

## University of St. Thomas, Minnesota UST Research Online

---

School of Divinity Master's Theses and Projects

Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity

---

Spring 2015

# A Critical Examination of Key Claims Karl Rahner Makes About His Thesis of the Anonymous Christian

Brantly C. Millegan

*University of St. Thomas, Minnesota*, [bcmillegan@gmail.com](mailto:bcmillegan@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ir.stthomas.edu/sod\\_mat](https://ir.stthomas.edu/sod_mat)

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Millegan, Brantly C., "A Critical Examination of Key Claims Karl Rahner Makes About His Thesis of the Anonymous Christian" (2015). *School of Divinity Master's Theses and Projects*. 10.  
[https://ir.stthomas.edu/sod\\_mat/10](https://ir.stthomas.edu/sod_mat/10)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity at UST Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Divinity Master's Theses and Projects by an authorized administrator of UST Research Online. For more information, please contact [libroadmin@stthomas.edu](mailto:libroadmin@stthomas.edu).

THE SAINT PAUL SEMINARY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY  
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

A Critical Examination of Key Claims Karl Rahner Makes  
About His Thesis of the Anonymous Christian

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Divinity

Of the Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts in Theology

© Copyright

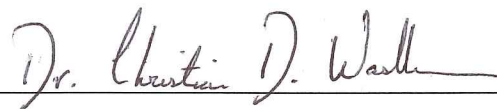
All Rights Reserved By

Brantly C. Millegan

St. Paul, MN

2015

This thesis by Brantly C. Millegan fulfills the thesis requirement for the master's degree in theology approved by Dr. Christian Washburn, Ph.D., Catholic University of America, as Director, and by Dr. Stephen Hipp, S.T.D., University of Fribourg, and by Dr. Kristin Towle, Ph.D., Ave Maria University.



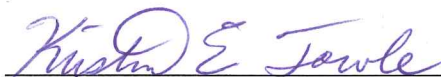
---

Dr. Christian Washburn, Ph.D., Catholic University of America, Director



---

Dr. Stephen Hipp, S.T.D., University of Fribourg, Reader



---

Dr. Kristin Towle, Ph.D., Ave Maria University, Reader

# Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| I. Introduction . . . . .  | 1  |
| II. A Summary of Karl Rahner’s Thesis of the Anonymous Christian . . . . .               | 8  |
| a. Defining the Term “Anonymous Christian” . . . . .                                     | 8  |
| b. Jesus, the Supernatural Existential, and Salvation . . . . .                          | 9  |
| c. Rahner and the Need for Spiritual Community . . . . .                                 | 15 |
| d. Certainty of Rahner’s Thesis and Optimism for Universal Salvation . . . . .           | 20 |
| e. Rahner’s Sources for His Thesis . . . . .   | 23 |
| III. Evaluating the Possibility of Anonymous Christians in Light of Vatican II . . . . . | 25 |
| a. <i>Lumen Gentium</i> and the Salvation of Non-Christians . . . . .                    | 25 |
| b. <i>Lumen Gentium</i> and the Jewish People . . . . .                                  | 27 |
| c. <i>Lumen Gentium</i> and Muslims . . . . .  | 28 |
| d. <i>Lumen Gentium</i> and Those Who “Search for the Unknown God” . . . . .             | 29 |
| e. <i>Lumen Gentium</i> and “Those Who... Do Not Know Anything About Christ” . . . . .   | 31 |
| f. The Holy Office on Fr. Feeney . . . . .   | 31 |
| g. <i>Lumen Gentium</i> and Those Who Do Not Believe in God . . . . .                    | 39 |
| h. How Non-Christians May Attain Salvation . . . . .                                     | 41 |
| i. The Church’s Missionary Mandate . . . . .   | 42 |
| IV. Evaluating Additional Claims . . . . .   | 50 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| a. The Existence and Number of Anonymous Christians . . . . .              | 50 |
| b. Optimism for Universal Salvation . . . . .                              | 51 |
| c. Implications of the Relationship Between Rahner's Thesis and Revelation | 54 |
| V. Conclusion . . . . .  | 61 |
| VI. Works Cited . . . . .  | 64 |

# Chapter 1

## *Introduction*

During what appeared to be the free-fall collapse of the Christian faith in Europe in the mid- to late 20th century, German theologian Karl Rahner<sup>1</sup> articulated the worries held by many Catholics:

In a world in the process of evolution, offering less and less ground out of which a genuine Christianity could grow, things go more and more downhill, and we can neither understand why God should permit times so unfruitful for Christianity nor foresee any end to them. We can therefore only go on being depressed (this too is concealed and unadmitted), because we cannot “get out” and yet — fortunately — don’t have to expect the end in our own lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on Karl Rahner’s life and work, see: Louis Roberts, *The Achievement of Karl Rahner* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967); Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought* (New York: Crossroad, 1986); John J. O'Donnell, *Karl Rahner: Life in the Spirit* (Roma: Gregorian University Press, 2004); Anne E. Carr, *The Theological Method of Karl Rahner* (Missoula, Mont: Published by Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1977); Linus Ibekwe, *The Universality of Salvation in Jesus Christ in the Thought of Karl Rahner: A Chronological and Systematic Investigation* (Würzburg: Echter, 2006); Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction* (New York: Crossroad Pub, 2007); Andreas R. Batlogg, Melvin Michalski, and Barbara Turner, *Encounters with Karl Rahner: Remembrances of Rahner by Those Who Knew Him* (Milwaukee, Wis: Marquette University Press, 2009); Allen G. Jorgenson, *The Appeal to Experience in the Christologies of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Rahner* (New York: P. Lang, 2007); Joseph H. Wong, "Anonymous Christians: Karl Rahner's Pneuma-Christocentrism and an East-West Dialogue." *Theological Studies* 55, no. 4 (December 1, 1994): 609-637; Robert J. Schreiter, "The anonymous Christian and christology." *Missiology* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 1978): 29-52; William J. Danker, "The anonymous Christian and christology: a response." *Missiology* 6, no. 2 (April 1, 1978): 235-241; Gavin D'Costa, "Karl Rahner's anonymous Christian: a reappraisal." *Modern Theology* 1, no. 2 (January 1, 1985): 131-148; Eamonn Conway, "'So as not to Despise God's Grace': Re-assessing Rahner's Idea of the 'Anonymous Christian,'" *Louvain Studies* 29, 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2004): 107-130; Paul Hypher, "Karl Rahner in Context," *New Blackfriars* 90, 1026 (March 2009): 201-205; Peter Joseph Fritz, "Karl Rahner repeated in Jean-Luc Marion?," *Theological Studies* 73.2 (June 2012): 318; Michael B. Raschko, "Karl Rahner and Demythologization: A Response to Michael H Barnes." *Theological Studies* 56, no. 3 (September 1, 1995): 551-559; R.R. Reno, "Rahner the restorationist: Karl Rahner's time has passed, R. R. Reno argues," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 233 (May 2013), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, tr. Edward Quinn (London: SPCK, 1974), 20, 84-89; quoted in Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 112.

He describes in heart-breaking detail the personal agony the mass apostasy was causing so many people, particularly within families:

The Christian of today lives in a Diaspora which penetrates deep into the circle of his relatives... He lives in a family circle whose members although originally Catholic, not only are not zealously “practicing,” but if the truth is to be told have become completely without faith, sometimes to the point of being actively hostile, of officially leaving the Church...

How many questions are involved in this situation, how much anxiety and pain! Are there tears more bitter than those shed by a Christian mother, when her son renounces the faith of his fathers which is also hers? How does the heart of a mother not tremble when she asks herself whether it will be her belief or the unbelief of her surroundings which will triumph in the hearts of her children? How wounding can ridicule and mocking rejection be, when it comes from those whom we love.<sup>3</sup>

He points out that while the faith was failing in the primary place that it had taken hold in the world, Europe, it was not gaining ground in other places, like Asia:

The West is no longer shut up in itself; it can no longer regard itself simply as the centre of the history of this world and as the centre of culture, with a religion which... could appear as the obvious and indeed sole way of honoring God to be thought of for a European.<sup>4</sup>

In ancient cultures of Asia, [the Christian faith] has never been able to gain a foothold, and in the West where it became one of the historical roots it is still steadily losing in importance and influence... the saying about the little flock will become still more true in spite of all the Church’s pastoral and missionary efforts.<sup>5</sup>

Rahner was not alone in assessing the situation of the Church in the world as dire and predicting a decrease in the Church’s influence in the foreseeable future. Joseph Ratzinger expressed similar concerns in the midst of the Second Vatican Council in 1963:

As far as the future is concerned, it seems likely that, in the view of the proportion between the growth of the Church and the growth of the world’s population, the Church’s

---

<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Christian Among Unbelieving Relations,” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 3: 355-356; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 5: 116-117; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 111.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 6: 390; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 111.

influence in the world will constantly decrease. The numerical triumph of Catholicism over other religions, which today may still be taken for granted, will in all probability not continue much longer.<sup>6</sup>

Where had the Church gone wrong?

