

# KARL RAHNER: A THEOLOGIAN OF 'OPEN' MODERNITY

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Until recently, progressive Roman Catholic theology has been associated with names such as Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan and Edward Schillebeeckx. Progressive theology, as we are using the term here, can be defined as a theology that assimilates the positive achievements of modern thought and, as a result, is able to speak to contemporary people. In the meantime, however, modern thought itself has come under attack. A new generation of postmodern philosophers has emerged – Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Gianni Vattimo – who all distance themselves from modernity. For Lyotard, modern planning not only results in a streamlined type of society, but also leads to the erection of concentration camps in which the unwilling are liquidated. Lyotard thinks of the deadly work camps, the gulag archipelago under Joseph Stalin. As far as Derrida is concerned, he blames modern thinking for creating the illusion of an entire ‘presence to one self’ which takes on megalomaniac traits and fails to take seriously the ambiguities inherent in real life. Vattimo finally predicts modernity’s downfall for the simple reason that growing pluralism is going to undermine the uniform patterns of modernity. Postmodern electronic media eroded the power of centralized ideologies while the movements for independence in Africa and Asia which followed the Second World War made it clear that the colonial powers only succeeded in imposing their rule

through the use of violence; they had to have recourse to violence in order to spread their regimes of 'western liberty'.

In this article<sup>1</sup> I would like to pay special honor to Karl Rahner (1904-1984) whose birth centennial was celebrated in 2004. This theologian had a tremendous influence on the Church's new attitude of 'openness towards the world' inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). At that time, he had already been teaching for more than fifteen years as a professor in dogmatic theology in Innsbruck (Austria) - soon to be followed by teaching appointments in Münster and Munich (Germany). Karl Rahner had been innovative with respect to pre-Vatican II theology with its focus on abstract creedal formulas rather than on one's concrete experience of God. In this retrospective honoring of Rahner, I will pay due attention to this point. On the other hand, I cannot leave unnoticed that Rahner has been critiqued for being too modern. One of his staunchest critics is the Anglican theologian, John Milbank.

### JOHN MILBANK'S RADICAL ORTHODOXY

In 1990 John Milbank (1952- ) published his famous *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*.<sup>2</sup> In this work he spoke up for theology's independence from modern rationality. After the end of the 'grand stories' of human emancipation, theology could finally afford to return to its own particular sources, without bothering too much about complying with the requirements of an all-encompassing rationality.<sup>3</sup> One of these sources is Saint Augustine's *City of God*.

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1. A more in-depth treatment of the main lines of this article can be found in Georges De Schrijver, *Recent Theological Debates in Europe. Their Impact on Interreligious Dialogue* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004), 1-36 (on Vattimo), 37-122 (on Milbank), 134-144 (on Maréchal), 145-154 (on Rahner's transcendental method), 155-180 (on Heidegger's influence on Rahner), 181-183 (on Christian mysticism), 185-191; 210-215 (on Ignatius of Loyola).

2. (Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

3. This thesis has been elaborated further in John Milbank, 'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions', in *Modern Theology* 7 (1991): 221-232.

Here Milbank finds a description of the Christian way of life characterized by harmony and peace – in contrast to the ‘earthly city’ in which competition and violence are the rule. The Christian community’s charitable behavior is made possible because of God’s invitation for the community to ‘participate’ in the trinitarian life of the divine. Wherever receptivity for this life is missing, pagan attitudes prevail with their emphasis on excellence, competition, and ‘oppositional otherness’. It is only within the church community that ‘non-oppositional otherness’ can flourish, to the point of forming a ‘swelling polyphony’ and growing harmony. Milbank is known for his use of classifications: the ‘good guys’ are on his side, and the ‘bad guys’ on the other. Furthermore, it is the church’s duty to uphold this separation: whoever persists in opting for violence ought to be repelled. The church, as the community of forgiveness, must insist on conversion. Only converts can be welcomed as new members in the community.

In a kaleidoscopic overview of the whole of western civilization, Milbank observes that all the ways of thinking that have cut themselves loose from the supernatural fall prey to violence. This is the case with modern dialectics in which the higher stages of development are attained through the destruction of the preparatory stages: Hegel’s higher synthesis can only triumph on the ashes of its antecedents. In the same vein, Derrida’s plea for rescuing the ‘other’ from the tentacles of a suppressing whole remains stuck in violence, for to reach this goal he is forced to continuously combat this whole. Peaceful co-existence, therefore, as a sign of one’s dedication to God, is only to be found in the Church. This, in a nutshell, is Milbank’s new theological program.

