RAHNER'S THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

CREIGHTON PEDEN

Introductory note: This is an imaginary dialog, intended to provide an introduction to Karl Rahner's thought as found in Volume IX of his Theological Investigations (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). Although the statements attributed to Rahner are primarily direct quotations from that volume, quotation marks and references have been omitted in order not to distract from the dialog format.

PEDEN: Dr. Rahner, it is indeed a pleasure to have this opportunity of talking with one of the most noted philosophical theologians in the Roman Catholic Church. You are in the midst of publishing eleven volumes which are being issued under the general title of *Theological Investigations.* In order to introduce your position to our readers, we will focus our comments on Volume IX. But before we get into specifics, I would like to ask you a general quesiton about your style of writing. To be honest, some chapters read very easily but others are extremely complex.

RAHNER: I can understand how you would find this variation in style. Unfortunately these volumes do not contain an unfolding of a coordinated systematic position. Life in these times does not provide the insulation for such a systematic work. Also the pluralistic forces in our cultures impeed such an effort. Rather, what is contained in these books are collections of my essays, lectures, and research studies. Of course, lectures have a more relaxed style than do the essays or studies.

PEDEN: You divided Volume IX into three parts, designating these as (1) The Shape of Contemporary and Future Theology, (2) The Doctrine of God and Christology, and (3) Theological Anthropology. Although we will not limit our conversation to the book's format, let me ask you a question related to your discussion in part one concerning Vatican II. Does the Second Vatican Council signify a decisive orientation for present and future theological undertakings?

RAHNER: There can be no doubt that the Second Vatican Council has created a 'challenge' to Catholic theology; that is, it has provided it with new tasks, given it a more dynamic impetus and wider scope for free movement. An important contribution of the Council in its teachings was the raising of many themes which have served to open dialog with the world—the modern scientific world. This dialog is a recognition that the Church must acquire a kind of knowledge which

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does not spring from divine revelation but from human experience. It could be said that the Church is no longer merely being involved with the world which God created and made available to simple (although still profane) everyday experience, but also with that world which man is building as his work, as an embodiment of his decisions, dreams, utopias and of his scientific reflection. As we confront this modern world, theology is going to have the task of how to explain briefly what it is that Christianity proclaims and offers to modern man, yet at the same time in a comprehensible way and in a dynamic formula capable of driving him deeper into the fulness of faith.

PEDEN: Do you think contemporary theologians, especially of the 'orthodox' variety, are meeting this challenge?

RAHNER: To be honest, I am anxious whether the theologians of the Church will rise to meet the challenge. I am most concerned with 'orthodox' theology, which is in danger of remaining a theology for an ever-diminishing circle of pious believers.

PEDEN: You indicate the need for a 'philosophizing' theology which will relate itself to the modern age. What issues are you addressing when you make such a reference?

RAHNER: Contemporary man functions in a pluralistic society that has as its undergriding the scientific method. Man has come to view himself as standing aloof from his transcendental dependence upon God. Instead of realizing the necessity of relating to the natural law of God, man has come more and more to feel himself the directing force in his own culture. This view of reality is variously expressed in modern philosophy, emerging since Descartes, Kant, German Idealism (including its opponents), up to modern Phenomenology, Existentialism and Fundamental Ontology.

PEDEN: Reviewing in my mind the philosophical positions just mentioned as well as those discussed in your books, I am struck by the omission of Pragmatism. Pragmatism is a philosophy essentially based on the scientific approach and in the United States has had strong influence on the school of thought often designated as 'empirical theology.'

RAHNER: Every thinker brings to his theology the particular form, the historical and fragmentary nature of his own given understanding of existence. There are just more philosophies shaping one's understanding than can be appropriated and known by the individual. The ones I have discussed form an irreducible pluralism in my personal

European and Catholic culture. Pragmatism has had little realizable impact on the forces which have shaped my understanding of existence. Since you are familiar with pragmatism and emperical theology, it would be helpful if you would include this perspective in our discussion.

PEDEN: If a pragmatic perspective should seem appropriate, I shall try and include it. If I understand you correctly, you are restating the general theme that modern man rejects his metaphysical foundations and places his reliance on empirical approaches. Of course pragmatism makes such a metaphysical rejection. How does this affect theology?