Rahner and others placed some of the blame on Neo-Scholasticism, which they viewed as too rigid and closed off from modern ideas.<sup>7</sup> Rahner's work prior to the 1960s, according to Karen Kilby, was largely spent trying to work within the principles of Neo-Scholasticism to open it to the ideas of modern philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger.<sup>8</sup> This led to conflict with other Catholic scholars, even at the beginning of his academic career: his philosophy dissertation director, Martin Honecker, rejected his dissertation *Geist in Welt* (Spirit in the World) because, in the words of Rahner, it was "too inspired by Heidegger."<sup>9</sup> Unflagged, Rahner published *Geist in Welt* and wrote a new dissertation to earn a doctorate in theology instead.<sup>10</sup> After surviving Nazi occupation in Austria,<sup>11</sup> Rahner continued teaching, writing, and speaking until the early 1960s when he was simultaneously placed under "preliminary censorship"<sup>12</sup> by the Vatican and appointed to be a *consultor* and *peritus* for the Second Vatican Council.<sup>13</sup> After meeting various Vatican officials during the council,<sup>14</sup> the preliminary

---

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "Salus Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Est," Documentatie Centrum Concilie, Series I, No. 88, (Rome, 1963): 2; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 112.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2007), xvi-xvii.

<sup>8</sup> Kilby, *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction*, xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Vorgrimler, Herbert, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 61-62; Rahner received an honorary doctorate from the University of Innsbruck in 1970: Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 67-69.

<sup>12</sup> Meaning, anything he wrote that he wanted to have published would first have to be approved by someone at the Vatican.

<sup>13</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 92-93.

<sup>14</sup> Apparently Cardinal Ottaviani told Rahner that the preliminary censorship was a privilege and protected him from those who misunderstood him. Rahner replied that he wished to forego the privilege. See Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 93.



ensorship was dropped in 1963, and he had freedom to publish the rest of his life.<sup>15</sup>

Following the Second Vatican Council, Rahner stepped forward with what he thought could be a much needed balm for the crisis of people leaving the Church: his thesis of the “anonymous Christian”<sup>16</sup>:

But the Christian who finds himself in a diaspora situation which is becoming increasingly acute, the believer who finds his faith and his hope sorely tried at the sight of his unbelieving brothers, can derive from [my thesis of the anonymous Christian] comfort and the strength of objectivity... this knowledge will keep him from panic.<sup>17</sup>

It might not stem the tide of people leaving the Church, but his thesis could provide relief for those who still believed and cared about the eternal fate of those who were abandoning the Christian faith.

An anonymous Christian, Rahner explains, is someone who does not profess the Christian faith, perhaps even denying the existence of God, and yet is nonetheless justified by the grace of Christ. He argues that, due to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, “there should be no room for doubt among Catholic theologians or Christians” that anonymous Christians are not only a possibility, but that there actually are anonymous Christians living today.<sup>18</sup> He goes further to claim that “optimism of universal salvation [is] entailed in this thesis

---

<sup>15</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> The primary places one can find Rahner’s work on his thesis of the anonymous Christian include: “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church” in *Theological Investigations*, Confrontations 2, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 12; “Anonymous Christians” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 6; “The Christian Among Unbelieving Relations” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 3; “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 5; *Faith in a Wintry Season*. New York: Crossroad, 1990; *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. New York: 1978; “Observations on the Problem of the ‘Anonymous Christian’” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1976, 14; *The Shape of the Church to Come*, tr. Edward Quinn. London: SPCK, 1974.

<sup>17</sup> Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” 396; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 112.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Rahner, “Observations on the Problem of the ‘Anonymous Christian,’” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 14: 283.

[of the anonymous Christian],”<sup>19</sup> accusing those who believe that most people might not be saved of “indescribable coldness in your heart.”<sup>20</sup>

Regarding the sources of his thesis, Rahner admits that “no truly theological demonstration of this thesis can be supplied here from scripture or tradition.”<sup>21</sup> He recommends further work be done to “reconcile” his thesis with the “viewpoint... [of] the New Testament.”<sup>22</sup> Though he points to hints of his thesis throughout the history of the Church, he gives most credit to the Second Vatican Council for supporting his thesis, which he says ran counter to “the officially received theology concerning these questions, which was more or less traditional right down to the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>23</sup>

But on a personal level, Rahner was motivated largely by “pastoral concerns,” according to Ralph Martin:

It is clear that Rahner is actually motivated by pastoral concerns and is trying to preserve “hope” in those who are discouraged by the prospect of evangelizing in the cultural context Rahner was most sensitive to — the post-Christian European intellectual culture of his time.

In a way not unlike that of the sixteenth-century Dominican and Jesuit theologians, who attempted to come to grips theologically with the shock of the discovery of vast peoples in the “new world” who had never heard the gospel, Rahner is attempting to come to grips theologically with the shock of the collapse of Christendom and the ascendancy of an aggressive anti-Christian international secular culture in the Christian heartland, as well as the continued existence of vast numbers of people of “other religions” who show no signs of conversion to Christianity in significant numbers. He is explicit in stating this as his motivation.<sup>24</sup>

Given the traditional doctrine, it appeared to Rahner in the 20th century (and still does to many

---

<sup>19</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 238.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 168; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 104.

<sup>21</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 283.

<sup>22</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 292.

<sup>23</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 284.

<sup>24</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 110.

people today) as though most people will not attain salvation. So in order to maintain optimism, Rahner felt compelled to formulate a doctrine that would support optimism for universal salvation, despite all appearances to the contrary.

His thesis has been lauded<sup>25</sup> as well as heavily criticized, with various parts of his thesis called “astonishing”<sup>26</sup> (in a negative sense) and “ridiculous.”<sup>27</sup> Most seriously, his thesis has been said to “demolish”<sup>28</sup> the traditional reason for missionary work and to have contributed to a “crisis in the missions.”<sup>29</sup>

But whatever their opinion is of his theology, theologians are in agreement that Rahner’s thesis of the anonymous Christian has become a reference point for theological work on the question of the salvation of non-Christians in the last half century. For example, Francis Sullivan devotes a whole chapter to Rahner and his thesis in his book *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Church’s Response*,<sup>30</sup> as does Ralph Martin in his more recent book *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*.<sup>31</sup>

In this thesis, I argue that many of Rahner’s key claims about his thesis are either greatly exaggerated or incorrect. In chapter two, I explain Rahner’s thesis of the anonymous Christian in greater detail, including how Rahner defines what an anonymous Christian is more precisely, the

---

<sup>25</sup> See Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 181.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Jen-Guy Pagé, *Qui Est L’église?: Le Peuple de Dieu* (Montréal: Les Editions Bellarmin, 1979), vol 3, 53; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 109.

<sup>28</sup> Eamonn Conway, *The Anonymous Christian: A Relativized Christianity? An Evaluation of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Criticisms of Karl Rahner’s Theory of the Anonymous Christian* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lange, 1993), 25; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 114.

<sup>29</sup> Eugene Hillman, “‘Anonymous Christianity’ and the Missions,” *The Downside Review* 84, no. 277 (1966): 362, 379; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 114.

<sup>30</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 162-181.

<sup>31</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 93-128.

role Rahner assigns to Jesus in salvation, the importance of his doctrine of the supernatural existential, how he thinks pagans become anonymous Christians, the certainty he ascribes to his thesis, the optimism for universal salvation he believes is entailed by his thesis, and finally the relationship he claims his thesis has to the Second Vatican Council, Scripture, Tradition, and previous magisterial teaching. In chapter three, I examine relevant texts of the Second Vatican Council, including taking a careful look at footnotes in the conciliar text, to demonstrate that his claim that the Second Vatican Council leaves “no room for doubt”<sup>32</sup> about the possibility of anonymous Christians is greatly exaggerated. In chapter four, I evaluate other important claims that Rahner makes about his thesis, and I argue that the existence and number of anonymous Christians is not addressed by the Second Vatican Council, that his thesis does not entail optimism for universal salvation, and that his claims about the relationship between his thesis and Scripture, Tradition, and the Second Vatican Council are problematic and entail a decisive argument against his thesis. Finally, in chapter five I summarize my conclusions and point to areas for further research.

