

# Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology

About the BCE

WeirdWildWeb

About the Editor

## Karl Rahner (1904-1984)

Table of Contents
1. Background
2. Works (Selected List)
3. Themes
4. Outline of Major Works
5. Relation to Other Thinkers
6. Bibliography and Works Cited
7. Internet Resources
8. Related Topics

How does one approach the study of the German, Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner? While no one work can be pointed to as an example of his "systematic" theological program, he has written on almost every theological topic. His thought is multifaceted, original, and certainly dense. This essay will offer two things. First, it offers an opportunity to understand something of the life history of Karl Rahner by means of a brief outline. Second, it offers a glimpse of his theological approach by focusing on some of his foundational ideas. In order to understand him we will investigate some of the phrases he coined such as "self-communication of God," "supernatural existential," "mystical moment," "thematic" and "unthematic" experience, "transcendental," "fundamental option," and "anonymous Christians." Yet, while we may describe him as a theologian, it was, for him, never merely a choice between philosophy or theology. He lived by the conviction that both belong together. For Rahner, theology implies a philosophical anthropology, and human existence implies the experience of God. It is this insight that best alerts us to his primary concern. However, before continuing with his theological program, let us turn now to a sketch of his life.

### 1. Background

#### Early Years

Karl Rahner was born March 5, 1904, in the city of Freiburg in Breisgau, Germany. His parents, Karl and Luise (Trescher) Rahner, had seven children, of which Karl was the fourth. His father was a professor in a local college. His mother's religious influence in the home resulted in an atmosphere that was both open and pious. Karl attended primary and secondary school in Freiburg, which seems to have had a reputation for being tolerant and liberal minded. Karl decided to enter the Society of Jesus upon graduation, and began his novitiate in the North German Province of the Jesuits on April 20, 1922, four years after his older brother Hugo entered the same Order. During the initial phase of the novitiate (1920-24) Rahner was deeply affected by the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, that later was to permeate his whole theological program, especially the notion of "finding God in all things." Karl Rahner's education during the next phase of the novitiate (1924-7) included an introduction to the Catholic scholastic philosophy and modern German philosophers. He seems especially to have been interested in Immanuel Kant and two contemporary Thomists, Joseph Maréchal and Pierre Rousselot. These latter two were to influence Rahner's understanding of Thomas Aquinas (as well as to offer a way to deal with Kant's transcendental method in relation to Thomistic epistemology).

During the first years of his Jesuit formation Rahner was deeply taken by Ignatian spirituality, as reflected in his first article, "Why We Need to Pray," which appeared in the journal *Leuchtturm* ('Lighthouse'). While studying philosophy in Feldkirch and Pullach (1922-1927), Rahner had the opportunity to become acquainted with Immanuel Kant, along with the Belgian Jesuit Joseph Maréchal and the French Jesuit Pierre Rousselot. As Rahner himself later mentioned, these two Jesuit philosophers, especially Maréchal, deeply influenced his own philosophical and theological work. Maréchal was famous for his study on Kant and Thomism, especially for applying Kant's transcendental method to Thomistic epistemology (Vorgrimler 1986, 51).

Since Jesuit training included a period of practical work, Rahner was assigned to teach Latin to the novices at Feldkirch (1927-29). After this, he began his theological studies at the Jesuit theologate in Valkenburg, Holland in 1929, which allowed him to develop a thorough grasp of patristic theology. He was also interested in spiritual theology, mysticism and the history of piety. On July 26, 1932, Rahner was ordained priest and then began his last year of required theological training, which was devoted to prayer and gaining pastoral experience before starting formal ministry. Rahner completed this training at St. Andra, Austria in 1933. He then spent the "silent year" of the Tertiate in St. Andrea in Austria's Lavanttal Valley.

#### Philosophy and Theology Together

Since Rahner's superiors had decided that he would teach philosophy at Pullach, he returned home to Freiburg in 1934 to study for the doctorate in philosophy. During this time he delved more deeply into the philosophy of Kant and Maréchal, while at the same time attending seminars by Martin Heidegger. Rahner participated in the demanding seminar taught by Heidegger for two years, as a result of which he became one of the so-called, Catholic Heidegger School (an effort to unite Heideggerian insights with a reinterpretation of the thought of Thomas Aquinas), along with J.B. Lotz, G. Siewerth, B. Welte, and M. Müller. His philosophy dissertation *Geist im Welt*, an intriguing interpretation of Aquinas's epistemology influenced by the transcendental Thomism of Joseph Maréchal and the existentialism of Martin Heidegger (that is, the relation between Aquinas's notion of dynamic mind and Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world), was ultimately rejected by his mentor Martin Honecker apparently because it

was influenced too much by Heidegger and did not sufficiently express the Catholic neo-scholastic tradition. According to Vorgrimler, Honecker's rejection of Rahner's dissertation reflected the former's antipathy toward Heidegger's philosophy (Vorgrimler 1986, 62). Thirty four years later the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Innsbruck gave him an honorary doctorate for his philosophical works, especially for his failed dissertation, published in 1939 as *Geist in Welt* (*Spirit in the World*, hereafter *SW*). Yet, it was in the early 1930s that Rahner elucidated his conviction that the human search for meaning was rooted in the unlimited horizon of God's own being experienced within the world.

In 1936 Rahner was moved to Innsbruck by his superiors to continue his theological studies. With his previous knowledge of patristic theology he completed his *habilitationsschrift* (a second dissertation qualifying one to teach at the university level), "From the side of Christ: The origin of the church as second Eve from the side of Christ the second Adam. An examination of the typological meaning of John 19:34" in 1937. Soon after the completion of this work he was appointed a *Privatdozent* (lecturer) in the faculty of theology of the University of Innsbruck in July, 1937.