Does Milbank also accuse Rahner of propagating violence? Not directly. This accusation is leveled against liberation theologies in so far as they pick up ideas from Rahner.<sup>4</sup> Rahner himself is blamed

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4. See Georges De Schrijver, “John Milbank’s Attack on Liberation Theologies: A Reply”, *Hapág* 1, No. 2 (2004): 65-78.

for 'naturalizing' the supernatural. In fact, Milbank rejects the whole of Rahner's program because it locates the experience of God in our common daily experience. Rahner seems to admit that religiosity can prosper in the domain modernity holds dear: in humankind's growth towards adulthood in the secular milieu. Therefore, he must be regarded as a follower of Kant, the philosopher who launched the device: 'Dare to make use of your own critical reason instead of relying on external guidance'. And precisely this device has a bearing on Rahner's 'transcendental method'. For in it, Rahner attempts to delve into the conditions of possibility of a given process. But these conditions also put limits on things. In a naturalistic way he explores the contours of what an experience of God means - and is still allowed to mean - to people living in a secular human milieu.

Then comes Milbank's second accusation: in the wake of Kant, Rahner wants to reformulate the traditional explanations of the faith. These explanations smack of a medieval way of thinking that, gauged by modernity's 'universal rationality', must be decried as outdated and terribly particularistic. This explains, Milbank continues, Karl Rahner's preference for 'empty universal schemes' waiting to be filled with a concrete content. Indeed, Rahner has a lot to say about human transcendentalism. For him, our incessant 'going beyond limits' opens the way for the expectancy of a great future. But this expectancy remains empty as long as it is not filled with the praxis of ethical commitment. Here the parallel with Kant is clear. In Kantian thought, we can also observe that the categorical imperative (with its universal schemes) remains 'empty' as long as one does not truly live up to its obligations. But, Milbank laments, in this way the religious impetus receives a purely 'innerworldly' orientation so that one's attention is turned away from the God above us, by whose grace we are allowed to participate in the beauty of His trinitarian life. To the extent that Rahner espouses Kantian categories, Milbank asserts, he strips faith of its supernatural quality. I leave Milbank's considerations for my reader to evaluate. One thing is sure: this Anglican theologian wants

to go back to the religious ‘ghetto’ against which Rahner had warned so vociferously. In this ghetto, religious aesthetics, personal encounter, and emotional piety are the hallmarks. But a real influence on every day life is not to be expected from it, except a disastrous one.

From February 25 till March 4, 2002, Milbank gave a series of lectures at the Philosophical Institute of the Catholic University of Leuven (KULeuven), Belgium. He, however, is not only a successful speaker in Europe. He has for some years now taught systematic theology at the University of Virginia (U.S.A.), where he is forming a school and supervises the publication of the Radical Orthodoxy Series. In this series one finds studies on medieval theology,<sup>5</sup> but also on what a genuine theology of liberation ought to be. In one of them I read to my astonishment that the exploited poor have as their first vocation to forgive their oppressors.<sup>6</sup> I was shocked by it, not because I doubt the value of the Christian virtue of forgiveness, but because such an exhortation is designed to evoke in the oppressed a sense of resignation to their inhumane plight. In the style of “arm chair theologians”, Milbankian scholars disseminate the idea that only renunciation of one’s possessive thirst will have the effect of breaking the power of the neo-liberal economic empire. To bring this vision to reality, however, it is the underdogs themselves who must take responsibility for the situation by giving an example to their oppressors: they are to stay in their misery and forgive their oppressors so that these may be put to shame – this can only be interpreted as the cynical peak of a worldview staging itself as Christian. One easily understands that this type of theologizing has been labeled the ‘new romanticism’.

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5. See Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2000); John Milbank & Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2001); James Smith, *Speech & Theology. Language & the Logos of the Incarnation* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2002).

6. Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology after the End of History. The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2001), 124.