---

<sup>32</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

## Chapter 2

### *A Summary of Karl Rahner's Thesis of the Anonymous Christian*

In this chapter, I will summarize key points about Rahner's thesis of the anonymous Christian that I will evaluate in chapters three and four. These points include how Rahner defines the term "anonymous Christian," the role Rahner assigns to Jesus in salvation, the importance of his doctrine of the supernatural existential, how he thinks pagans become anonymous Christians, the certainty he ascribes to his thesis, the optimism for universal salvation he believes is entailed by his thesis, and finally the relationship he claims his thesis has to the Second Vatican Council, Scripture, Tradition, and previous magisterial teaching.

#### **Defining the Term "Anonymous Christian"**

In two different places in his writings, Karl Rahner provides complementary definitions of what he means by the phrase "anonymous Christian," a term which he coined in the latter half of the 20th century:

- (1) [T]he 'anonymous Christian' in our sense of the term is the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ's grace through faith, hope, and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup>
- (2) [E]ven outside the Christian body there are individuals — and they are to be found even in the rank of atheists — who are justified by God's grace and possess the Holy

---

<sup>33</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

An anonymous Christian is someone who has the spiritual conditions of a Christian (“is justified by God’s grace,”<sup>35</sup> “lives in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope, and love,”<sup>36</sup> and “possesses the Holy Spirit”<sup>37</sup>) but who at the same time lacks explicit knowledge of Jesus, the Gospel, the Church, or even God (“they are to be found even in the rank of atheists”<sup>38</sup>). An anonymous Christian would not claim to be a Christian (he may not have any familiarity with the term) because he does not know that he is a Christian. If the person does have familiarity with the term, he may emphatically deny that he is a Christian or even that he believes in God. Such a person is, thus, a Christian “anonymously,” both to others and himself.

### **Jesus, the Supernatural Existential, and Salvation**

Rahner was committed to the unicity and necessity of Christ for salvation, and he opposed the kind of religious pluralism advocated by theologians such as John Hick.<sup>39</sup> Hick calls for a theological “copernican revolution” in which “Christianity, instead of being the center of the religious universe, would, like the other religions, be centered rather on God.”<sup>40</sup> He terms his position “theocentric pluralism” and argues that salvation can be gained in any religion.<sup>41</sup> His position entails the rejection of central claims of traditional Christianity, including the universal role of both the Church and Jesus Christ in God’s plan of salvation for all the people of the

---

<sup>34</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 291.

<sup>35</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 291.

<sup>36</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>37</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 291.

<sup>38</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 291.

<sup>39</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 171.

<sup>40</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 170.

<sup>41</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 170.

world. Francis Sullivan explains Hick's position:

For Hick, Jesus Christ is but one of several agents of God's plan, and consequently the Christian religion is but one of several equally valid ways of salvation.

As must be obvious, Hick's theory is incompatible with Christian belief that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God. What he calls "the myth of Christian uniqueness" depends on what he calls "the myth of God incarnate." For Hick, neither of these Christian beliefs is any longer tenable. It is evident that the fundamental question is whether Jesus Christ is truly the unique Son of God, or merely the human founder of one of the many religions through which God intends to work out his plan of salvation.<sup>42</sup>

In contradistinction to Hick, Rahner affirms that Christ is the incarnation of God, that the only grace available to individuals for salvation comes from Christ, and that the grace of Christ is mediated by the Church, at least in some way. Sullivan explains Rahner's position further:

[T]here is no grace for salvation but the grace of Christ, of which the church of Christ is the tangible, historical presence in the world. Hence, Christianity is the absolute religion destined for all of humanity, after the coming of which all other religions are objectively abrogated. The salvation of the individual requires that the person respond to divine revelation with an act of supernatural faith, and in some real sense this faith must be ultimately directed to Christ as the mediator of salvation.<sup>43</sup>

Sullivan points out that Rahner's position, *prima facie*, would "seem to make salvation impossible for non-Christians."<sup>44</sup> But of course Rahner believes that "the salvific will of God embraces every human person without exception."<sup>45</sup> His explanation as to how this is possible is grounded in his unique theological anthropology.

Crucial to Rahner's understanding of why there can be anonymous Christians is his doctrine of the "supernatural existential," by which he means, according to Ralph Martin, that "the supernatural is present and active in 'nature' and most especially human nature, apart from

---

<sup>42</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 170.

<sup>43</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 171; See Karl Rahner, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 16: 199-224.

<sup>44</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 171.

<sup>45</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 171.

explicit faith or incorporation into Christ.”<sup>46</sup> Rahner defines his doctrine of the supernatural existential more at length this way:

This self-communication by God offered to all and fulfilled in the highest way in Christ rather constitutes the goal of all creation and — since God’s word and will *effect* what they say — even before he freely takes up an attitude to it, it stamps and determines man’s nature and lends it a character which we may call a ‘supernatural existential.’<sup>47</sup>

Rahner makes a distinction between human nature and the supernatural existential, but he argues human nature does not exist without the supernatural existential, and in fact has never existed without it: there has never been a human who existed with “pure nature.”<sup>48</sup> Though he believes they always exist together, his distinction between nature and the supernatural existential is intended to safeguard the Catholic dogma that salvation is entirely a gift of God’s grace.<sup>49</sup> The supernatural existential makes all human beings “transcendently ordered to eternal life with the Trinity,” but, according to Rahner, does not by itself bring about justification, which involves other forms of grace.<sup>50</sup>

Patrick Burke explains in greater detail the three different kinds of grace in Rahner’s theology:

First, man is created as a dynamic natural openness to all being. As such, he is dynamically open to the supernatural and finds in God, and ultimately in Christ, his absolute fulfillment. However, this fulfillment is not owed to him, and he apparently can find fulfillment in a lesser natural good. This is the “grace of creation.”

---

<sup>46</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” 393; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 94; emphasis in original.

<sup>48</sup> There has been theological debate about the definition and importance of “pure nature” since at least the 16th century. It was particularly important in debates surrounding the teachings of Baius and Jansen as a way of maintaining the absolute gratuity of God’s grace. According to E. M. Burke, the term normally refers to “a possible state of man contrasted with elevated, or engraced, nature and fallen, or sinful, nature. In the state of pure nature a man would possess all the physical and spiritual realities necessary to constitute a human being: a body and a rational soul with all their properties and capacities.” For more, see Burke, E. M., “Pure Nature, State of,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. CUA editorial staff (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), 11: 1033-1034.

<sup>49</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 94.

<sup>50</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 94; See Rahner, “Anonymous Christians” and Karl Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 4: 105-120.



Second, man is endowed originally and always with a “supernatural existential” that elevates his natural dynamic transcendence, unconditionally orienting him toward God. This is not a “grace of creation,” but neither is it apparently “strictly supernatural grace.”

Finally, man is offered “strictly supernatural grace,” traditionally called “uncreated grace,” which is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the self-communication of God himself.<sup>51</sup>

This means that when an individual comes into contact with the visible Church, he is not for the first time coming into contact with non-created grace, at least of a certain sort, but has instead been living with a certain form of non-created grace his whole life.

Since the supernatural existential is with a person his whole life from the moment of conception, Rahner points out that one should not think of the reception of God’s grace as an event in a person’s life:

The supernatural grace of faith and justification offered by God to men does not need to be conceived of as an isolated intervention on God’s part at a particular point in a world which is itself profane.

On the contrary, it can perfectly well be interpreted on the basis of God’s universal will to save as a grace which, as offered, is a constantly present existential of the creature endowed with spiritual faculties and of the world in general, which orientates these to the immediacy of God as their final end, though of course in saying this the question still remains wholly open of whether an individual freely gives himself to, or alternatively rejects, this existential... It does this effectively at all times and in all places in the form of the offering and the enabling power of acting in a way that leads to salvation.<sup>52</sup>

The supernatural existential is itself not enough for salvation but requires some sort of response from the individual. What kind of response does Rahner think is required for salvation? Rahner explains:

[E]very individual who does not in any absolute or ultimate sense act against his own conscience can say and does say in faith, hope, and love, Abba within his own spirit, and is on these grounds in all truth a brother to Christians in God’s sight.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 69; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 94.

<sup>52</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 288; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 96.

<sup>53</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 294; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 97.

So all that is required is that the person do an action that is not “in any absolute or ultimate sense... against his own conscience.” Due to the supernatural existential, this alone makes the person “in all truth a brother to Christians in God’s sight,” or an anonymous Christian. He goes on to say that any “moral decision can... be thought to measure up to the character of a supernaturally elevated, believing and thus saving act, and hence to be more in actual fact than merely ‘natural morality.’”<sup>54</sup> Martin points out that this implies that there are no merely natural moral acts.<sup>55</sup> All moral acts are necessarily supernatural in character in Rahner’s view due to the presence of the supernatural existential in every person’s life from the moment of their conception.