Despite the rejection of his first dissertation in philosophy, Rahner's interest in philosophy was still alive and even "almost superstitious" (Kress 1982, 3). During the summer of 1937 Rahner delivered a series of lectures to the Salzburg Summer School on "Foundations of a Philosophy of Religion," which were later published in 1941 as *Hörer des Wortes* (*Hearers of the Word*, hereafter *HW*), which represented another step in the development of Rahner's philosophical anthropology. This too represented a dialogue between Thomistic metaphysics and Heidegger's phenomenological ontology. Rahner, using Heidegger's notion that the question of the meaning of one's being is preceded by a "pregrasp" of the world's horizon of meaning, said that the search and longing of the human subject for meaning of experience is grounded in a "preconceptual" grasp of God's infinite horizon of being as a condition (and fulfillment) of the human search for meaning. Together with *SW*, this book demonstrated Rahner's philosophical views underlying his whole theological system. While in *SW* Rahner provided a general philosophical anthropology, in *HW* he applied this specifically to theological matters, especially to the question of revelation.

In 1939 the Nazis took over the University and Rahner, while staying in Austria, was invited to Vienna to work in the Pastoral Institute, where he both taught at the institute and became active in pastoral work. During the war (1939-1949) Rahner had to leave Germany for Vienna, where he taught theology and worked as a pastor.

## Post-war Years: Teaching, Writing and Controversy

In 1948-9 Rahner returned to the theology faculty at Innsbruck and taught on a wide variety of topics which were to become the essays published in *Schriften zur Theologie* (*Theological Investigations*). The *Investigations* is not a systematic presentation of Rahner's views, but, rather, is a diverse collection of essays on theological topics characterized by his probing, questioning search for truth.

Rahner was to develop difficulties with Rome. His outspoken, frank approach to issues and his creative, challenging and non-traditional approach to theology often got him into trouble with the authorities who tended to be more traditionally minded, especially on the issue of the "unchangeable" teachings of the Catholic Church. In 1962, however, with no prior warning Rahner's superiors in the Order told him that he was under Roman pre-censorship, which meant that he could not publish or lecture without prior permission. The basic objections of the Roman authorities focused, essentially, on Rahner's views on the eucharist and Mariology. However, the practical import of this decision was evacuated in November 1962 when, without any objection, John XXIII appointed Rahner a *peritus* (expert advisor) to the Second Vatican Council. Rahner had complete access to the council and numerous opportunities to share his thought. Rahner's influence at Vatican II was widespread. He was chosen as one of seven theologians who would develop *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic explication of the doctrine of the Church, and he had input to many of the other conciliar presentations as well. The council's openness to other religious traditions can be linked to Rahner's notions of the renovation of the church, God's universal salvific revelation and his desire to support and encourage the ecumenical movement. According to Vorgrimler, it is not hard to trace Rahner's influence on the work of the Council (with the exception, however, of four texts: the Decree On the Means of Social Communication, the Decree On the Catholic Eastern Churches, the Declaration on Christian education, and the Declaration on Religious Liberty) (Vorgrimler 1986, 100).

During the council Rahner was invited to take the Chair for Christianity and the Philosophy of Religion at the University of Munich. He accepted the chair in philosophy and began teaching in 1964. The lectures in Munich were to be the core material published in his more systematic *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (*Foundations of Christian Faith*). Unfortunately, since the chair he held was in philosophy, Rahner was not involved in the direct preparation of doctoral students, something he greatly desired. As a result, he accepted a chair in dogmatic theology in the Catholic theological faculty of the University of Münster, where he stayed until his retirement in 1971.

## The Final Years

Moving to Munich, and finally to Innsbruck in 1981, he remained for the next 13 years an active writer and lecturer, and continued active pastoral ministry. He continued to publish volumes (23 total in English) of collected essays for the *Schriften zur Theologie* (*Theological Investigations*), expanded the *Kleines theologisches Wörterbuch* (*Theological Dictionary*), and co-authored other works such as *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility* with Heinrich Fries. In 1976 he finally completed the long-promised systematic work, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (hereafter, *FCF*). Rahner died on 30 March 1984 at the age of 80.

Rahner's works are extraordinarily voluminous. In addition to the writings that have been mentioned previously his other major works include: the ten-volume encyclopedia, *Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche*; a six-volume theological encyclopedia, *Sacramentum Mundi*, and many other books, edited books, and articles. In addition to his own work, the reference works that Rahner edited also added significantly to the general impact of his own theological views.

## 2. Works (Selected List)

*Geist in Welt* (1939, 1957, ET *Spirit in the World*, 1994), *Hörer des Wortes* (1941, ET *Hearers of the Word*, 1969), *Schriften zur Theologie* (ET *Theological Investigations*, 23 vols., 1961-92), *Foundations of Christian Faith* (1976, ET 1978).

## 3. Themes

### Philosophical Foundations

It is impossible to understand Karl Rahner's theological method without a firm grasp of the philosophical perspective developed in his first books, *SW* and *HW*. However, since these texts are not our main concern, I give them only brief attention. In *SW*, which was intended as his philosophical dissertation, Rahner develops, "under the general influence of Maréchal and with a few particular borrowings from Heidegger, a rereading of Aquinas through the lens of Kant and the post-Kantians" (Kilby 2004, 14). Here Rahner analyzes a single question in St. Thomas' *Summa Theologica* (I, Q84, a7), "Can the intellect actually know anything through the intelligible species which it possesses, without turning to the phantasms?" This question is important for Rahner, since in this question Aquinas comes to a fundamental metaphysical issue: How can the human intellect know any non-sensible thing or God? Thomas provides three modes of this type of metaphysical apprehension: *excessus* (eminence or excess), *comparatio* (comparison), and *remotio* (removal or negation). In the "Reply to Objection 3" Aquinas argues,

Incorporeal things, of which there are no phantasms, are known to us by comparison with sensible bodies of which there are phantasms. Thus we understand truth by considering a thing of which we possess the truth; and God, as Dionysius says (Div. Nom. i), we know as cause, by way of excess [*excessus*] and by way of remotio [*remotio*]. Other incorporeal substances we know, in the present state of life, only by way of remotio [*remotio*] or by some comparison [*comparatio*] to corporeal things. And, therefore, when we understand something about these things, we need to turn to phantasms of bodies, although there are no phantasms of the things themselves.