## TRANSCENDENTAL REFLECTION IN THEOLOGY

While Rahner is also a leisurely scholar, his reflections take on a totally different direction - that of religion being in the service of humanity as a whole. His theology attempts to demonstrate that the human condition is moved by a desire to meet God or the 'highest good', a desire which is elicited by Godself.<sup>7</sup> Basically this vision says that God graciously communicates Godself to everybody without privileging particular groups of persons, and that God's self-communication boosts in the one who welcomes it in a vivid sense of human responsibility. For Rahner, the encounter with God enhances one's commitment to the greater good of the human community. It is for this reason that Latin American liberation theologians such as Clodovis Boff and Jon Sobrino drew inspiration from Rahner. From him they learned that struggle for justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed gets a specific élan from one's encounter with God's mystery-depth.

In his formative period, Rahner has undoubtedly been influenced by Kant; in this respect Milbank is right. Yet, as I will argue, two other major influences have also come into play: Rahner's assimilation of Heidegger's existential analysis of our 'being in the world', and his in-depth study of the Church Fathers as well as the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola. Furthermore, Rahner's dependence on Kant must be assessed with due nuances. When assimilating Kant's transcendental method, Rahner incorporates it in a philosophy of religion to become the springboard for his further theological reflections.

I start with Rahner's philosophy of religion. In this domain Rahner has shown how our attempts at knowing – which start with asking questions – bring us into contact with a broader horizon of what 'is' and 'can be' in such a way that this encompassing horizon continues to attract us in our further search for knowledge. Here he

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7. English translations of Rahner's works retain his non-inclusive God-language; I have done the same.

follows the intuition of the Belgian Jesuit Joseph Maréchal (1878-1944) who had earlier embedded into his interpretation of Kantianism a pivotal insight of Aquinas: man's natural desire for beholding God. In Kant's theory of knowledge, the knower distills knowledge from sense impressions with the help of a priori categories of the mind; but these categories can only work when applied to given sense impressions. This means that it is only on the basis of a knowledge that is tied to the materiality of the world that we come in touch with some higher perspective or horizon of meaning. The whole question will revolve around the notion of how we are to specify this 'higher perspective or horizon'. For Kant, this 'higher horizon' is that of the formation of scientific theories related to our expansion of knowledge. For Fichte, Kant's disciple, this 'higher horizon' contains an appeal addressed to us to humanize our world, instead of reducing it to a domain controlled by functional knowledge (as this was still the case with Kant). Now, it is this urge to humanize the world that makes us reach out, beyond all limitation, towards the 'Absolute'. For Fichte, the human being is driven by a dynamic orientation towards a mysterious point  $x$  which he seeks to asymptotically approach. This is the essence of human transcendentalism for him. Maréchal joins in at this juncture. He combines this dynamic orientation with Aquinas' objective approach to reality. As is well known, Aquinas prioritizes reality as given over our attempts at knowing it. This combination leads to a new synthesis. It becomes clear now that the dynamic orientation which makes us reach out for the Absolute brings us into contact with reality, as this reality is creatively called into existence and offered to us by the really existing God (and not just by a God who is a postulate of human dynamics).

In his work *Spirit in the World* (1939),<sup>8</sup> Rahner continues this line of thought. In particular, he brings together three important

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8. K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968).

aspects that play a role in the act of knowing: venturing oneself into the world, enhancing one's conscious existence, and reaching out towards the whole domain of Being. The human person can only reach growing self-clarification by engaging in further acquisitions of knowledge. Self-reflexivity is a conscious return to oneself after having 'gone out' into the world to grasp what is taking place in its entire domain. Crucial in this process is the ever new confrontation with new data that one encounters in the world. It is by reflecting on these new data that one experiences the dynamism of reaching out for the horizon of Being as such – and for the mysterious source that lies at the origin of all existing and possibly existing things. In the mind's reaching out for the 'whole range of Being', the existence of God is co-affirmed. This shows that our human make-up is geared towards the Absolute - towards the God one unthematically becomes aware of in the cognitive acts of everyday life.