Rahner also states his position regarding how salvation is obtained this way:

[H]e also already accepts this revelation whenever he really accepts *himself completely*, for it already speaks *in* him. Prior to the explicitness of official ecclesiastical faith this acceptance can be present in an implicit form whereby a person undertakes and lives the duty of each day in the quiet sincerity of patience, in devotion to his material duties and the demands made upon him by the persons under his care... In the acceptance of himself man is accepting Christ.<sup>56</sup>

Since all Rahner thinks a person needs to do to respond to the supernatural existential for salvation is to “not in any absolute or ultimate sense act against his own conscience,” or even simply “accept himself,” Rahner thinks Christians should actually presume that most people are in fact living under the influence of God’s supernatural grace. He thinks this should be the default presumption even if all appearances would indicate otherwise:

[I]f one believes seriously in the universal salvific purpose of God towards all men in Christ, it need not and cannot really be doubted that gratuitous influences of properly Christian supernatural grace are conceivable in the life of all men... and that these

---

<sup>54</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 5: 125; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 97.

<sup>55</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 97.

<sup>56</sup> Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” 394; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 98; emphasis in original.

influences can be presumed to be accepted in spite of the sinful state of men and in spite of their apparent estrangement from God.<sup>57</sup>

Note Rahner's strong language that serious Christians not only "need not" but in fact "cannot" doubt the influences of God's grace in people's lives, regardless of the "sinful state of men and in spite of their apparent estrangement from God."<sup>58</sup> No sin, regardless of its gravity or prevalence, nor whether it is explicitly embraced without regret or remorse, should lead any Christian to doubt the salvation of most people. Elsewhere, Rahner does admit that "this hope [of universal salvation] is constantly being undermined by our empirical experience."<sup>59</sup> Rahner does not, however, take this empirical experience as counting against his thesis, or as warranting any lessening in his certainty or optimism regarding the salvation of most people.

In an attempt to explain this pervasive incongruity between what he believes is the state of most people's souls and the actions of most people, Rahner draws on the Church's distinctions between mortal and venial sins, stressing the difference between the objective sinfulness of an act and the guilt that is possibly accrued subjectively by the actor, depending on the specific circumstances of the sinner:

We must consider the immeasurable difference — which it seems right to suppose to exist even in the Christian sphere — between what is objectively wrong in moral life and the extent to which this is really realized with subjectively grave guilt. Once we take all this into consideration, we will not hold it to be impossible that grace is at work, and is even being accepted, in the spiritual, personal life of the individual, no matter how primitive, unenlightened, apathetic and earth-bound such a life may at first sight appear to be.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, Rahner thinks it is possible that most, if not all, of the people committing gravely immoral actions are not subjectively guilty, or at least not gravely guilty, for their actions, and

---

<sup>57</sup> Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 125; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 97.

<sup>58</sup> Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 125; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 97.

<sup>59</sup> Rahner, *Wintery Season*, 167; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 103.

<sup>60</sup> Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 124-125; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 100.

thus are not in as bad of a spiritual state as they appear to be in.

It is true that in Catholic theology for a sin to be mortal, rather than merely venial, “three conditions must together be met: ... grave matter... which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.”<sup>61</sup> Rahner admits that, by all appearances, people may seem “primitive, unenlightened, apathetic, and earth-bound,”<sup>62</sup> but he argues that the three conditions of a mortal sin are almost never met. This would seem to make “mortal sin” an almost entirely theoretical, and thus practically useless, category. It would also diminish, if not entirely eliminate, the primary purpose of the sacrament of confession, which is to provide absolution for mortal sins.

### **Rahner and the Need for Spiritual Community**

Rahner also argues that a person’s salvation should not remain an exclusively inward phenomenon, even for anonymous Christians.<sup>63</sup> Due to the inherently social nature of human beings, one’s relationship with God must also have an external, communal expression with other people. Since anonymous Christians do not have access to the normal visible signs, sacraments, and community of the Church, what is the communal expression of the faith of anonymous Christians? Rahner argues that non-Christian religions fill the void. Sullivan explains Rahner’s position:

Rahner insists that the anonymous Christian’s response to God’s self-communication cannot be understood as a purely inward, private affair. He fully endorses the statement of Vatican II that God’s saving design is not carried out exclusively in people’s souls, with a kind of secrecy. The essentially social nature of human existence calls for some kind of communal expression of people’s response to God. Normally, this will take the form of the religion which is part of their culture.

Rahner concludes that, when Christianity is not a viable option, it must be within the

---

<sup>61</sup> CCC 1857.

<sup>62</sup> Rahner, “Non-Christian Religions,” 124-125; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 100.

<sup>63</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 172.

providential design of God that people express their worship of God in the religion which is available to them. In other words, even though the non-Christian religions are objectively abrogated by the advent of Christianity, they continue to be legitimate religions for people who are inculpably ignorant of any obligation on their part to abandon the religion of their culture and to embrace Christianity.<sup>64</sup>

Instead of being a threat to one's salvation, Rahner views non-Christian religions as imperfect but nonetheless helpful, even providential, aids to anonymous Christians for their souls. To be clear, in Rahner's view, they are "not to be thought of as ways of salvation independent of Christ, who is the unique source of the grace by which their adherents are saved."<sup>65</sup> Rather, non-Christian religions can have "supernatural elements in them, which make them apt to serve as mediations of [the] divine grace" that was won by Christ.<sup>66</sup>

But if an anonymous Christian's path to salvation depends on his love of neighbor, a non-Christian religion is only an aid to his salvation insofar as it helps him to love his neighbor, which is something not all religions do to the same degree. This point has been raised by Max Seckler, whose objection Sullivan explains in further detail:

Seckler's objection to Rahner's theory is that it attributes a saving function to the practice of whatever happens to be the religion of a particular culture, independently of the specific nature of its beliefs and practices, which might hinder as well as help people toward salvation.<sup>67</sup>

Though Rahner did not respond to Seckler's critique directly, he did give an important qualification to his view of the value of non-Christian religions for anonymous Christians in a later work on this point:

When a non-Christian attains salvation through faith, hope and love, non-Christian religions cannot be understood in such a way that they do not play a role, or play only a negative role in the attainment of justification and salvation. This proposition is not concerned about making a very definite Christian interpretation and judgement about a

---

<sup>64</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 172.

<sup>65</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 173.

<sup>66</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 173.

<sup>67</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 177.

concrete non-Christian religion. Nor is there any question of making such a religion equal to Christian faith in its salvific significance, nor of denying its depravity or its provisional character in the history of salvation, nor of denying that such a concrete religion can also have negative effects on the event of salvation in a particular non-Christian.

But presupposing all of this, we still have to say, if a non-Christian religion could not or may not have any positive influence at all on the supernatural event of salvation in an individual person who is a non-Christian, then we would be understanding this event of salvation in this person in a completely ahistorical and asocial way. But this contradicts in a fundamental way the historical and social nature of Christianity itself, that is, its ecclesial nature.<sup>68</sup>

So Rahner readily admits that non-Christian religions may be “depraved” and “provisional,” and may have “negative effects” on a person’s salvation, but he also wants to affirm any good that a non-Christian religion may do for an anonymous Christian living without the fullness of the Catholic Church, particularly regarding their ability to express their anonymous Christianity in a social and communal way. He also points out that his comments are general in nature and are not intended to be applied with specificity to a particular non-Christian religion, which may be more or less helpful for a person’s soul depending on the specifics of its beliefs and practices.

But since Rahner holds that the Catholic Church alone is the fullness of the Christian faith, at what point must anonymous Christians abandon their non-Christian religion? Only when anonymous Christians are so convinced of the truth of the Catholic faith that they would be committing a mortal sin to reject it, says Rahner. Until then, however, Rahner holds that God desires that anonymous Christians take part in their local non-Christian religion:

Rahner insists that this means that until non-Christians become so convinced of their obligation to accept Christianity that it would be a mortal sin for them not to do so, their own religion continues to be the way in which God must intend that they express their relationship with him and arrive at their salvation.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: 1978), 314; quoted in Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 177-178.

<sup>69</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 172.