RAHNER: You are correct about the negative evaluation of metaphysical propositions. Modern man feels that thousands of statements in theology are just forms of mythology and that he is no longer able to believe them in all seriousness. Let us look dispassionately at today's real cultural situation: if a modern man who has not been brought up as a Christian hears the words 'Jesus is God made man' he will straight away reject this explanation as mythology which he cannot begin to take seriously nor to discuss, just as we do when we hear that the Dalai Lama regards himself as a reincarnation of Buddha. Now Protestant theology in its tendency towards 'demythologisation' has been a real attempt to deal with this issue. Bultmann led the way and it is he who has triumphed over Barth on the whole in European Protestant theology. But Bultmann is not the whole answer, for it limits the content of revelation. At the same time I would want to say that if modern man finds the *content* of revelation unworthy of belief it is the fault of theology. All these difficulties of modern man can be traced to a common formal structure: theological statements are not formulated in such a way that man can see how what is meant by them is connected with his understanding of himself, as witnessed to in his own experience.

PEDEN: How would you have theology approach the problem?

RAHNER: Without in any way belittling revelation and Church dogma, theology must focus today on the human experience. The question for the theologian is what does his own anthropology really tell him about man? We are going to have to admit that man has learned a lot about himself which the Christian revelation has not taught him.

PEDEN: What are these things we have learned about ourselves not available in Christian revelation?

RAHNER: Man is essentially the *subject*: he is a person, aware of himself as a free being, and related, in his freedom, to the absolute mystery which we call 'God'. He experiences this *a posteriori* in his 'passive' subjectivity, in the flesh of history, in language and in the objective account of himself which he finds in 'civilisation'. Man's nature is constructed with a built-in transcendental necessity: man must inevitably affirm his own nature even in an action which seeks freely to deny it.

PEDEN: Essential to your entire theology is an emphasis on man's 'transcendental' character. What does this concept mean?

RAHNER: You are correct that the essential thing about each human is his transcendental nature. Thus every theology of this kind is necessarily transcendental anthropology. Man experiences his transcendent nature as a being-in-reference-to the reality of absolute truth and free-ranging, infinite, absolutely valid love. It can only be understood in one's innermost regions as an immediacy before the absolute mystery of God, i.e. as the absolute realization of man's transcendental nature itself, made possible by God in his self-communication. Let me try and put this in more traditional theological language. The essential thing about man's nature is his ability to participate in a relationship with the supernatural power, God. This participation is made possible because God communicates his grace to man enabling this essential nature to flourish. Do you understand?

PEDEN: I think so. You are presenting the traditional ideas of theological essentialism, i.e. that humans share a common essential nature created by God and that this nature is only realizable through the functioning of God's supernatural grace. In effect the nature of humans is externally established, not created by them but by an outside supernatural force. Taking this general position you include a different emphasis from the perspective of existential philosophy. This emphasis is seen in your focus on grace not being an act of God but a communicating process with man. From the perspective of the individual this communication is not an external force but is an existential experience occurring in the person's innermost regions. How does transcendental theology relate to traditional symbols and concepts, such as the sacraments and eschatology?

RAHNER: The approach we suggest has a large and important field of application in the doctrine of the sacraments. Modern man has come to view the sacraments as some form of primitive magic. If we follow our approach, it would emerge that a sacrament is God's en-

during offer to man's transcendental nature, mediated through the historical and symbolical categories of intercommunication, of participation in his (God's) freedom in the concrete decision-making of his existence. Then it would be clear that sacraments really do have nothing to do with magic.

I am glad that you asked about eschatology. In order to be equal to today's demands eschatology needs the foundation provided by a transcendental anthropology, in which man is comprehended as the being who plans himself, looking forward to an open future, as the being who *hopes*, empowered by God to embrace an absolute future. It is only this kind of transcendental anthropological and formal futurology which can provide explicit hermeneutic principles that are needed today to interpret eschatological assertions, if the latter are to appear worthy of belief. It seems to me that academic eschatology is still not far enough beyond the mentality of the professor of dogmatics who says he never maintained that the Archangel Michael's judgment-trumpet was a 'tuba materialis' but he would certainly defend the view that the sound of this trumpet was a 'tonus materialis'. Instead of really being theology, which always essentially involves criticism of images and models, academic eschatology is often a sort of puzzle in which one tries to unite into a single picture the images of scripture, which cannot be so fitted together in a plastic form, neither do they claim as much. A transcendental foundation of eschatology would reveal that eschatology is not an anticipatory report of the phenomenal aspects of future events, revealed by a God who already witnesses them, but the necessary interpretation, inescapably integral to man's nature, of his present existence—eschatologically subject to grace—within the perspective of its absolute future.