It is clear that Rahner focuses his attention in *SW* on *excessus*. He writes,

The *excessus* to metaphysics, which takes place in a conversion to the phantasm, is considered as a condition of the truth of the human experience of the world and metaphysics, insofar as it is on the one hand related to the world possessed in sensation and so always consists in a consideration of the thing through a conversion into phantasm, and yet on the other hand it contains a being-set-apart from knowledge and thing, and only in this does the knowledge become truth and the thing become object. In this being-set-apart, truth appears over against the world and thus is possible only in an *excessus* beyond the world which is possessed in sensation. Therefore it already belongs in the realm of metaphysics. (*SW*, 54)

This long citation reflects Rahner's conversations with Heidegger. Heidegger's focus on the importance of being-in-the-world ("*in-der-Welt-Sein*") is for Rahner similar to his notion of spirit-in-the-world, or in the citation above, "the human experience of the world." Yet, in order for the human spirit to be in the world, it must simultaneously be "being-set-apart ... against the world." This is possible through the *excessus*, or in Rahner's term, borrowed loosely from Heidegger, the pre-apprehension (*Vorgriff*). It is through the pre-apprehension of being (*Vorgriff auf esse*) that human spirit "reaches out toward what is nameless and by its very nature is infinite" (*FCF*, 62) or "reaches out beyond the word and knows the metaphysical" (*SW*, liii). The pre-apprehension itself is the condition of spirit transcending itself toward the infinite being, while still remaining in the world. Thus, Rahner modifies Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* that moves the self toward nothing, being-toward-death. On the contrary, argued Rahner, "the *Vorgriff* attains to a 'more' rather than to a 'nothing'" (Carr 1977, 75).

Rahner also holds that we cannot distinguish knowing from being. It is human being or spirit that knows the worldly reality as well as the infinite absolute or God. Yet, in his theological works we find that Rahner maintains that God is both known and unknown (more on this below). Accordingly, God is a mysterious Being who is incomprehensible apart from God's self-communication to the world. In contrast to Schleiermacher's understanding of God as "Whence," Rahner offers the understanding of God's mysterious being as the "Whither" of pre-apprehension. Yet, he argues dialectically, "This totality, precisely as the 'whither' of the pre-apprehension, cannot be the subsequent sum, but only the original unity of the possible objects" (*SW*, 145). Thus, God is both the origin and goal of all reality. In short, God is the horizon of all beings. He states, "We seem to know God, the 'object' of metaphysics, only as the necessary horizon of the experience of world which is possible only in this way" (*SW*, 407).

I have focused my exposition above on Rahner's philosophical thought as appeared in his *SW*. His other book, *HW*, deals with the same issues and problems, but it establishes a transition from his more philosophical work to his later theological writings.

### Theological Methods

#### Philosophizing within Theology

As we have seen, Rahner is so eager to put theology into dialogue with philosophy that one cannot find in his writings any position that is not informed by his philosophical perspective. In Rahner's own words, what he proposes is to relate both philosophy and theology by "philosophizing ... within theology itself" (*FCF*, 10). Yet, what he means by philosophy is particularly an anthropological philosophy, which focuses on humanity as the "universal question" (*FCF*, 11). Thus, philosophy refers to the question of human beings within their infinite horizon without any reference to the revealed sources. For Rahner the fact that Christianity can be the

answer requires that we do theology. Moreover, the encounter between the question and the answer is made possible by understanding God's revelation as the "point of mediation" between both (FCF, 11).

To some extent, Rahner's approach is similar to Tillich's method of correlation, which interrelates "existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence" (Tillich 1950, 60). Yet, as Fiorenza suggests, the difference between them is that of "a Catholic sacramental vision of the world as graced ... and a Lutheran vision that is sensitive to the ambiguities and sinfulness of the human condition" (in Livingstone 2000, 211).

### Transcendental-Anthropological Method

How does Rahner develop this philosophical theology? It is clear that in building his own system, Rahner always starts from the human as an existential unity, who is simultaneously *historical* and *transcendental*. On the one hand, the historical dimension of human being refers to the fact that we are always connected to the world through our spatio-temporal and actual ("categorical" in Rahner's terms) experiences. In this sense, categorical experience is a *posteriori* experience. Even, Rahner maintains, our transcendental knowledge or experience of God, which is conditioned by our transcendentality, is also a *posteriori*, since it is "mediated by a categorical encounter with concrete reality in our world, both the world of things and the world of persons" (FCF, 52).

On the other hand, there is an *a priori* or given element in all human beings that makes it possible for them to reach out to the infinite and to receive God's grace. This condition orients us not only in the direction of experiencing God but also in the direction of experiencing ourselves as transcendental subjects. Those two experiences, thus, "are not simply identical, still both of them exist within a unity of such a kind that apart from this unity it is quite impossible for there to be any such experiences at all" (Rahner 1993, 222).

This is the transcendentality of human being that is basic to Rahner's notion of the pre-apprehension of being (*Vorgriff auf esse*). He says, "Man is a transcendent being insofar as all of his knowledge and all of his conscious activity is grounded in a pre-apprehension (*Vorgriff*) of 'being' as such, in an unthematic but ever-present knowledge of the infinity of reality" (FCF, 33). Thus, while the term "transcendental" or "transcendent" previously (e.g. in Scholasticism) referred to the quality of a being (e.g. God) that is beyond any category, Rahner now applies it to human beings as well.

For Rahner it is important to remember that we do not experience our transcendentality without also experiencing our historicity. The question of how these two features—transcendentality and historicity—correlate to each other is undoubtedly paramount in Rahner's theology. Human transcendental experience of the infinite always takes place within real history and thus makes human beings always return to themselves.

But because we know the world objectively, we are always already present to ourselves in a complete return; in turning out to the world we have turned back to ourselves. But then the horizon of the possible experience of world necessarily becomes a theme itself, metaphysics becomes necessary in man's existence. Insofar as we ask about the world known by man, the world and the man asking are already placed in question all the way back to their absolute ground, to a ground which always lies beyond the boundaries within man's grasp, beyond the world. (SW, 407)

Therefore, there is a dynamic oscillation (*Schwebe*) between transcendentality and historicity within human life. We are all fundamentally paradoxical, if not ambivalent. We swing from one pole to another all the time. Rahner continues,

Thus man is the mid-point [*schwebende Mitte*] suspended between the world and God, between time and eternity, and this boundary line is the point of his definition and his destiny: "as a certain horizon and border between the corporeal and incorporeal (ibid.)