To evoke contact with this mysterious source, Rahner has coined a distinctive vocabulary. To describe the dynamic orientation towards the whole range of Being (as the precondition for understanding things in their particularity) he uses the term 'pre-apprehension' (*Vorgriff*). And to articulate contact with God, the creative origin, who 'surfaces' in this act of preapprehension, he has coined the terms 'unthematic' (*unthematisch*), and 'unobjectifiable' (*ungegenständlich*) to describe the dimensions of our knowledge of God. Conscious dealing with things and events of daily life confront us with the presence of an ultimate accompanying horizon which is of a totally different nature than the things thematically known. The evocative terms 'unthematic' and 'unobjectifiable' bring us into the sphere of the Holy. Or, as Rahner puts it in 1941: "Whether they realize it or not, human beings are moved by a basic orientation towards the Absolute - towards a possible self-revelation of God".<sup>9</sup>

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9. K. Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, in *A Rahner Reader*, ed. Gerard McCool (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), 20. "Only that makes the human being into a human being: that he is always already on the way to God whether or not he knows it expressly, whether or not he wills it. He is for ever the infinite openness of the finite for God."



## RAHNER'S TURN TO CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM AND TO HEIDEGGER

Rahner had hoped to obtain a PhD in philosophy with his work *Spirit in the World* but the dissertation was rejected because, in his mentor's view, the work too easily blended elements of Aquinas' method with themes taken from German idealism. Upon the advice of his brother Hugo, also a Jesuit, Karl Rahner turned then to the study of the Church Fathers and would earn in this domain the title of Doctor in Theology.<sup>10</sup> It was in this period that he published two studies on the Christian mysticism of Origen and Bonaventure. In them one finds a description of mystical union in terms of the experience of God's immediate presence (*Erfahrung der Unmittelbarkeit Gottes*), a characterization that will become crucial in Rahner's theologizing.

Rahner discovers that Bonaventure (1217-1274) discerns two stages in the mystical itinerary. In the first stage, the accent is on the creaturely means that are used to come into contact with the domain of the mysterious in God, such as emptying oneself and acquiring the right disposition towards this encounter, etc. In the second stage, one has to deal with the experience of being overwhelmed by God's stupendous nearness, which takes place without any creaturely mediation or effort. One's search for God is relegated to the background at this level for it is God's very self who draws near 'in immediacy' and without any further mediation. The knowledge of God resulting from it is affective rather than notional. This knowledge brings the mystic into an atmosphere of intense consolation but also of growing darkness. For the encounter with God in the fullness of light is only possible in the afterlife, in the beatific vision. In his later studies on the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, Rahner comes

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10. See Karl Rahner, "E latere Christi: Der Ursprung der Kirche als zweiter Eva aus der Seite Christi des zweiten Adam. Eine Untersuchung über den typologischen Sinn von Joh 19, 34," (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Theological Faculty, University of Innsbruck, 1936).

back to this insight. There he will also describe the mystical union as a 'consolation without any preceding (creaturely) cause': God's drawing near in immediacy cannot be produced by a human being. One can only prepare oneself for such a breathtaking encounter.

All this has a bearing on Rahner's theologizing. In his *Theological Investigations*<sup>11</sup> he examines exactly what happens to someone who experiences God's grace. As some theologians see it, this experience only deepens our basic orientation towards God (not that much different from man's natural desire for God I have touched upon above). Rahner, however, rejects this view and makes it clear that the experience of God's grace is nothing but an encounter with God's drawing near in immediacy. He even goes a step further. Based on the testimony of both the scriptures and the mystics, he holds that the human being – and for Rahner this means every human being – has been created to experience God's immediacy within the contours of one's very being. Just as in his philosophy of religion Rahner maintained that every human being is oriented toward a possible self-revelation of God, so too, when speaking as a theologian, he now underlines the human being's capacity to experience God's drawing near in all-fulfilling nearness. Yet he will add, human beings also have the freedom either to accept or to reject this offer of grace. The deliberate rejection of God's offer of grace is what constitutes the domain of human sinfulness.

This brings me to the Heideggerian layers in Rahner's theology. During his studies in Freiburg, Rahner attended classes given by Heidegger. Heidegger's influence on Rahner is visible in the way in which Rahner dwells on certain structural conditions (in German: *Existentialien*) which seem to characterize human existence. Heidegger has listed some of these existential conditions such as 'our thrownness into existence' and 'our exposure to death'. Human freedom is not

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11. The German edition of *Theological Writings (Schriften zur Theologie)* comprises 16 volumes published between 1954 and 1984.

as ‘unlimited’ as modern thinking would have us believe; it is marked by limitations and by negative experiences that render our existence ambivalent. In his reflections on human freedom, Rahner follows this line of thought. For him, human freedom must be understood within the context of our corporeality and the necessity of our material exchange with fellow human beings and with nature. The human being is female or male, lives in a particular cultural milieu, and is part of an ethnic group. This makes us understand to what extent external influences put limits on the unrestrained freedom we would like to enjoy.