It is noteworthy how greatly Rahner's position contrasts with the more traditional Catholic standard of "invincible ignorance" for determining whether a person is culpable for rejecting the Christian faith. While invincible ignorance requires that the person does not know and, further, could not have known even if they had sought the truth, Rahner's position is that a person must not only know but be convinced of the truth of the Gospel before they can be held accountable. Further, even though Rahner holds that it is possible for anonymous Christians to be culpable for rejecting the Christian faith, Rahner also holds that Christians should have as their default presumption "that those who have heard the Christian message and have not yet accepted it are in good faith, and are not guilty of sin in remaining in their own religion."<sup>70</sup> Since the vast majority of the people in the world adhere to a non-Christian religion in some way, Rahner argues that Christians should believe that non-Christian religions "remain, under God's providence, legitimate ways of salvation for the majority of the world's people."<sup>71</sup>

But what of self-professed atheists who reject even non-Christian religions? If most atheists are anonymous Christians, is there a social expression of their implicit faith available to them? Rahner answers that "while such created mediations of grace are always necessary [for an anonymous Christian], they are not in every case of the specifically religious kind."<sup>72</sup> He argues that a secular culture can also provide "the material for the decision in which a person effectively responds to the self-communication of God which we call grace."<sup>73</sup> Rahner explains his position on this issue:

The transcendent reference of man to God is mediated through categorical objects (at least in cases other than genuine mystical experiences). But this object does not necessarily have to be a religious concept. The transcendent reference to God can be

---

<sup>70</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 172-173.

<sup>71</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 173.

<sup>72</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 179-180.

<sup>73</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 180.

found in the mediations of ordinary, secular material, as long as man by means of this material freely comes to a position of complete responsibility and self-determination.<sup>74</sup>

This mediating, categorical objectivity... does not have to be an explicitly religious act. It can be formed by a particular moral decision in which a man is responsible for himself and accepts (or rejects) himself.<sup>75</sup>

For Rahner, any moral act for which a person takes responsibility can take the place of what would otherwise be a religious expression for a self-professed atheist who is also an anonymous Christian. Sullivan says that Rahner did not explore this subject in greater detail, but that other theologians took up the task of fleshing out how secular realities may serve as mediators of grace for non-religious people.

Among them was Yves Congar, who points out that some atheists or secularists devote themselves to “such transcendent values as Duty, Peace, Justice, Fraternity, Humanity.”<sup>76</sup> He says that such values can serve as “*incognitos* of God for those inculpably lacking any explicit religion.”<sup>77</sup> But the most important *incognito* of God is what Congar calls the “mystery of the neighbor.”<sup>78</sup> Sullivan explains Congar’s position:

It is the other person who is most worthy of self-sacrificing love, and through whom the atheist who offers such love reaches out to the God whom he does not know.<sup>79</sup>

Atheists, Congar argues, can inadvertently love the God that they deny exists by loving the people around them.

Gustave Thils also gives examples of “individual and collective mediations, through which, with or without any practice of religion, people can arrive at the attitudes of faith and love

---

<sup>74</sup> Karl Rahner, “Anonymous and Explicit Faith” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 16: 55; quoted in Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 180.

<sup>75</sup> Rahner, “Anonymous and Explicit Faith,” 58; quoted in Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 180.

<sup>76</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 180.

<sup>77</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 180; emphasis in original.

<sup>78</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 180.

<sup>79</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 180.



which are essential for their salvation.”<sup>80</sup> Examples of individual mediations include “the law written in hearts,” the “seeds of the Word,” interior illumination, and one’s conscience.

Examples of collective mediations include “the covenants of God with humanity,” “the divine dispositions,” general revelation, and “non-biblical wisdom and prophetism.”<sup>81</sup> Thils argues that “there is no one for whom God does not provide some such mediation, whether of a religious or a secular nature, whereby the person can respond to God in such a way as to reach salvation.”<sup>82</sup>

Every person will have some sort of meditation made available to them.

According to Sullivan, most Catholic theologians (at least as of 1992, when his book *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* was published) agree with Rahner in large part that “both non-Christian religions and secular realities can serve as mediations of grace and salvation for people who do not share Christian faith,” including “Wolfgang Beinert, Yves Congar, Jacques Dupuis, Johannes Feiner, Piet Fransen, Heinrich Fries, Walter Kasper, Hans Küng, Joseph Ratzinger, Otto Semmelroth, Bernard Sesboüé, Gustave Thils, and Hans Waldenfels.”<sup>83</sup>

### **Certainty of Rahner’s Thesis and Optimism for Universal Salvation**

Having argued that all people have God’s grace working in them their entire lives, that the only thing necessary to respond to that grace for salvation is to “not in any absolute or ultimate sense act against his own conscience,” having explained why we should not take seriously the ubiquitous incidence of grave sin as indicative of people’s spiritual state, and

---

<sup>80</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 180.

<sup>81</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 180-181.

<sup>82</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 181.

<sup>83</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 181.

having argued that non-Christian religions, or even secular culture, can be mediators of grace for the salvation of anonymous Christians, Rahner concludes that “there should be no room for doubt among Catholic theologians or Christians” regarding the existence of anonymous Christians and that in fact “[t]here can be, and actually are” such individuals in the world right now.<sup>84</sup>

In one passage, Rahner goes so far as to say that it is “impossible” for Catholics to think otherwise:

It is... impossible to think that this offer of supernatural, divinizing grace made to all men on account of the universal salvific purpose of God, should in general (prescinding from the relatively few exceptions) remain ineffective in most cases on account of the personal guilt of the individual. For, as far as the gospel is concerned, we have no really conclusive reason for thinking so pessimistically of men. On the other hand, and contrary to every merely human experience, we do have every reason for thinking optimistically of God and his salvific will which is more powerful than the extremely limited stupidity and evil-mindedness of men...

Christ and his salvation are not simply one of two possibilities offering themselves to man's free choice; they are the deed of God that bursts open and redeems the false choice of man by overtaking it. In Christ God not only gives the *possibility* of salvation, which in that case would still have to be effected by man himself, but the actual salvation itself, however much this includes also the right decision of human freedom which is itself a gift from God. [...]

And hence we have every right to suppose that grace has not only been offered even outside the Christian Church... but also that, in a great many cases at least, grace gains the victory in man's free acceptance of it, this being again the result of grace.<sup>85</sup>

Notice that while in the first line he says it is “impossible” to think God's grace is not effective in the lives of most people, just a few sentences later he makes the weaker claim that “we have every right” to believe that God's grace is effective in the lives of most, if not all, people. While the latter is obviously entailed by the former, the wide range in terms makes it not entirely clear

---

<sup>84</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>85</sup> Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 123-124; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 102; emphasis in original.

how precise Rahner is intending to be with his language here. Also notice that he denies that salvation is “simply one of two possibilities offering themselves to man’s free choice.”<sup>86</sup>

Traditionally, including as it is described in Scripture,<sup>87</sup> salvation has been described precisely as a decision between two options. But Rahner also says that salvation “includes... the right decision of human freedom which is itself a gift from God.”<sup>88</sup> It is not clear what role a person’s “right decision of human freedom” plays in one’s salvation if there are no options. It is also noteworthy that Rahner credits “the gospel” with providing “no really conclusive reason for thinking so pessimistically of men.”<sup>89</sup>

Having determined that optimism of universal salvation is the only possible position for Catholics, Rahner makes an *ad hominem* attack against those who think most people may actually be going to hell, singling out St. Augustine specifically:

With all respect to Saint Augustine, he must be asked: “How can you believe in the victory of the cross of the eternal Son of God and at the same time see no problem in the fact that apparently enormous numbers of people are damned? Does this not testify to an indescribable coldness in your heart?”<sup>90</sup>

Rahner’s comments are striking since the idea that most people are going to hell has been the majority view for almost the entire tradition, held by a wide range of doctors of the Church, saints, bishops, and popes. Rahner’s attack prompts Martin to ask Rahner this counter-question: “What would one then have to say about Jesus’ heart, whose teachings on the ‘many’ and the ‘few’ are a basis for Augustine’s thought?”<sup>91</sup>

Rahner also says that “optimism of universal salvation [is] entailed in this thesis [of the

---

<sup>86</sup> Rahner, “Non-Christian Religions,” 123-124; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 102.

<sup>87</sup> Matthew 7.13-14, Deut. 30.15-20, et al.

<sup>88</sup> Rahner, “Non-Christian Religions,” 123-124; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 102.

<sup>89</sup> Rahner, “Non-Christian Religions,” 123-124; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 102.

<sup>90</sup> Rahner, *Wintry Season*, 168; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 104.

<sup>91</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 104; see Matthew 7.13-14

anonymous Christian].”<sup>92</sup> In other words, Rahner holds that there is a necessary logical connection between his thesis of there being anonymous Christians and optimism about the chances of salvation for all people in the world. Eamonn Conway sums up Rahner’s claims of optimism like this: “Though the Christian must refrain from judging others, he nonetheless must also have unlimited optimism for the salvation of all. Not to profess such optimism,” Conway says of Rahner’s position, “is to doubt the success of the Christ-event.”<sup>93</sup> Note the strong language that to lack “*unlimited* optimism for the salvation of all”<sup>94</sup> is the same as “to doubt the success of the Christ-event.”<sup>95</sup> The lack of optimism for universal salvation held by most Christians in the tradition, including doctors of the Church, saints, bishops, and popes, was a result of their lack of faith in Christ’s victory on the cross.

