have an intrinsic relation to the cosmos. He bases this claim on the scriptural references to principalities and powers whose apparent role in ancient belief, including that of Paul, was precisely as rulers of aspects of the universe.<sup>68</sup> Rahner appeals also to Thomism, which defines matter not as bits and pieces of stuff, but as materiality, as the one "field" of the cosmos, as the aspect of time-space extension that is characteristic of the universe as God created it. Here is another way to affirm the commonality of all that is created. If angels and demons exist, he says, they too are part of the natural world.<sup>69</sup> His analysis is one of how *reasonable* it is to believe in angels, "within the scope of natural knowledge,"<sup>70</sup> the kind of knowledge that is appropriate for what is part of the natural universe.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *Hominisation* 98-99.

<sup>66</sup> *Investigations* 19.252.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 250.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 252, 255.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 258.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 260.

<sup>71</sup> In this article "On Angels" Rahner also offers a theory about revelation, namely that it consists only of what is true of the truly Supernatural, which is God alone. Thus only beliefs about God, Trinity, Incarnation, and possibly a few other unspecified beliefs

He explores possibilities widely. He seriously entertains the idea that angels and demons do not exist.<sup>72</sup> But he tries out an almost science-fiction scenario as an alternative, that angels may be a name for "eschatological beings" that do not yet exist but, will come into existence in the future as the product of continuing cosmic evolution. He defines angels then as "regional subjectivities," i.e. as modes of transcendental consciousness which are not linked to the cosmos through the kinds of bodies that humans have, but, analogous to the human soul-body form of life, have a special connectedness to certain regions of cosmic reality.<sup>73</sup>

After this speculative exploration of what is conceivable about angels, Rahner returns to the question of what is actual: Do angels really exist?<sup>74</sup> He rejects miracles as evidence, as one might expect from his theology of miracles. He looks instead for natural structures in the universe that could be explained best by postulating some sort of "regional subjectivity" that could be called angels. His modest conclusion is that it would be at least possible that the natural order, without a mythological interpretation, as he puts it, could include something like angels.<sup>75</sup>

In individual passages his wording sounds as though his primary concern is to determine the existence and nature of angels as part of traditional Christian belief. But the background concern, one that wins out in the end, is to reinterpret and, if necessary, abandon the belief if it cannot be successfully demythologized and naturalized. Modestly, Rahner never concludes that belief in angels, and demons also, is so intrinsically mythological that it can no longer stand. But the strongest support he gives to the belief in the end appears in the form of advice to avoid a "primitive rationalism" that *denies* the possibility of any "creaturely subjectivity" above the human.<sup>76</sup> Whether this possibility has already or will become actual in the history of the universe is something he cannot say but which, he believes, still presents the danger of mythological thought.

### *The Saints in Heaven*

Catholic tradition has recommended addressing the souls of the departed who are in heaven in order to ask for their intercession with

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can be part of revelation, strictly speaking. Knowledge of all else, even angels if they exist, is therefore part of natural knowledge. The way to know if angels really exist is to use the natural sciences!

<sup>72</sup> *Investigations* 19.260.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 266-67.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 265.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 274.

God. At times Rahner has spoken as though he simply accepted this belief. "We suppose as self-evident," he says, "that the saints in heaven, along with the angels and the humanity of Christ, know about us and our prayers directed to them."<sup>77</sup> We Catholics approach the saints as real beings to whom we pray.<sup>78</sup>

But then he calls this way of speaking into question by asking doubtfully whether people today really do this.<sup>79</sup> It is an odd question. As a Catholic priest Rahner certainly knows that Catholics do this. His real worry may not be that people are not doing it, but that the way they are doing it strikes him as mistaken. In latter writings, pursuing the topic further, the danger he identifies in the veneration of saints is "a sort of mitigated spiritualism, magic, or watered-down form of polytheism."<sup>80</sup> From this cautious wording a reader might conclude that Rahner seeks only to refine the practice of veneration a bit.

The actual path of analysis Rahner takes is to offer two alternatives. One is to think of the veneration of the saints as a "spiritualist" kind of communication with the dead.<sup>81</sup> He once more flatly rejects this. The second alternative is to assert that the attention paid to the saints must really be paid to God and "bear upon the dead or the saints only in general terms."<sup>82</sup> His reason for choosing the second alternative is theological in part. The eternal mystery of God is not subject to change, through saintly intercession or any other means.<sup>83</sup> But he also says that it is a "justifiably rational and realistic" theology he seeks.<sup>84</sup> And the effect of his analysis is to demythologize, as it were, what would otherwise be a belief in invisible and active spirit-beings.

Rahner's language is often ambiguous here as it is on other topics. For example, he ends the article on veneration of the saints this way: the saints are "our brothers who have already attained their perfection, and they entreat the God of the living to let that light shine upon us too, which is the manifestation of his own love and the blessed eternity of his own life."<sup>85</sup> But just prior to saying this he has denied that eternal life involves activity or changes, and has denied that God will change in response to entreaties and "let" something happen. Rahner will explicitly label as "mythological" any models which suggest a continuance of temporality in eternal life.<sup>86</sup> Death, he says, is "the absolute end of the temporal dimension."<sup>87</sup> That leads to the next topic here, which will help to explain further his ideas on the saints.

<sup>77</sup> *Investigations* 3.36.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 174.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

<sup>80</sup> *Investigations* 8.9.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Investigations* 13.172.

*Eternal Life in General*

One way Christians think of life after death is to imagine a disembodied soul continuing a life of thoughts and feelings in a kind of extension of temporal existence into another plane of existence. Or Christians might follow biblical images of an eschatological kingdom with a new heaven and a new earth. The latter is closer to Rahner's conception of eternal life because it maintains a union of spirit and matter. Nonetheless, Rahner describes both images as mythological.