We are thus only able to exercise our liberty in a pre-given milieu that has a negative or positive bearing on our decisions. The spontaneity of our freedom will consist mostly in saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to a situation that intrudes upon us from outside and which influences our mode of existence. In this context, Rahner has delved more deeply into what has, in the theological tradition, come to be termed ‘original sin’ – a transmission of fallenness. For him, our freedom does not start from scratch. It is always colored by the devastating but also promising decisions which generations before us have taken. Honesty demands that we acknowledge the extent to which our lives are interwoven with the history of grace and disgrace of the whole of humankind.

Recent studies on Rahner have come to appreciate this Heideggerian influence as a welcome counterpart to Rahner’s modern transcendental approach. They point out that Rahner is much less optimistic than this is usually accepted. Yet his theology continues to announce the good news. Even when Rahner sometimes calls attention to the overwhelming presence of negative structural conditions (the so-called ‘existentials’), his message concerning the ‘supernatural existential’ will overrule these negative effects. In Heideggerian parlance, he formulates his theology of grace as follows: no matter whether they realize it or not, human beings – and this means again every human being – find themselves in a structural condition in

which God, on God's own initiative, draws near to them in amazing immediacy. I find this a very happy formulation. It evokes something existential (when one experiences it, one experiences 'blissfulness'); but at the same time it points to something which is constitutive of human existence, which means that nobody is excluded from this event because it is genuinely part of our supernatural structural condition (*übernatuerliches Existential*).

There is, however, another commonality with Heidegger. In his early period, this philosopher had insisted on the need to take existential decisions in the midst of our 'exposure to death'. He has emphasized later that this 'choosing for oneself' must be complemented with receptivity towards the 'Ground of Being' who from its own initiative draws near to us in our every day existence. To 'open oneself up' to this unfathomable Ground brings one into the sphere of the Holy, who both discloses itself and withdraws itself in its sacred domain. Those who realize this begin to understand that one's ecstatic reaching out for the 'Ground' is in fact already a response elicited by the self-disclosure of this Ground. Rahner develops the same idea. He also attaches much importance to our existential decisions and, like the late Heidegger, sees these decisions as a response to the amazing drawing near of God in immediacy. To convey the great event of the drawing near of the abysmal Ground, he coins his own terminology. Rahner increasingly comes to describe God as the fulfilling mystery-depth that discloses itself in its incomprehensibility and immediate presence. Even in Rahner's later writings, he continues to speak about the 'nameless' One whom we come to know only unthematically and in a non-objectifying way. He no longer relates these terms to the striving of our human intellect toward the mysterious point x. The terms 'unthematic' and 'non-objectifiable' are used now to express the drawing near of the Absolute Mystery. Similarly his notion of pre-apprehension (*Vorgriff*) takes on a different meaning. It no longer points to a dynamism that makes the intellect reach out for the Absolute. This movement is

now seen as a religious response to the drawing near of the absolute mystery in amazing nearness.

### **A GOD CHARACTERIZED BY SELF-COMMUNICATION**

It will have become clear that Rahner's God is a God of self-communication. For him this insight is so overwhelming that he makes it the pivotal element in his explanation of the Trinity and how it comes to call into existence a creation in which the Son (the Word) is to become flesh. The Christian God is not a solitary God. If instead of the opening verse of the Johannine gospel ('In the beginning was the Word') one would read 'In the beginning was the Godhead', then that which was in the beginning would immediately 'branch off' without any loss of unity. Right from the outset, an outflow emerges from the Source-deity (the Father) who is nothing else but the Father's 'other-of-himself': the figure through which the Father expresses and exteriorizes himself. With the Hegelian term 'the-other-of-himself', Rahner evokes both the self-utterance of the Father in the Word (the Son) and the mutual bond between them namely, the Holy Spirit. Rahner extends this process to the creation of the world: Creation 'out of nothing' lies in the prolongation of what happened in the trinitarian 'branching off'. In the act of creation, the Godhead also exteriorizes itself through a self-expression that is no longer confined to the inner-divine domain but which comprises the whole realm of finitude, of 'nothingness', and manyness.