The notion of *Schwebe* helps Rahner to elaborate his understanding of human "being" as presence-to-self (*Beisichsein des Seins*). One finds this motif throughout Rahner's theological works. In FCF, for instance, Rahner says, "Being a person, then, means the self-possession of a subject as such in a conscious and free relationship to the totality of itself" (FCF, 30). Thus, there is always a dynamic of turning to the subjective self, or in Thomas's words, "a complete return of the subject to itself" (*reditio completa subjecti in seipsum*) (Rahner 1993, 223).

### Dialectical Analogy

Patrick Burke suggests a specific term to name Rahner's philosophical-theological method: *dialectical analogy* (Burke 2002). By dialectical analogy he means the method through which Rahner,

oscillated constantly between unifying dynamism and conceptual distinction and therefore united dialectically while still holding in distinction the traditional antinomies of Christian thought—God and the world, spirit and matter, grace and nature (viii).

Unlike the traditional view of analogy of being, Rahner understands the analogous language about God in his perspective of *Schwebe*. He argues,

It is a tension which is not produced by us at a logically subsequent midpoint between a univocal "yes" and an equivocal "no." It is rather a tension which we ourselves as spiritual subjects originally *are* in our self-realization, and which we can designate by the traditional term "analogy" if we understand what this word means in its original sense. (FCF, 72)

Here “self-realization” refers to our existence “in and through our being grounded in [God’s] holy mystery which always surpasses us” (*FCF*, 73).

## Theological Themes

Having explored Rahner’s philosophical foundation as well as his theological method, we now turn to some important theological themes in his system. To do this, I choose to mine his brief yet richly stated views in *FCF* about the central truth of the Christian faith.

[1] The only really absolute mysteries are the self-communication of God [2] in the depths of existence, called grace, [3] and in history, called Jesus Christ, [4] and this already includes the mystery of the Trinity in the economy of salvation and of the immanent Trinity. (*FCF*, 12; numbers mine)

On my view, claims regarding other theological themes in Rahner’s thought – the church, sacraments, eschatology, etc – derive from these basic claims. Interestingly, Rahner also expands this short statement into three brief creedal statements (theological, anthropological, and future-oriented) in the last part of *FCF* (448-60), formulating them within a Trinitarian scheme. What I want to do now is to enter the “gate of mysteries” that Rahner has opened for us by using the steps provided in the above statements.

### Self-Communication of the Absolute Mystery

Rahner’s transcendental theology is centered on the belief that human openness to transcendence is founded in the pre-apprehension of the infinite reality or the transcendent God. Thus, it is important for Rahner to caution his reader not to confuse human transcendence with God’s transcendence.

Rahner’s basic position regarding God is that God is the “absolute” or “holy” mystery. As absolute mystery, God is “incomprehensible and impenetrable” (Rahner 1993, 45). However, human beings can know and relate to God insofar as God, who has produced and created non-divine beings through “externalizing and ... giving” Godself (Rahner 1993, 47), allows us to know and relate to God. God gives Godself through God’s self-communication. Moreover, in this self-bestowal and self-communication God “becomes both giver and gift, and even more the actual source of the human being’s own capacity to receive [God] as gift” (47).

This notion of God’s self-communication is so central in Rahner’s theology – it appears explicitly in his three brief creedal statements – that apart from it one cannot grasp any part of his views. Since God’s self-communication is directed to human beings and the world, God is taken to be the origin and goal, *arche* and *telos*, for both human beings and the world (84). Rahner eventually expands the meaning of divine self-communication into four dyadic groups: “(a) Origin – Future; (b) History – Transcendence; (c) Invitation – Acceptance; (d) Knowledge – Love” (quoted in Burke 2002, 81-2).

In this context, Rahner distinguishes efficient causality from formal causality. In efficient causality the effect is always different from the cause. Rahner employs formal causality for explaining God’s self-communication, in which God “does not originally cause and produce something different from [Godself] in the creature, but rather...communicates [God’s] own divine reality and makes it a constitutive element in the fulfillment of the creature” (*FCF*, 121). The result is that God does not lose God’s infinite reality and absolute mystery and the creature does not cease to be a finite being. Consequently, there is still a distance between God and the creature, but at the same time – consistent with Rahner’s Ignatian sensibility – God can be found everywhere in everyday reality.

By allowing distance from the creature, God makes space for human beings to return to the transcendent self and to reach out (*Vorgriff*) to God’s transcendence. It is called the “transcendental experience,” another key term in Rahner’s system. This experience is called “transcendental” because it creates the possibility of experience (in the Kantian sense), and because it transcends something (i.e., human categorical experiences and historicity). Thus, once again, we find here a typically Rahnerian *Schwebe*.

### Grace within the Depth of Existence

We begin now with the first dimension of God’s self-communication, that is, grace within the depth of existence. We have discussed what Rahner means by “the depth of existence” or the analysis of human beings, which becomes the point of departure in his theological system. I only need to add an important point here regarding the issue of sin.

#### Sin

Rahner correlates “the depth of existence” to the notion of grace because there is a circle of guilt and forgiveness that is experienced internally within human existence. It is circular because every time human beings say “no” to God in their freedom, it is also the time when they realize that God is not judgmental but is offering loving forgiveness. They are, thus, invited to say “yes” to God. For Rahner, the threat of sin is “really a permanent existential which we can never eradicate in our single, temporal history” (*FCF*, 105). At the same time, the “yes” is contained within each “no” in the sense that the “yes” as the basis for the possibility of any self-assertion is always there, even in the “no” In this context he reinterprets the notion of original sin. It is called “original sin” because human beings have established guilt throughout history. He rejects the traditional understanding of original sin as biologically transmitted through Adam and Eve. Rather, original sin refers to the fact that guilt is universal and ineradicable. This fact is evident since every one is “co-determined” by others’ guilt as well as by the whole history of wrongdoing. In this context, Rahner’s statement about grace as God’s self-communication within the depth of human existence obtains its significance.