PEDEN: You give emphasis to man oriented to the future and planning for himself. There is certainly a similar emphasis in pragmatism as it views man as being in an evolutionary process the direction to which he can contribute. At issue is whether man is really a valid morally free agent who can give direction to the development of his own history, or is there to be some theological slight-of-hand which proclaims man free because of the functioning of some external agent or force? Many pragmatic empirical theologians have asserted this to be a key issue if one is to develop an adequate theology for the modern scientific age. What they contend is that all our contemporary information about man invalidates the doctrine of original sin, which necessitates a reworking of traditional theology. One noted pragmatist, Scribner Ames, puts it as follows: "The doctrine that men are born in sin and depraved from birth until some miraculous grace converts

them belongs to outworn mythology and is a savage and barbaric belief."[1]

Rahner: If the doctrine of original sin is presented as a mythology, I would agree that it needs to be re-explained. But it is certainly a valid explanation of the condition of man as our transcendental nature demonstrates. Possibly the validity of the doctrine of original sin will become more clear if I illustrate its significance in interpreting theologically the coming large-scale manipulation of mankind. The 'Fall' was actually the first act of self-manipulation of mankind, even if its context was essentially the dimension of religious, transcendental self-determination before God, and even if we leave open the question as to how far it had categorically tangible consequences, delivering man up not only to his own nature alone, which could conceivably be guiltless. But in this case of self-manipulation *sui generis* there is one thing which is an indubitable element of the dogma: the act had irreversible consequences, it inaugurated a process and mankind cannot get back beyond the beginning of that process. All future human history is ineradicably determined by this situation of guilt so long as history itself lasts. Although redemption embraces this fact of human history and ultimately sets its mark upon it, it does not abolish it. I find it difficult to comprehend how one could have a Christian theology without an inclusion of the doctrine of original sin. What conception of God is possible in an empirical theology?

PEDEN: As in all theological schools, each thinker in the empirical approach finds his particular chosen language to be the most adequate. Therefore, it is impossible to present in a few words a conception of God agreeable to all. Possibly another quotation by Scribner Ames will serve to indicate an answer to your question. Ames says: "The doctrine of evolution has led to the view that nature is a vast process, in which appears the marvelous series of living forms of plants and animals and men. . .There is no longer the old cleavage between the natural and the spiritual man, as if one belonged to the earth and the other to heaven. The whole is natural, the low and the high, the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful, but in man there is aspiration and struggle to find nobler and richer forms of life. Nature so conceived is God. If we are careful not to slip back into the idea that

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[1]Edward Scribner Ames. *Letters To God And The Devil.* New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1933, p. 80. It may be of interest to note that Ames was part of the pragmatist group officially known in the philosophic world as "The Chicago School". John Dewey was the most famous of the group, but besides Ames it also included George Herbert Mead, James Rowland Angell and James Hayden Tufts. Ames served as Chairman of the Philosophy Department with this group at the University of Chicago. His special interest was applying the principles of pragmatism to the experimental practice of religion.

nature is just physical, material substance, but that it also contains sentient, thinking, willing, loving human beings, then we may easily understand how nature may be God in us. Nature, conceived in this way, is a great life in which we live and move and have our being."[2]

RAHNER: It may be that this pragmatic approach relates well to the modern scientific age, but I would reject it as being Christian. It seems as some form of pantheism or panentheism.

Whether man is consciously aware of it or not, whether he is open to this truth or suppresses it, man's whole spiritual and intellectual existence is oriented towards a holy mystery which is the basis of his being. This mystery is the inexplicit and unexpressed horizon which always enriches and upholds the small area of our everyday experience of knowing and acting, our knowledge of reality and our free action. It is our most fundamental, most natural condition, but for that very reason it is also the most hidden and least regarded reality, speaking to us by its silence, and even while appearing to be absent, revealing its presence by making us take cognizance of our limitations. We call this God.

PEDEN: You contend that God relates to man's natural self whether man is consciously aware of it or not. What type of moral knowledge can the individual have in relation to this holy mystery?

RAHNER: There exists a moral mode of knowing. This moral knowledge itself has a structure which is both universal and not exhaustively analysable in conscious reflection. In a certain way it exercises a critical function in an area where 'is' and 'ought' *mutually* determine each other, but where what is 'objectively' right only becomes transparent to the person who has already embraced the correct attitude to it.