### **Rahner’s Sources for His Thesis**

Rahner credits his “unlimited optimism” — optimism strong enough to overcome “constantly being undermined by our empirical experience”<sup>96</sup> — directly to the Second Vatican Council: “This optimism concerning salvation appears to me one of the most noteworthy results of the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>97</sup> He says that this development runs counter to “the officially received theology concerning these questions, which was more or less traditional right down to the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>98</sup> Given how big of a change the Second Vatican Council made regarding optimism for universal salvation, Rahner says he is surprised at how little debate there

---

<sup>92</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 238.

<sup>93</sup> Conway, *Anonymous Christian*, 17-18; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 108.

<sup>94</sup> Conway, *Anonymous Christian*, 17-18; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 108; my emphasis.

<sup>95</sup> Conway, *Anonymous Christian*, 17-18; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 108.

<sup>96</sup> Rahner, *Wintry Season*, 167; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 103.

<sup>97</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 284.

<sup>98</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 284.

was about it at the council:

[W]e can only wonder how few controversies arose during the Council with regard to these assertions of optimism concerning salvation, and wonder too at how little opposition the conservative wing of the Council brought to bear on this point.<sup>99</sup>

Rahner is correct that it would warrant wonder if the Second Vatican Council really did reverse without serious controversy a doctrine that had been officially held for the whole history of the Church until the council.

Regarding the relationship of his thesis to the deposit of faith, Rahner actually admits that his thesis of the anonymous Christian cannot be demonstrated from either Scripture or Tradition:

No truly theological demonstration of this thesis can be supplied here from scripture or tradition. Such a demonstration would not be easy to make, because [this thesis] has only gradually become clear and asserted itself in the conscious faith of the Church.<sup>100</sup>

By saying that his thesis has “gradually become clear and asserted itself in the conscious faith of the Church,” Rahner means that he can trace the development of his thesis in the work of Ambrose, the medieval doctrines of *baptismus fluminis* and the *votum ecclesiae*, the Council of Trent, and finally into the 20th century with the magisterium of Pope Pius XII, none of which he thinks reflects the teachings of Scripture or Tradition.<sup>101</sup> Note that Rahner holds this to be the case despite that fact that he also thinks that the “officially received theology [denying his thesis] concerning all these questions... was more or less traditional right down to the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 284.

<sup>100</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>101</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>102</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 284.

## Chapter 3

### *Evaluating the Possibility of Anonymous Christians in Light of Vatican II*

In the present chapter, I will focus on Rahner's claim that the Second Vatican Council leaves "no room for doubt"<sup>103</sup> of whether there can be people who fit his description of the anonymous Christian. Through a careful examination of the relevant texts of the Second Vatican Council, mostly *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 16, including a close look at the documents and Scripture verses referenced in the footnotes, I will demonstrate that, while the council does not definitively rule out the possibility of there being anonymous Christians, the conciliar text does not support it definitively either. Some parts of the conciliar text seem to support his thesis, and some parts are neutral on the question, while others seem to weigh against it, contradicting Rahner claim of indisputable support from the council for his thesis.

#### ***Lumen Gentium* and the Salvation of Non-Christians**

The most relevant passage from the documents of the Second Vatican Council is *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 16. It begins by saying that "those who have not yet accepted the gospel are related to the people of God in various ways."<sup>104</sup> The term used to describe the connection between the Church and those who have not received the Gospel is "related" (*ordinantur*). The

---

<sup>103</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>104</sup> *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 16; *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (DEC), Vol II (Trent - Vatican II), ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 861-862.

term “joined”<sup>105</sup> (*coniunctam*) is used to describe the relationship of non-Catholic Christians to the Church in the preceding paragraph, and the phrase “fully incorporated”<sup>106</sup> (*plene... incorporantur*) is used to describe the relationship of Catholics to the Church in the paragraph before that. The difference in terms is meant to indicate a difference in the kind of relationship the different groups have to the Church. While “joined” seems to indicate a real connection between non-Catholic Christians and the Catholic Church, the term “related,” describing the relationship between non-Christians and the Catholic Church, is substantially weaker.

This first line has a footnote referencing St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologicae* III, q. 8, a. 3, ad 1. The question is “Of the grace of Christ, as He Is the Head of the Church,” and the article is “Whether Christ is the Head of All Men?” Thomas answers in the affirmative that Christ is the head of all humans, but makes the important qualification that this is only true *potentially*:

Those who are unbaptized, though not actually in the Church, are in the Church potentially. And this potentiality is rooted in two things—first and principally, in the power of Christ, which is sufficient for the salvation of the whole human race; secondly, in free-will.<sup>107</sup>

The unbaptized have the potential to be saved by Christ and thereby become actual members of the Church. If this is the sense in which *Lumen Gentium* intended to mean that non-Christians are “related” to the Church, and the fact that the council references this passage of Thomas as the only footnote on that line indicates that it did, then this is strong evidence against Rahner’s thesis, since “anonymous Christians,” according to Rahner, are people who are actually living in the grace of Christ as members of Christ’s body, and not merely in potentially.

---

<sup>105</sup> LG, 15; Tanner, DEC, 860-861.

<sup>106</sup> LG, 14; Tanner, DEC, 860.

<sup>107</sup> ST III, q. 8, a. 3, ad. 1, in *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Vol 2 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 2077.

The fact that Thomas highlights the role of free-will in making people potential Christians also seems to contradict Rahner's assertion that "Christ and his salvation are not simply one of two possibilities offering themselves to man's free choice."<sup>108</sup> If the Second Vatican Council really is intending to teach something that runs counter to "the officially received theology concerning these questions, which was more or less traditional right down to the Second Vatican Council,"<sup>109</sup> then why is the council referencing a traditional doctrine articulated by Thomas that contradicts Rahner's interpretation?

### ***Lumen Gentium and the Jewish People***

The conciliar text continues, addressing "that people to whom the testaments and promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh"<sup>110</sup> — a reference to the Jewish people, though notably not by name. The council says that this people is "most dear because of their ancestors: for God never goes back on his gifts and his calling."<sup>111</sup> A footnote references Romans 11.28-29, which offers helpful context:

As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.<sup>112</sup>

Both the council text and the passage from Romans say that the Jewish people are beloved by God and that God does not take back his calls. But Scripture also says "as regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake." This more negative element accompanies the positive ones in Scripture but is missing from the conciliar text.

---

<sup>108</sup> Rahner, *Non-Christian Religions* 123-124 ; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 102.

<sup>109</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 284.

<sup>110</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>111</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>112</sup> ESV.



It is not explicitly stated in the conciliar text that there can be individuals who embrace the Jewish religion but are nonetheless, according to Rahner's definition of the anonymous Christian, "in the state of Christ's grace through faith, hope, and love, yet who [have] no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ."<sup>113</sup> It could be argued that the gifts of God to the Jewish people on which "God never goes back" may include some possibility of salvation without explicit faith in Jesus Christ, but such an interpretation is not obvious or necessary. In fact, the second part of that statement — "God never goes back on...his *calling*"<sup>114</sup> — would seem to indicate that those embracing the Jewish religion still need to respond to God and that thus there is a permanent need for those embracing the Jewish religion to be explicitly converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Otherwise it is not clear what the purpose of God's "calling" is in this context.

### ***Lumen Gentium* and Muslims**

The council next addresses "those who acknowledge the Creator" and says "among these the Moslems are first; they profess to hold the faith of Abraham and along with us they worship the one merciful God who will judge humanity on the last day."<sup>115</sup> The council does not explicitly mention any other groups who acknowledge the Creator, though Jews, addressed just prior, would also fall into this category. Regarding the prospects of salvation for Muslims, the council text says simply that "the plan of salvation also embraces" them. Undoubtedly, since Christ came for all people, God's plan of salvation includes all people insofar as salvation is available to all, at least in principle. Such a modest claim, while vague enough to include

---

<sup>113</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>114</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862; my emphasis.

<sup>115</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

Rahner's claim, is far from leaving "no room for doubt among Catholic theologians"<sup>116</sup> that there can be anonymous Christians among those explicitly embracing and practicing the Muslim religion and other religions that acknowledge the one creator God but reject central Christian claims about Christ. It is possible that God's plan of salvation for Muslims is for Muslims to explicitly hear and respond to the Gospel, becoming Christians explicitly. That may not be the case, but the conciliar text does not explain itself in greater detail. It is noteworthy that Muslims are the only group addressed by *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 16 whose lines do not have a footnote citing any support for the council's statement.