Original sin, therefore, expresses nothing else but the historical origin of the present, universal and ineradicable situation of our

freedom as co-determined by guilt, and this insofar as this situation has a history in which, because of the universal determination of this history by guilt, God's self-communication in grace come to man not from "Adam," not from the beginning of the human race, but from the goal of this history, from the God-Man Jesus Christ. (FCF, 114)

### **Grace and the Supernatural Existential**

Rahner's view of divine grace is made possible because we have congeniality for receiving it. This is what he calls the "supernatural existential." Rahner distinguishes existential from existentiell, although both are inseparable and refer to the same human finitude. While the former refers to the ontological dimension, the latter to the everyday categorical dimension. When Rahner talks about supernatural existential he criticizes both traditional scholasticism and the *nouvelle théologie* (particularly of Henri de Lubac) of his own era. Here Rahner enters the classical "nature and grace" debate within Catholic theology. The neo-scholastics held to the view of extrinsicism, namely, an understanding that God's grace is imposed from outside on nature; whereas the theologians of the *nouvelle théologie* emphasized the intrinsic orientation of nature to grace. For the proponents of the *nouvelle théologie* (such as de Lubac), there is no such thing as "pure nature" which then accepts grace; instead there is a "natural desire" (Thomas's *desiderium naturale*) within human nature for God.

Against both positions, Rahner argues that human beings as God's partner have to be able to receive God's loving grace. Here he relies on the Thomistic notion of *obediential potency*, which becomes the condition—or better, a remainder concept (*Restbegriff*)—in the human existential constitution that has been present before God offers grace, "even prior to sin" (FCF, 124). This condition he calls the "supernatural existential." In Rahner's most-quoted words, "God's self-communication as offer is also the necessary condition which makes its acceptance possible" (FCF 128). The end and goal of God's grace, finally, is that human beings receive the final vision of God (beatific vision), which implies an ontological relationship between God and creatures. Yet, it is not merely an ideal reality in the future. Rather, according to Rahner, it is an historical experience, *hic et nunc*,

[I]n grace, that is, in the self-communication of God's Holy Spirit, the event of immediacy to God as man's fulfillment is prepared for in such a way that we must say of man here and now that he participates in God's being; that he has been given the divine Spirit who fathoms the depths of God; that he is already God's son here and now, and what he already is must only become manifest. (FCF, 120)

## **Jesus as God's Self-Communication in History**

The second dimension of God's self-communication is through history that culminates in Jesus Christ. But before examining Rahner's Christological views (Chapter VI of his *FCF*), we should pause a moment to review his profound account of the meaning of the history of salvation and revelation (Chapter V).

### **Salvation History, World History and Revelation**

Rahner's basic thesis is that human history is the *event* of transcendence. This is to say that through the supernatural existential—it "takes place" within or "is mediated" by everyday history—human beings experience their transcendence. Only within this condition of human transcendence are human beings enabled to experience and receive God's self-communication through historical mediation, which is called "salvation history."

This basic argument leads Rahner to offer his second thesis, i.e., that the history of salvation and the whole world history are co-existent. They are not to be equated, since there is also the history of guilt within the world history. Yet, they are also not to be separated, as if the history of salvation is another extramundane reality unrelated to human concrete history.

With regard to the notion of revelation, Rahner maintains that the universal history of salvation is also the history of revelation. He distinguishes two kinds of revelation: universal-transcendental revelation and special-categorical revelation. While the first refers to the experience of God that could happen anywhere and for everyone, the latter is an expression of the former within special and categorical ways, which culminates in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

### **Anonymous Christians**

Rahner's views of the supernatural existential and of revelation become the basis of his famous theory of "anonymous Christians." On the one hand, God's salvific will is universal. This leads Rahner to say that there should be a possibility for all persons to be saved. Yet, on the other hand, the Catholic tradition holds a belief that salvation is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ and the membership into the Church. For Rahner, this conflict is solvable through the notions of the "supernatural existential," as the condition for all persons in their transcendence to receive God's grace and "universal-transcendental revelation," which becomes God's self-communication to all people as transcendent beings. Consequently, Rahner urges, those who do not confess Jesus Christ explicitly and do not become members of the Catholic Church, "must have the possibility of a genuine saving relation with God" (Rahner 1993, 54) and therefore they are called "anonymous Christians."

### **Christology**

The task of Christology is to make intelligible the Christian faith that Jesus of Nazareth, a historical person, is Christ as the center of all human history and the final and full revelation of God to humanity. There are some limitations of classic Christological formula

suggested by the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) which claims "one identical Son, our Lord Jesus Christ . . . perfect both in his divinity and in his humanity. . . [with] two natures without any commingling or change or division or separation . . . united in one person" (Hentz 1991, 110). Rahner feels that it does not reflect on "the contemporary mentality which sees the world from an evolutionary point of view" (Rahner 1978, 206) by focusing on the person of Christ in his unique individuality and ignoring any possibility of combining the event of Christ with the process of human history as a whole. Furthermore, the Chalcedon formula adopted strange philosophical concepts such as *nature* and *hypostatic union* which are no longer used to explain and interpret our experiences. Thus, Rahner introduces *transcendental Christology* which interprets the event and person of Christ in relation to the essential structure of the human person, reflecting on the essential conditions of all human experiences, conditions which transcend any one, particular kind of experience (Rahner, 206-12). Before beginning with his transcendental Christology, it will be helpful for us to look at his basic insights on Christology within an evolutionary view of the world.