This venturing of God into finitude must be explored from two sides. Firstly, the creation that is called into being (as self-utterance of God) is a creation with a material basis – a material basis caught up in a movement of self-transcendence towards spirit and intellect (and it is onto this self-transcendence that the transcendence of the mind towards 'the whole realm of Being' is grafted). Secondly, the self-transcending creation serves as the grammar for God's expressive self-communication to the created realm. In Rahner's view the world

is the non-divine domain to which God communicates Godself, just as the Son is the one whom this self-communication befalls in the interior life of the deity.

To evoke the creature's response to the divine self-communication, Rahner has recourse to a theme developed by the Church Fathers: the 'deification of the human being'. But here he underlines that this supernatural elevation keeps the human being in the corporeal contours of inner-worldly existence. This emphasis comes clearly to the fore in his picture of the incarnate Son. In him one may behold how, from the depths of human liberty and in spite of being entangled in the vicissitudes of temporality, a 'divine' response is given to the Father. The Word incarnate acts through the life options of a human being confronted with the unforeseeable, thus expressing the risk God takes in communicating himself to the 'world'.

This sketch is still deductive, in line with Rahner's transcendental method. In the course of his theologizing, however, Rahner has increasingly integrated elements from the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola and from Heideggerian thought. In his reflection on the eternal significance of Jesus' humanity, Rahner underlines the importance of Jesus' corporeal existence as well as his corporeal relationship with the human beings around him and with humanity as such. Jesus' divine mode of existence becomes, through his incarnation, a human mode of existence that is entirely situated in history. In his humanity, he shares with us the effects of both the tragic and the grace-filled decisions taken by previous generations, decisions which to some extent must be acknowledged as determining the spontaneity of human freedom. Yet it is exactly in this domain that he will say 'yes' to God's incomprehensible mystery as this communicates itself to him in overwhelming nearness. He also articulates this 'yes' in the difficult moments in which his radical message of love of the neighbor and his commitment to outcasts have come to meet with deadly resistance. Jesus is the godly figure who has fully accepted and integrated God's offer of grace in the

exercise of his human liberty – a liberty that (to speak with Ignatius of Loyola) has put itself completely in the service of the divine majesty.

Looking at Jesus through the lens of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Rahner sees in him the ‘contagious’ beginning of a new way of life. The early Heidegger was still left with an unresolved crux. For how can one whose existence is fatally exposed to death succeed in making an existential option that enables one to overcome this fatality? In Rahner’s presentation of Jesus’ life, this difficulty has been resolved. It must be admitted that Jesus, in the concrete circumstances of his human existence, had to come to grips with the negative effects that flow from structural limitations of the human condition. Jesus, however, was able to withstand the negative aspects of a history of sin because of his intimate dealing with the Father or, in Rahnerian terms, because of his spontaneous welcoming of the divine mystery-depth offering itself in immediacy to him. This welcoming made him grow as a responsible person and this process exerted an irresistible lure on his environment.

At this juncture, Rahner is able to highlight an aspect that he did not develop in his earlier work: the transforming character of one’s encounter with God. One’s intimate dealing with the divine mystery-depth ‘personalizes’ human beings; it prompts them to develop a growing psychological strength and generosity and challenges them to engage in a struggle against structural injustice. For Rahner, this can become the lot of every one who follows Jesus. To the amazement perhaps of many, Rahner specifies that such a following of Jesus can also be undertaken by people who, because they belong to a different culture, have never even heard of Jesus Christ, or by modern atheists – those who find themselves unable to recognize the figure of Christ in the institutional Church and its centralized power structure. It would not take long before Rahner came to realize that there must exist something like an ‘anonymous Christianity’, a Christian way of life outside the confines of the institutional Church.