### ***Lumen Gentium* and Those Who "Search for the Unknown God"**

Next, the council teaches: "There are others who search for the unknown God in shadows and images; God is not far from people of this kind."<sup>117</sup> The reference to seeking God "in shadows and images" appears to be a reference to idolaters. The claim made here is even more modest than the council's claim about Muslims: God is not far from such people. The second part of the sentence explains the sense in which God is not far distant: "... since he gives to all life and breath and everything, and the Saviour wishes all to be saved."<sup>118</sup> The text references Acts 17.25-28 and 1 Timothy 2.4 in footnotes. The passage in Acts quotes St. Paul preaching to the people in Athens:

[N]or is [God] served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

---

<sup>116</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>117</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>118</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

‘In him we live and move and have our being’;  
as even some of your own poets have said,

‘For we are indeed his offspring.’<sup>119</sup>

St. Paul says that God is close to *all people* since he sustains our existence as his creatures. The reference to 1 Timothy simply says that God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Since God is not far from *all* people, saying that God is not far from a particular person tells us nothing unique about that person, including their prospects for being an anonymous Christian.

In fact, the the reference to both of those passages suggests that the people in question are not already saved as anonymous Christians. In the Acts passage, St. Paul is preaching the Gospel to unbelievers in Athens. It certainly does not appear as though St. Paul considered the people in this passage (or in any of his missionary travels, on which he suffered greatly to bring people the Gospel<sup>120</sup>) as fellow-though-anonymous Christians who were already saved and only needed to manifest their true spiritual state. Also, after St. Paul concludes his preaching, the text says “some mocked... [b]ut some men joined him and believed...”<sup>121</sup> In other words, the biblical text explicitly says that some believed, whereas some rejected him. And notice that the passage from 1 Timothy says that God “*desires* all people to be saved and to *come* to the knowledge of the truth,”<sup>122</sup> not that all people are already saved. God’s desire for people to be saved would make little sense if all people were already saved.

---

<sup>119</sup> ESV.

<sup>120</sup> 2 Corinthians 11.23-28.

<sup>121</sup> Acts 17.32, 34, ESV.

<sup>122</sup> My emphasis.

### ***Lumen Gentium* and “Those Who... Do Not Know Anything About Christ”**

The next few sentences of *Lumen Gentium* give the strongest support from the actual text of the council to some of Rahner’s claims:

There are those who without any fault do not know anything about Christ or his church, yet who search for God with a sincere heart and, under the influence of grace, try to put into effect the will of God as known to them through the dictate of conscience: these too can obtain eternal salvation.<sup>123</sup>

This passage is particularly strong for Rahner’s thesis since it actually says that the type of people being addressed “can obtain eternal salvation,” unlike previous lines, though it does not say how. Note also that it says that such people can “too” attain to salvation. Does this indicate that when the council spoke just previously of the status of the Jewish people (“most dear [to God]”), Muslims (“the plan of salvation also embraces [them]”), and idolaters (“God is not far from [them]”<sup>124</sup>), the council meant that all of them could attain salvation in their current condition? All people can, of course, attain salvation in some way, but what the council meant in these various phrases is unclear.

### **The Holy Office on Fr. Feeney**

The footnote at the end of the first sentence of this passage,<sup>125</sup> footnote 19, is a reference to the 1949 letter of the Holy Office to Archbishop of Boston regarding Fr. Leonard Feeney’s interpretation of the dogma “outside the Church there is no salvation.” It is important to examine what this document says in order to better understand what the council meant to teach regarding the possibility of salvation for those “who without any fault do not know anything about Christ

---

<sup>123</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>124</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>125</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

or his church.”<sup>126</sup>

In the letter of the Holy Office, Secretary of the Holy Office Cardinal

Marchetti-Selvaggiani affirms:

[A]mong those things which the Church has always preached and will never cease to preach is contained also that infallible statement by which we are taught that there is no salvation outside the Church. However, this dogma must be understood in that sense in which the Church herself understands it.<sup>127</sup>

Notice his clear affirmation that “no salvation outside the Church” is an “infallible statement.”

But, as with all teachings of the Church, he says, it must be correctly understood. The Cardinal begins to explain the dogma’s correct interpretation by pointing to the necessity of baptism, as taught by Jesus:

Now, in the first place, the Church teaches that in this matter there is question of a most strict command of Jesus Christ. For He explicitly enjoined on His apostles to teach all nations to observe all things whatsoever He Himself had commanded (Matt. 28: 19-20).

Now, among the commandments of Christ, that one holds not the least place by which we are commanded to be incorporated by baptism into the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, and to remain united to Christ and to His Vicar, through whom He Himself in a visible manner governs the Church on earth.<sup>128</sup>

From these principles, the Cardinal concludes:

Therefore, no one will be saved who, knowing the Church to have been divinely established by Christ, nevertheless refuses to submit to the Church or withholds obedience from the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth.

Not only did the Savior command that all nations should enter the Church, but He also decreed the Church to be a means of salvation without which no one can enter the kingdom of eternal glory.<sup>129</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>127</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, “Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office,” *American Ecclesiastical Review* (AER), Vol CXXVII, October (1952): 312; the full English translation can be found on pages 311-315; the full Latin text can be found on pages 307-311; It should be noted that *Lumen Gentium* only cites DS 3869-3872, which does not include this initial section of the letter.

<sup>128</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, “Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office,” AER, 312.

<sup>129</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, “Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office,” AER, 312-313.

This line is similar to what is stated in *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 14: “Therefore, those cannot be saved who refuse to enter the church or to remain in it, if they are aware that the catholic church was founded by God through Jesus Christ as a necessity for salvation.”<sup>130</sup> The most salient words in the statements are “knowing” and “aware,” respectively, since it implies that a person may not be held responsible for not visibly entering the Church if he does not know that he should.

The Cardinal points out that the grace of baptism can be acquired by desire, even if the sacrament of baptism is not received:

[T]he effects, necessary for one to be saved, of those helps to salvation [the sacraments]... can also be obtained in certain circumstances when those helps are used only in *desire* and *longing*. This we see clearly stated in the Sacred Council of Trent, both in reference to the sacrament of regeneration and in reference to the sacrament of penance.<sup>131</sup>

The Council of Trent not only mentions the possibility of receiving the grace of baptism and reconciliation by desire, but actually gives the caveat more generally to all the sacraments, at least insofar as they may be necessary for one’s salvation:

If anyone says that the sacraments of the new law are not necessary for salvation but are superfluous, and that people obtain the grace of justification from God without them *or a desire for them*, by faith alone, though all are not necessary for each individual: let him be anathema.<sup>132</sup>

Cardinal Marchetti-Selvaggiani applies the idea of receiving something necessary for salvation by desire to the Church generally:

The same in its own degree must be asserted of the Church, in as far as she is the general help to salvation. Therefore, that one may obtain eternal salvation, it is not always

---

<sup>130</sup> LG, 14; Tanner, DEC, 860.

<sup>131</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, “Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office,” AER, 313; Emphasis in original; This is the first quote from the letter that is within the bounds referenced by *Lumen Gentium*. The rest of the quotes are within the bounds referenced by *Lumen Gentium*, except when noted.

<sup>132</sup> Council of Trent, Session 7, Canon 4; Tanner, DEC, 684; my emphasis.

required that he be incorporated into the Church *actually* as a member, but it is necessary that at least he be united to her by *desire* and *longing*.<sup>133</sup>

This is just a restatement of the fact that the grace of baptism can be obtained by desire, since it is by baptism that one enters the Church.

Finally, the Cardinal makes perhaps the most important point in his letter, explaining that this desire can be effective even if it is not explicit:

[W]hen a person is involved in invincible ignorance God accepts also an *implicit desire*, so called because it is included in that good disposition of soul whereby a person wishes his will to be conformed to the will of God.<sup>134</sup>

Notice that the Cardinal has the qualification of “invincible ignorance” for God to accept implicit desire.

The Cardinal says that this interpretation of “outside the Church there is no salvation” was “clearly taught” by Pope Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis*:

[Pope Pius XII] mentions those who "are related to the Mystical Body of the Redeemer by a certain unconscious *yearning* and *desire*," and these he by no means excludes from eternal salvation, but on the other hand states that they are in a condition "in which they cannot be sure of their salvation" since "they still remain deprived of those many heavenly gifts and helps which can only be enjoyed in the Catholic Church."

With these wise words he reproves both those who exclude from eternal salvation all united to the Church *only by implicit desire*, and those who falsely assert that men can be saved equally well in every religion.<sup>135</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Cardinal rejects the claim that “men can be saved equally well in every religion.” The Cardinal also gives further clarity to what kind of desire could gain salvation for a person:

---

<sup>133</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, “Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office,” AER, 313; emphasis in original.

<sup>134</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, “Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office,” AER, 313; emphasis in original.

<sup>135</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, “Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office,” AER, 313-314; emphasis in original; *Mystici Corporis*, 103.