According to Rahner, Christian faith claims that all things in the world come from the one same origin, God. It means that in spite of their differences, there is "an inner similarity and commonality" among things, which forms a *single* world. This commonality is most clearly disclosed in a human being in a form of the unity of spirit and matter. In other words, it is only in a human person that spirit and matter can be experienced in their real essence and in their unity. *Spirit* is a unique mode of existence of a single person when that person becomes conscious of him/herself and is always oriented towards the incomprehensible Mystery called God. But it is only in the free acceptance by the human subject of this mystery and in its unpredictable disposal of the subject that he or she can genuinely undertake this process of returning to him/herself and of being oriented towards. On the other hand, *matter* is the condition which makes human beings estranged from themselves towards other objects in the world and makes possible an immediate intercommunication with other spiritual creatures in time and space. Of course, there is an essential difference between spirit and matter, but not understood as an essential opposition. The relationship between the two can be said as "the intrinsic nature of matter to develop towards spirit" (Rahner, 184). This kind of becoming from matter to spirit can be called as self-transcendence which "can be only understood as taking place by the power of the absolute fullness of being" (Rahner, 185).

Furthermore, as Rahner asserts, the evolutionary view of the world allows us to consider that humanity is nothing but the latest stage of the self-transcendence of matter. If a human being is the self-transcendence of living matter, one can say that "the history of nature and of spirit form an intrinsic and stratified unity in which the history of nature develops towards man, continues on in him as *his* history, is preserved and surpassed in him, and therefore reaches its own goal with and in the history of man's spirit" whose "goal consists in the infinite fullness of God" but "hidden from and beyond the power of man himself" (Rahner, 187-8). It is in a human being where the nature becomes conscious of itself. It is in a human being where the specific characteristic of the reality which are "his presence to himself and his relationship to the absolute totality of reality" comes to be (Rahner, 189). The uniqueness of the status of a human being in the cosmos is that this cosmic self-consciousness takes place in its own unique way in *each* individual person. And if the evolution explained in this way has any ultimate and one-way direction at all, this process must also have a final result and it must exist. Christian faith claims that the cosmos reaches its final fulfillment when it receives the immediate self-communication of its own ground in the spiritual creatures which are its goal and its high point (Rahner, 190). In this sense, Rahner asserts that God's self-communication to the world is the final goal of the world and that the process of self-transcendence makes the world already directed towards this self-communication and its acceptance by the world (Rahner, 192). What, then, is the place of Christ in this whole process of self-transcendence of the world?

According to Rahner, the whole process of the self-consciousness of cosmos has *always* and *necessarily* to do with the process of the intercommunication of spiritual subjects for otherwise, there is no way to retain the unity of the process. God's self-communication is given to cosmic subjects who have freedom to accept or reject it and who have intercommunication with other existents. It takes place only if the subjects freely accept it, and only then forms a *common* history in a sense that "it is addressed to all men in their intercommunication" (Rahner, 193). The event of God's self-communication is definitely a historical event in time and space, which is then "addressed to others as a call to their freedom" (Rahner, 193). In this sense, Rahner claims that "God's self-communication must have a *permanent beginning* and in this beginning a guarantee that it has taken place, a guarantee by which it can rightly demand a free decision to accept this divine self-communication" (Rahner, 193). In this scheme, the *saviour* refers to a historical person "who signifies the beginning of the absolute self-communication of God which is moving towards its goal, that beginning which indicates that this self-communication for everyone has taken place irrevocably and has been victoriously inaugurated" (Rahner, 193). *Hypostatic union*, therefore, occurs in an intrinsic moment when God's self-communication and its acceptance by that person are met, and this union is open to all spiritual creatures with the bestowal of grace. In order to be fulfilled, this event should have "a concrete tangibility in history" (Rahner, 201). Now, it is time to turn back to Rahner's project of a transcendental Christology.

According to Rahner, a transcendental Christology "presupposes an understanding of the relationship of *mutual* conditioning and mediation in human existence between what is transcendently necessary and what is concretely and contingently historical" (Rahner, 208). It is a kind of relationship between the two elements in such a way that "the transcendental element is always an intrinsic condition of the historical element in the historical self" while "in spite of its being freely posited, the historical element co-determines existence in an absolute sense" (Rahner, 208). What is the starting point for a transcendental Christology? Rahner claims that it is "the experiences which man always and inescapably has" (Rahner, 208). What, then, are these experiences that a human being always have? How does Rahner develop his transcendental Christology? First, a human being was created to freely transcend himself or herself and objects in the world towards the incomprehensible Mystery called God. Secondly, the limitations of human situation make a human being hope that the full meaning of humanity and the unity of everything in the world will be fulfilled by God's self-giving. Thirdly, God's self-communication and human hope for it should be "mediated historically" because of "the unity of transcendentality and historicity in human existence" (Rahner, 210). Fourthly, the human hope looks in history for its salvation from God that "becomes final and irreversible, and is the end in an 'eschatological' sense" (Rahner, 211). Here Rahner suggests two possibilities of human salvation either as "fulfillment in an absolute sense" which means the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth or as "a historical event within history" (Rahner, 211). Lastly, the event of human salvation by God's self-giving love should be the event of a human person because God's salvific love can only be effective in history when a person

*freely* accepts his love, surrenders everything to God in death and in death is accepted by God (Rahner, 211). Here, Rahner makes a significant claim with respect to the character of the savior as exemplary and absolute:

We are presupposing here the anti-individualistic conviction that, given the unity of the world and of history from the view point of both God and the world, such an "individual" destiny has "exemplary" significance for the world as a whole. Such a man with this destiny is what is meant by an "absolute saviour." (Rahner, 211)

Strangely enough, Rahner says that the task of a transcendental Christology is not to claim that this savior "has been found precisely in *Jesus of Nazareth*" because it "belong[s] to the experience of history itself which cannot be deduced" (Rahner, 211), but that it "allows one to search for, and in his search to understand, what he has already found in *Jesus of Nazareth*" (Rahner 212).

Rahner feels that the savior described by his transcendental Christology is not different from the one expressed by the classic Christological formulations of Chalcedon which used a concept of *hypostatic union* to claim Jesus as the Christ. Then, the next task for Rahner is to articulate the meaning of the hypostatic union.