Rahner logically came to the conclusion that God's drawing near in immediacy is a structural given that befalls every human being without discrimination – in whatever race or culture these human beings find themselves and whatever the causes to which they are truly committed. It is given to each of them to develop a psychological strength that flows from their intimate encounter with God. Rahner's thesis, however, has met the strong disapproval of theologians with an inner-ecclesial orientation. John Milbank, as we have seen, is one of them.<sup>12</sup>

### RAHNER'S OPENNESS TOWARDS THE WORLD AND HIS JESUITICAL INSPIRATION

Whether read from a transcendental-philosophical or a Heideggerian perspective, it is evident for Rahner that the ordinary experience of every day life rather than a closed and inward-looking ecclesial existence is the context in which God is to be found. One may call this a typically modern feature in Rahner's thought insofar as he goes beyond a particular faith expression to espouse a more universal concern. This turn towards the universal, however, cannot be easily linked with a colonizing modernity engaged in conquest and subjugation. For this reason, I have entitled this article: 'Karl Rahner: a theologian of "open" modernity'. It would, indeed, be grotesque to maintain that Rahner's theory of 'anonymous Christianity' is inspired by a policy of annexation. Rather, the contrary is true: he wants to sensitize his fellow-Christians to the undeniable reality that, outside of their own cultural milieu, there are so many other human beings to whom God also communicates Godself in challenging immediacy.

Rahner's concern is to highlight the universality of God's self-communication without restriction. I concede – and in this Milbank was correct – that the stress on this universality gives his theologizing

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12. One of the first staunch reactions was that of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1966).



a modern tonality. But this does not mean at all that Rahner arrogates to himself a superior platform from where to enunciate stringent logical statements about the whole of reality in the style of absolute idealism. Rahner's thought always retains a quality of humility that bows its head before the Creator God and his desire to intimately communicate himself to humans. This stance of humility is also visible in his Heideggerian approach to the structural conditions of grace and disgrace in which we are entangled as a consequence of our human freedom. Here too, he uses 'universal' categories (phenomenologically filled in this time) but only to evoke the marvel of encountering God in the midst of our 'being-in-the-world, no matter how this 'being in the world' is lived in varying cultural settings.

Within the framework of an 'open modernity', Rahner stands out as a truly committed thinker. For him, to be forced to make decisions is essential to our human make-up and to the deep religiosity that emerges from it. The encounter with God who offers himself in 'immediacy' intensifies this decision making process and pushes it in a certain direction. In order to explain this concept, Rahner refers to the 'odd' logic of generosity and service that comes into play when somebody immerses him/herself in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola. In these Exercises, the search for God's will is always particular (i.e., carried out by particular persons) just as the divine will and the circumstances are always particular. Thus, Rahner concludes, when the generous person offers him/herself to be 'used' by the divine majesty for the spreading of his love and concern, the concrete choice s/he makes can never be deduced from general principles. Such a deduction would make the choice bloodless. What actually happens is that the renewed life-option defies prevailing rules and norms and appears to have a dissident ring about it. The only thing that matters is to discern what God 'demands from me' in these concrete circumstances in view of the in-breaking of his reign of love and justice. The imperative of a personal choice results from a profoundly personal encounter with God's mystery-depth drawing near in overwhelming presence.

In addition to Rahner's commentaries on the *Spiritual Exercises*, perhaps the most remarkable document that he wrote on this topic is his *Address of Ignatius of Loyola to a Jesuit of Today* published in 1978.<sup>13</sup> In this address, Rahner uses a fictional technique in which he stages Ignatius (from the place where he is enthroned in heaven) addressing the Jesuits as Rahner believes he would if he were alive today. This allows Rahner to reveal what he himself has learned from Ignatius and to point out possible distortions and limitations that may have crept into the transmission of his charisma. From the onset, the Rahnerian Ignatius says: "If I have anything to tell you, it is this: I have encountered God in immediacy, the abysmal, nameless mystery that has revealed itself to me in its unfathomable being".<sup>14</sup>

It is the vocation of the Jesuits to 'awaken' in others this experience of God by initiating them into the *Spiritual Exercises*. But apparently not every Jesuit knows how to do this; a great many of them think they will bring people closer to God through intellectual persuasion and doctrine, thereby forgetting that it is only by bringing to life an inner 'wellspring' that a vivid encounter with God can be 'felt' and anchored in the deep waters of one's personality. And then comes a sentence that is worth rendering: "The awakening of such an experience of the divine consists in 'allowing to come home' more explicitly – and eagerly welcoming – that which is always already 'given' with our human make-up. This 'co-given' may be hidden and even suppressed, but nobody can really run away from it. It bears the name 'grace': God's drawing near to us in immediacy".<sup>15</sup>

In the next step, the Rahnerian Ignatius lists the various effects that flow from this encounter. There is, first of all, the enhanced capacity for taking existential decisions: those being touched by God's mystery-depth develop a feel for bringing their choices in line with

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13. Karl Rahner, *Rede des Ignatius von Loyola an einem Jesuiten von heute*, in Karl Rahner/Paul Imhof, *Ignatius von Loyola* (Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder, 1978).