In other words, to adopt a term from the contemporary theology of faith, there is also a *moral* instinct of faith, i.e. a universal knowledge of right and wrong belief. This 'instinctive' judgment cannot and need not, however, be adequately subject to analytic reflection. In the more concrete questions of morality this faith-instinct is clearly indispensable because such complex realities are involved which cannot successfully be subjected to analytic reflection—and yet they must be evaluated morally all the same. Whenever the judgment of this moral faith-instinct attempts to express itself in words regarding a particular issue, it naturally and inevitably works with the categories of rational analysis, 'reason', conceptual arguments, etc., and thus con-

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

ceals its own character. But at bottom it knows that its judgments are not the resultant and formal logical sum of the rational considerations which it is able to 'objectivise'.

Now this mode of knowing is active in human life wherever someone is 'committed' to a particular attitude. It does not replace rationality, but it goes beyond it while possessing this very rationality as one of its own elements. But it is necessary because what is moral, the concrete action to be performed, corresponds automatically to the unity of experienced and conceptual reality. It cannot wait while conceptual analysis—an essentially endless process—makes its conclusions; it demands that one should enter into the darkness of reality (which is never completely transparent) and have the courage to take the step from theory to practice. This action is never the mere application of concepts to an empty world of matter, enjoying no reality but what the abstract concepts give it. This kind of universal moral instinct of faith and reason can calmly take 'risks' provided that it is self-critically aware that its judgments contain unreflected elements which are, as such, contingent, subject to change; and that consequently a *different* judgment may be shown to be correct at a later time. All the same, a particular contingent judgment of this kind can still be the only correct one *in its situation.* The making of it requires a universal knowledge of the current situation; this knowledge is correctly grasped in the 'instinctive' judgment which recognizes what is currently and properly called for, and this results in an 'appropriate' judgment.

PEDEN: Your 'universal moral faith-instinct' reminds me somewhat of the concept the 'will-to-believe' expressed by the pragmatist William James. James contends that there are momentous situations which demand an answer which you are unable to make on the basis of rational analysis of the data. It is at this point that one's attitude becomes important, for building on rationality one decides in terms of what one wills to believe as the correct choice. What the will decides is the only correct decision.

But let me shift from this epistemological discussion and focus once again on the challenge of Vatican II—the challenge of developing a theology for the modern world. Into what life-style do you think this theology will direct persons in this modern period?

RAHNER: Scientific man is very much open to the future. Like your pragmatist, he conceives of man being able to manipulate his environment in order to create a more utopian type of existence. I realize that the world upon us is one in which man will be the one who, both as an individual and as a society, plans, controls and manipulates himself

to a degree which was previously both undreamed-of and impracticable. He *must* do so; he can do other if he wishes to exist on the Earth side by side with many thousand millions of other human beings. At the same time man must remember his transcendent nature and limitations. If he becomes separated from his transcendent source then man will be unable to meet the crisis challenges which confront him.

To put it in a more traditional perspective, I would say that modern man must take up his cross even as he plans and works for the future. This cross will have at least two forms. The first is to accept being disappointed—being 'undeceived'—by life. The second form, perhaps the most radical case of disappointment—of being 'undeceived'—occurs when one loves although this love does not, or no longer, 'pays off', nor tries to take pleasure in itself as a heroic selfessness.

There are probably only two ways of living: being driven by frustration anxiety, and the acceptance of the cross, which, whether acknowledged as such openly or not, is the Cross of Christ. Strangely enough, each of these ways of life mimics the other. What seems to be a neurotic, even culpably incurred frustration anxiety, can be that very dying by which, in a hidden acceptance, the cross of life is taken up in suffering. What presents a 'healthy' and 'balanced' appearance can be the result of a frustration anxiety which is driving the person to avoid taking up his cross.

Basically one need not be afraid that the acceptance of one's cross necessarily leads to passivity and resignation in the face of the concrete tasks of life. The man who does not fear death, or rather, who accepts the abiding fear of death, can enjoy the particular good things of life which come to him because they are a genine promise of the absolute future. He is able to risk his whole self. He is free to love without sparing himself. He does not need to overtax this life's happiness and thus spoil it.

PEDEN: You seem to be offering almost a textbook illustration of Christian existentialism. One is placed in the world—a world in which he is confronted with lack of fulfillment. He is to accept these disappointments and go through the suffering of frustration anxiety. One confronts death in the process and becomes free to participate in the fulfillment of existence with the promise of an absolute future in infinite time.

RAHNER: We will leave it to those who read these *Theological Investigations* to decide whether your analysis is correct.