What does it mean to say that *God became man*? Does it mean that God is dressed up as a man or as a strange mixture of the divine and the human? Here the issue again is how to understand the meaning of being a human being. Rahner understands the phrase *became man* as assuming an individual human *nature* as God's own. At this point, one may raise a question about how God become *something* other than Godhead for God is the immutable One who is not subject to change. Rahner escapes from this dilemma by emphasizing "the self-emptying of God, his becoming, the kenosis and genesis of God himself" (Rahner, 222). He says that

He can become insofar as, in establishing the other which comes from him, he himself *becomes* what has come from him, without having to become in his own and original self. Insofar as in his abiding and infinite fullness he empties himself, the other comes to be as God's very own reality. . . . God "assumes by creating" and also "creates by assuming," that is, he creates by emptying himself, and therefore, of course, he himself is in the emptying. He creates the human reality *by the very fact* that he assumes it as his own. (Rahner, 222)

God's creating-by-emptying act belongs to God's power and freedom as the absolute One and to God's self-giving love expressed in scripture (Rahner, 222). Therefore, it is legitimate for Rahner to assert that God "who is not subject to change in himself can *himself* be subject to change in something else" (Rahner, 220). This is what the doctrine of the Incarnation teaches us: "in and in spite of his immutability he can truly become something: he himself, he in time" (Rahner, 221).

What, then, does it mean to say that God assumes a human nature as God's own reality? For Rahner, human beings are created to be oriented towards the incomprehensible Mystery called God. But, this human orientation towards the Mystery can be fully grasped only if we as humans freely choose to be grasped by the incomprehensible One. If God assumes human nature as God's own reality with God's irrevocable offer of God's self-communication, and a person freely accepts it, the person is united with God, reaching the very point towards which humanity is always moving by virtue of its essence, a God-Man which is fully fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth claimed by Christian faith. In this sense, Rahner sees the incarnation of God as "the unique and highest instance of the actualization of the essence of human reality" (Rahner, 218).

The next question is this: how do we find a God-Man in history? To answer it, Rahner employs a historical approach to Christology by examining the history of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Before doing it, Rahner sets two theses: 1) Christian faith requires historical foundation; and 2) taking into account a possibility of significant difference between who the person is and the extent to which he or she verbalizes or expresses his or her identity, it is possible both to say that "the self-understanding of the pre-resurrection Jesus may not contradict in an historical sense the Christian understanding of his person and his salvific significance," and to say that his self-understanding may not coincide with the content of Christological faith (Rahner, 236).

Rahner introduces two theses which should be proven as historically credible in order to establish the grounds of Christian faith: 1) Jesus saw himself "as the eschatological prophet, as the absolute and definitive saviour" and 2) the resurrection of Jesus is the absolute self-communication of God (Rahner, 245-6). According to Rahner, there are several elements in historical knowledge of Jesus concerning his identity as a Jew and "radical reformer", his radical behavior in solidarity with social and religious outcasts based on his belief in God, his radical preaching "as a call to conversion", his gathering disciples, his hope for conversions of others, his acceptance of death on the cross "as the inevitable consequence of fidelity to his mission" (Rahner, 247-8). These historical elements signifies Jesus' self-understanding as the eschatological prophet in terms of his claim of "imminent expectation", his preaching on the Kingdom of God "as the definitive proclamation of salvation", "the connection between the message and the person of Jesus", his free acceptance of death on the cross, and his miracle as a call to conversion (Rahner, 249-264).

With regard to the death and resurrection of Jesus, Rahner asserts that the death and the resurrection of Jesus are nothing but two aspects of a single event which can not be separated (Rahner, 266). But the resurrection is not a historical event in time and place like the death of Jesus. There is only a resurrection faith of the disciples as "a unique fact" (Rahner, 274). What the scriptural witness offers are powerful encounters in which the disciples come to experience the *spirit* of the risen Lord Jesus in their midst. The resurrection, in this sense, is not a return to life in the temporal sphere but signifies the seal of God the Father upon all that Jesus stood for and preached in his pre-Easter life. "By the resurrection, . . . Jesus is vindicated as the absolute saviour" by God (Rahner, 279). It means that "this death *as* entered into in free obedience and *as* surrendering life completely to God reaches fulfillment and becomes historically tangible for us only in the resurrection" (Rahner, 284). In the resurrection, the life and death of Jesus are understood as "the cause of God's salvific will" (Rahner, 284). He also opens the door to our salvation: "we are saved because this man who is one of us has been saved by God, and God has thereby made his salvific will present in the world historically, really and irrevocably" (Rahner, 284). In this sense, Jesus of Nazareth becomes a God-Man, the absolute saviour.



Rahner's transcendental Christology opens another horizon which includes non-Christian religions. God's universal saving will in Christ extends to non-Christians. Because Christ is the savior of all people, salvation for non-Christians comes only through Christ (anonymous Christians). On the other hand, it is possible to say that Christians can learn from other religions or atheistic humanism because God's grace is and can be operative in them (Schineller 1991, 102). How is the presence of Christ in other religions? Christ is present and operative in and through his Spirit (Rahner, 316). How and where do non-Christians respond to the grace of God? Here, Rahner suggest "the unreflexive and 'searching Christology'" (searching "memory" of the absolute saviour) present in the hearts of all persons (Rahner, 295, 318). Three attitudes or actions are involved: 1) an absolute love towards neighbors; 2) an attitude of readiness for death; and 3) an attitude of hope for the future (Rahner, 295-298). If a person is actually practicing them, it is only because that person is acting from and responding to the grace of God that was fully manifest in the life of Jesus.

### Descending, Ascending, and Transcendental Christologies

The chapter on Christology in *FCF* occupies more than one third of all pages of the book, which gives the strong impression that Christology is central to Rahner's theology.

In his *FCF*, Rahner employs the classical distinction between ascending and descending Christologies—from below and from above. His transcendental-anthropological theology allows him to take an ascending Christology, focused on the historical Jesus, as his point of departure. The descending Christology, on the other hand, is the end of all Christological reflection. He says, "If Jesus as the Christ has ever actually encountered someone, the idea of God-Man, of God coming into our history, and hence a descending Christology, also has its own significance and power" (*FCF*, 177). However, both types of Christology are intermingled and inseparable. What ties them together is his conception of transcendental Christology, which points to Jesus Christ, the God-Man, the absolute Savior, in whom God's acceptance of human beings has become an event. Transcendental Christology, in George Vass's words, is "sandwiched" between the two types of Christology (Vass 1996, 86).