Rahner frequently speaks so cautiously that the demythologization he asks for sounds like a very limited one: "We have to think of eternity without imagining it and *in this sense* demythologize it."<sup>88</sup> Perhaps this is again nothing more than a certain modesty on Rahner's part, an acknowledgement that no one really knows what it may be like to enter into an eternal union with God. This would be in accord with his use of the traditional notion of the soul's experience of God in the beatific vision,<sup>89</sup> and with the traditional language he uses at times about the intercession of the saints.<sup>90</sup>

But what was just said about the souls of the departed is an indication that his demythologizing is not just due to modesty. A stronger call to demythologize ideas about eternal life appears in the essay "Ideas for a Theology of Death."<sup>91</sup> In speaking of the "immortality of the soul," the "resurrection of the flesh," of "heaven," and of "afterlife," Rahner states that, "the elements of imagery and mythology and the inadequacies inherent in such systems and forms have now come to be consciously recognized and felt to be such."<sup>92</sup> Elsewhere he warns against the interpretation which presents eternal life in the form of a myth or fantasy or superstitious spiritualism.<sup>93</sup>

His understanding of eternal life emphasizes that it is eternal, not temporal. It consists of the final and definitive validity which our lives achieve in death, rather than a continuation of experiences. The exception to this, perhaps, is Rahner's interpretation of purgatory, in which he describes "a further maturing of [the person], even after death."<sup>94</sup> Yet even here he warns against speaking literally about any ongoing experiences after death. In fairly strong words Rahner refers

<sup>88</sup> *Foundations* 272.

<sup>89</sup> See Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, trans. Charles H. Henkey (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961) 33. See also *Investigations* 5.102, 8.244, 10.247.

<sup>90</sup> *Investigations* 3.36; 8.4, 8-9, 23.

<sup>91</sup> *Investigations* 13.169-86.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 172; see also *Investigations* 4.347-54.

<sup>93</sup> *Foundations* 436-37.

<sup>94</sup> *On the Theology of Death* 32-33.

to this notion as a "spiritualist aberration."<sup>95</sup> "Death," he says, "is the absolute end of the temporal dimension."<sup>96</sup>

This is too brief a summary to make adequately clear what Rahner does believe about eternal life. But it is enough to show that Rahner is fully consistent, in spite of occasional language that would seem to indicate otherwise, in rejecting the idea of the existence of spiritual substances in a condition or dimension other than as part of the cosmic material-spiritual history or as somehow, in a way unknowable to us, already fully united in final and definitive form to the eternal and incomprehensible Mystery.

#### CONCLUSIONS

There are two major and related aspects of Rahner's theology that emerge from this survey of his demythologizing. The first is the extent to which the content of his theology coheres as a vision of a graced natural world, which builds upon the ongoing empowerment by God to develop as graced nature towards an ultimate eternal union with God. The second is that the method of theology also promotes coherence among religious experience, Christian tradition, philosophy, and the natural sciences. Not every aspect of these coherences is evident in this brief essay. Rahner's theology of Church and sacrament, for example, is not included here. Nor is his philosophical analysis of the person as spirit in the world. But a longer analysis would show that these topics are also intrinsically coherent with Rahner's overall theological vision and method.

The overall coherence of Rahner's theological conclusions and method produces a unified religious vision. To demythologize belief in miracles and spirit can appear as a loss of religiousness, as loss of the sense of the active presence of God and of the spiritual realm. Rahner's purpose, however, is to give, not simply to take away. Rahner gives a foundation for a strong, deep, and extensive sense of the active divine presence in *every* event of both cosmic and individual history. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," said his fellow Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins. And charged with the active power and supportive presence of God in all things, Rahner could add. Rahner's spirituality is not one that requires a person to look away from the whole of nature and history in order to find God in special and unusual events. His spirituality plunges a person more deeply into the one nature and history that exists, in order to discover it as God's single self-communication.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 47-49. For repeated rejection of belief in eternal life as "a continuation of life that preceded it," see also *Investigations* 3.141, 151, and 156.

<sup>96</sup> *Investigations* 13.174.

Rahner's method is closely connected to this theological vision, particularly in its inclusion of the natural sciences as unofficial contributors to theological understanding. The use of philosophy in theology is both traditional and inescapable. Both deal with ultimate conditions of existence and will thus meet each other, in confrontation or cooperation. The connection between religious experience and theology is also inescapable, though contemporary correlational theologies may articulate that connection more fully than past theologies.

The connection between theology and the natural sciences, however, is less evident and, on the surface, appears quite escapable. Long ago both Irenaeus<sup>97</sup> and Augustine<sup>98</sup> realized that a Christian does not need to understand how the heavens go in order to go to heaven—to couch their thought in an expression which Galileo took from a contemporary of his, Cardinal Baronius. Rahner's theology, however, shows that when the sciences teach about the reliability of the order of secondary causality, about the evolution of the cosmos, about the appearance of life and soul, they are teaching things about God's activity that theology needs to learn; they are teaching about the history of salvation. The one universe created by God invites the integration of all ways of knowing: personal religious experience, traditional doctrines and Scripture, philosophical reflection, and the sciences.

Karl Rahner's theology and method offer a way to an integrated spiritual life, one in which God and the world are not two distinct orientations a person must be torn between, one in which faith and reason are not two segregated methods that can both be used only by a divided self. Rahner's demythologization is an intrinsic part of a theological vision and method in which God, self, history, world, and method all cohere.

<sup>97</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.28.2–3, in *The Writing of Irenaeus* 1, in the *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868) 5.220–22.

<sup>98</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion* chap. 9; see also chap. 16, where Augustine declares there is no need to know the cause of earthquakes but only the causes of good and evil (New York: Random House, [1948], 1.665–66).