14. *Ibid.*, 13.

15. *Ibid.*, 14.

the impulses of the indwelling divine Ground. Second, this reorientation transforms them into the instruments that the divine majesty needs in order to incarnate his caring concern into the deepest layers of the human social fabric: the encounter with God in immediacy propels the person in question to succor the neighbor. Third, this attitude of service undergoes a deepening, as soon as one decides to follow the 'humble' and 'poor' Jesus – for Rahner the culmination of Ignatian spirituality. In this context, the Rahnerian Ignatius invites the Jesuits to examine their conscience. Are they nowadays sufficiently preoccupied with what Ignatius and his companions used to do in their own day: to wander around with the beggar's staff and to share their mendicant's bread with the poor? Are they still serving in hospitals, and concerned about the dire predicament of prostitutes? But it is possible, the Rahnerian Ignatius adds, that today this field of charitable works must be approached more structurally by looking at the economic and political forces that perpetuate social disparities? A step in the right direction, at any rate, were the decrees of the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation the Jesuits held in 1974, stipulating that the proclamation of faith must go hand in hand with the promotion of social justice – a step which would bring them into conflict with the policies of John Paul II.<sup>16</sup>

As to the Jesuits' ecclesiastical loyalty, the Rahnerian Ignatius also has something worthy of consideration to say. From their origin the Jesuits are a charismatic group who succeeded in having their constitutions approved by the Church hierarchy. This implies that they will usually support the hierarchy but that they will also critique it whenever it is keen on grabbing power instead of clearing the

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16. On 07 August 1981, the Superior General of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe, suffered a stroke and was unable to continue his mandate. On August 26, John Paul II, against the procedures foreseen in the Constitutions of the Jesuits for electing a new general, nominated the Jesuit Paolo Dezza as his personal 'Delegate' endowed with the powers of Superior General. Karl Rahner was one of the first to vehemently critique this move which placed the Society of Jesus under 'tutelage'. Dezza remained in this function till September 1983 when Peter Hans Kolvenbach was elected Superior General.

path for the faithful to experience their 'God within': the mystery-depth of God drawing near in immediacy. Whenever this happens, criticism of the institution is in place even if in the past the Jesuits have perhaps not sufficiently manifested their disagreement. The Rahnerian Ignatius lamented that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Jesuits accepted in blind obedience their expulsion from Latin America where they were doing a good job in the *reducciones* of the indio-communities. He also bewailed the fact that they have not protested when the Vatican censured their missionary method in China, a method which precisely acknowledged that people of other cultures are also able to deeply experience the unfathomable mystery of God.

The address ends with a reflection on the possible extinction of religious orders and institutions. What if the Jesuits as an organization would cease to exist? Would it mean that by this very fact the charisma of the founder has also expired? In this context, Rahner refers to a statement of Ignatius saying that it would take him only a few minutes to digest the news that the order was suppressed. His faith in the dynamizing effects of the 'God-experience in immediacy' was so great that it was beyond doubt for him that if the order would disappear, the initiatives for which it was founded would before long rise up again in new forms. No limits can be put to God's self-communication and the challenging effects that flow from it. This is regardless of the extent to which a highly secularized cultural climate, such as that of contemporary Europe, might appear to contradict this expectation.

The *Address of Ignatius of Loyola to a Jesuit Today* can rightly be regarded as Rahner's spiritual testament. He has always lived by the inspiration of this address. The encounter with God which he has experienced and which he rendered thematic in all of his writings made him intrepid. In Rahner, the church has witnessed a prophetic voice, the voice of a 'classic' who, if necessary, could rebel against ecclesiastical authority in the name of God himself.

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