### Immanent Trinity and Economic Trinity

The last of Rahner's brief statements deals with his Trinitarian theology. He says, "[The self-communication of God] already includes the mystery of the Trinity in the economy of salvation and of the immanent Trinity." (*FCF*, 12) Catherine M. LaCugna defines both terms in this helpful passage.

The phrase "economic Trinity" refers to the three "faces" or manifestations of God's activity in the world ... In particular, economic Trinity denotes the missions, the being sent by God, of Son, and Spirit in the work of redemption and deification ... The phrase "immanent Trinity" ... points to the life and work of God in the economy, but from an "immanent" point of view. (LaCugna 1973, 211)

In his book, *The Trinity*, Rahner takes the Incarnation as the point of departure (Rahner 1970, 24-33), whereas in *FCF* he places the discussion of the Trinity within the chapter on God's self-communication (cf. *FCF*, 133-4). In both books, however, he expresses his dissatisfaction with both official formulation of the Trinity and any psychological theory of the Trinity. While the former is accused as having led to many confusion and misunderstandings, the latter "neglects the experience of the Trinity in the economy of salvation in favor of a seemingly almost Gnostic speculation about what goes on in the inner life of God [i.e., the immanent Trinity]" (*FCF*, 135).

Rahner's basic trinitarian axiom is famous: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity" (1970, 22). As in his Christological position, Rahner's Trinitarian theology also starts "from below" (LaCugna 1973, 216). Thus, there is a conceptual transition from economic to immanent Trinity. The logic behind this transition is supported by his view that "in God's self communication to his creation through grace [within the depth of existence] and Incarnation [within history] *God really gives himself, and really appears as he is in himself*" (*FCF*, 136; *italics mine*).

## 4. Outline of Major Works

[Forthcoming]

## 5. Relation to Other Thinkers

Karl Rahner is undoubtedly the most important Roman Catholic theologian in the twentieth century. His seminal position among his contemporaries results to some extent from his ability to put theology and philosophy into dialogue. His anthropological point of departure is also a convincing starting point for theology today, especially in the context of the modern-postmodern conflict over the nature of the self. Rahner is also adept at engaging the Catholic tradition, especially the Thomist tradition, although he would not have wanted to be labeled a traditionalist. As he said, "I consider myself a sincere and profound friend of St. Thomas. I do not, however, agree with those Thomists who are so locked into traditionalism that they can't imagine that any progress can be made independently of traditional Thomism" (Rahner, Imhof & Biallowons 1991, 155).

## 6. Bibliography and Cited Works

Burke, Patrick. 2002. *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Major Themes*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Carr, Anne. 1977. *The Theological Method of Karl Rahner*. Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press.

- Egan, Harvey D. 1998. *Karl Rahner: The Mystic of Everyday Life*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Fiorenza, Francis S. 2000. "Chapter Seven: The New Theology and Transcendental Thomism." In James C. Livingstone, et all. *Modern Christian Theology*. Vol. II: *The Twentieth Century*.
- Hentz, Otto H. 1991. "Anticipating Jesus Christ: An Account of Our Hope." In *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*. Ed. by Leo J. O'Donovan. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Kelley, Geoffrey B., ed. 1992. *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Kilby, Karen. 2004. *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Kress, Robert. 1982. *A Rahner Handbook*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.
- LaCugna, Catherine M. 1973. *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Rahner, Karl. 1954-1984. *Schriften zur Theologie*. 16 volumes. Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag.
- Rahner, Karl. 1968. *Spirit in the World*. Revised edition by J.B. Metz. Translated by William V. Dych. [Translation of *Geist im Welt: Zur Metaphisik der endlichen Erkenntnis bei Thomas von Aquin*. Innsbruck: Verlag Felizian Rauch, 1939; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Revised by J.B. Metz. München: Kösel-Verlag, 1957] New York: Herder and Herder.
- Rahner, Karl. 1969. *Hearers of the Word*. Revised edition by J.B. Metz. Translated by Michael Richards. [Translation of *Hörer des Wortes: Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie*. München: Verlag Kösel-Pustet, 1941] New York: Herder and Herder.
- Rahner, Karl. 1970. *The Trinity*. Translated by Joseph Donceel. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Rahner, Karl. 1978, 1987. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. Translated by William V. Dych. [Translation of *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*. Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1976] New York: The Seabury Press; New York: Crossroad.
- Rahner, Karl. 1993. *Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner Theological Writings*. New York: Crossroad.
- Rahner, Karl, with Paul Imhof & Hubert Biallowons, eds. 1990. *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews With Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life*. New York: Crossroad.
- Schineller, J. Peter. 1991. "Discovering Jesus Christ: A History We Share." In *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*. Ed. by Leo J. O'Donovan. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Thomas Aquinas. 1947. *Summa Theologica*. Tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Internet: <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html>.
- Tillich, Paul. 1950. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. I: Reason and Revelation – Being and God. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vass, George. 1996. *A Pattern of Christian Doctrines*. Part I: God and Christ. London: Sheed & Ward.
- Vorgrimler, Herbert. 1986. *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought*. New York: Crossroad.

## 7. Internet Resources

Karl Rahner Society

Materialien zum Werk Karl Rahners, 1904-1984

## 8. Related Topics

[Forthcoming]

Editor: Derek Michaud, incorporating material by Joas Adiprasetya (2005), Phil LaFountain (1999), and JeeHo Kim (1999).

The information on this page is copyright ©1994 onwards, Wesley Wildman (basic information here), unless otherwise noted. If you want to use ideas that you find here, please be careful to acknowledge this site as your source, and remember also to credit the original author of what you use, where that is applicable. If you want to use text or stories from these pages, please contact me at the feedback address for permission.