But it must not be thought that any kind of desire of entering the Church suffices that one may be saved. It is necessary that the desire by which one is related to the Church be animated by perfect charity. Nor can an implicit desire produce its effect, unless a person has supernatural faith: "For he who comes to God must believe that God exists and is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). The Council of Trent declares (Session 6, Ch. VIII): "Faith is the beginning of man's salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God and attain to the fellowship of His children."<sup>136</sup>

Grace, perfect charity, and supernatural faith are still necessary to effect the person's salvation, regardless of whatever desire the person may have.

Finally, in an exhortation to Fr. Feeney and his followers at the conclusion of the letter, the Cardinal reminds them that "submission to the Catholic Church and to the Sovereign Pontiff is required as necessary for salvation."<sup>137</sup> The Cardinal says that this "principle" applies to them "without restriction" since

they are children of the Church, lovingly nourished by her with the milk of doctrine and the sacraments, and hence, having heard the clear voice of their Mother, they cannot be excused from culpable ignorance...<sup>138</sup>

Fr. Feeney and his followers cannot disobey the Pope or his representatives without endangering their salvation.

This principle is a reference to the teaching of Pope Boniface VIII in his 1302 papal bull, *Unam Sanctam*, which states at its end:

[W]e declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.<sup>139</sup>

This declaration of *Unam Sanctam* was confirmed by the Fifth Lateran Council in 1516:

[S]ince subjection to the Roman pontiff is necessary for salvation for all Christ's faithful,

---

<sup>136</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, "Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office," AER, 314.

<sup>137</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, "Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office," AER, 315; *Lumen Gentium* references the letter of the Holy Office as it appears in Denzinger-Schönmetzer and consequent editions, which does not include these final lines.

<sup>138</sup> The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, "Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office," AER, 315.

<sup>139</sup> DH, 875.



as we are taught by the testimony of both sacred scripture and the holy fathers, and as is declared by the constitution of pope Boniface VIII of happy memory, also our predecessor, which begins *Unam sanctam*, we therefore, with the approval of the present sacred council, for the salvation of the souls of the same faithful, for the supreme authority of the Roman pontiff and of this holy see, and for the unity and power of the church, his spouse, renew and give our approval to that constitution, but without prejudice to the declaration of pope Clement V of holy memory, which begins *Meruit*.<sup>140</sup>

Note that the Fifth Lateran Council holds that this doctrine is taught both by Scripture and the Church fathers. Sullivan says that Adolf Schönmetzer, who edited Denzinger, held that the final line of *Unam Sanctam* was dogmatic and was simply another way of expressing the necessity of being in communion with the Catholic Church for salvation.<sup>141</sup> In support of this interpretation, Schönmetzer points out that Boniface is most likely quoting a line from St. Thomas Aquinas, “where the necessity of being subject to the Roman Pontiff is simply another way of expressing the necessity of being in the communion of the Catholic Church in order to be saved.”<sup>142</sup> Sullivan explains that Schönmetzer’s interpretation reflects the most common interpretation among theologians:

Schönmetzer’s historical note has been the more common interpretation of the bull among Catholic theologians, namely, that while Pope Boniface undoubtedly held and taught the medieval theory of the supremacy of the spiritual over the temporal power, what he solemnly defined in the final sentence is nothing more than the classical doctrine that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church.<sup>143</sup>

Sullivan acknowledges that some recent theological and historical studies of *Unam Sanctam* argue that Boniface VIII’s declaration at the end was exclusively regarding the relationship between temporal and spiritual power, was historically contingent, and therefore not dogmatic, but Sullivan concludes:

It is safe to say that if his bull defined anything, it was simply the traditional doctrine that

---

<sup>140</sup> Fifth Lateran Council, Session 11, December 19th, 1516; Tanner, DEC, 643-644.

<sup>141</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 65.

<sup>142</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 65.

<sup>143</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 65.

there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church.<sup>144</sup>

Ludwig Ott cites *Unam Sanctam* in support for the doctrine “membership of the Church is necessary for all men for salvation,” which he lists as a *de fide* dogma,<sup>145</sup> supporting Schönmetzer’s interpretation that Boniface intended to define the necessity of subjection to the Roman Pontiff with regards to the necessity of the Church for salvation.

Given the fact that the doctrine given by *Unam Sanctam*, and confirmed by the Fifth Lateran Council, has long been considered dogmatic, it is noteworthy that the Cardinal refers to it as a “principle,” even though earlier in his letter he refers to the doctrine that “there is no salvation outside the Church” as both an “infallible statement” and a “dogma.” It is not clear how intentional this difference in language is, particularly since it is also clear that the Cardinal is forcefully applying the “principle” that submission to the Pope is necessary for salvation as part of his exhortation to Fr. Feeney and his followers: the Cardinal is arguing that they must comply or else put their salvation in jeopardy.

It is not clear what exactly the council meant to endorse in the Holy Office’s letter, as it contains a great deal of information that is not present in the conciliar texts. The footnote referencing it is placed after this sentence in *Lumen Gentium*:

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.<sup>146</sup>

The council’s qualifier that it is speaking of those “who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church” is similar to Cardinal Marchetti-Selvaggiani’s

---

<sup>144</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 66.

<sup>145</sup> Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, tr. Patrick Lynch (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 1960), 312.

<sup>146</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

qualifier of “invincible ignorance.” The two qualifiers are basically synonymous.

Noticeably absent, however, from this line in *Lumen Gentium* and from all of the documents of the Second Vatican Council is an explicit mention of obtaining the grace of salvation by way of desire, let alone implicit desire, as the Cardinal mentions. Instead, *Lumen Gentium* says that those without knowledge of the Gospel can obtain salvation if they “sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.”<sup>147</sup> This, at least *prima facie*, does not appear to be the same thing as salvation by desire. Desire is an interior disposition, whereas the council speaks mostly of the person’s deeds, though the person’s motivations are included. The Catechism bridges this gap by saying that those who, by God’s grace, seek God and strive to do his will are the type of people who would desire baptism explicitly if were made known to them.<sup>148</sup> In other words, their more general desire to do God’s will means that they would want to be baptized if they knew it was God’s will, and thus a desire for baptism can be said to be implicitly present. In any case, given the long history of the doctrine of salvation by desire in the tradition, it is puzzling that it was not included explicitly in the conciliar text.

If the Holy Office document is taken as a whole, insofar as Rahner says that there can be people who do not explicitly profess the Christian faith and yet have nonetheless responded to God’s grace with faith, hope, and love, this footnote is Rahner’s strongest support in the conciliar documents. This letter does not, however, address his idea of the supernatural existential, the role of non-Christian religions and secular culture, how many people respond to God in this implicit way, nor whether we should be optimistic for universal salvation. In fact, the letter’s high

---

<sup>147</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>148</sup> CCC 1260.

standard of “invincible ignorance,” which is similar to the council’s standard of “through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church,”<sup>149</sup> would seem to greatly lessen Rahner’s optimism for universal salvation, since there are many people who do not appear to be invincibly ignorant and yet are not explicitly responding to the Gospel. The letter also seems to say that its doctrines are found in Scripture and Tradition, which Rahner denies is the case for his thesis.

### ***Lumen Gentium* and Those Who Do Not Believe in God**

Regarding “those who, through no fault of their own, have not yet attained to the express recognition of God yet who strive, not without divine grace, to lead an upright life,” the council gives an assessment similar to what it has said regarding other groups: “Nor does divine Providence deny the helps that are necessary for salvation” to such persons. Who are these people who are blameless for their lack of explicit belief in God’s existence? King David writes in Psalm 14 that “the fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”<sup>150</sup> And St. Paul writes in Romans:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been *clearly perceived*, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. *So they are without excuse*. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.<sup>151</sup>

St. Paul says that people who deny God’s existence are “without excuse” since God’s existence can be “clearly perceived” from nature. For a person to be “without blame,” as the council says,

---

<sup>149</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>150</sup> Psalm 14.1, ESV.

<sup>151</sup> Romans 1.18-21, ESV; my emphasis.

in lacking an explicit belief in God, perhaps the person would have to lack the ordinary human ability to perceive God's existence from nature? Notice that the council says such people "have not yet attained to the express recognition of God,"<sup>152</sup> rather than that such people explicitly deny God's existence. Is there a difference between a person having "not yet attained to the express recognition of God" and explicitly denying God's existence? There could be, though not necessarily, and it is not clear whether the council meant to make such a distinction.

Whoever the council may be referring to, that such persons will have salvation made available to them in some way is clear. How exactly Divine Providence provides "the helps that are necessary for salvation"<sup>153</sup> to such persons is left unexplained.

It is important to note that the council gives an important qualifier to the good deeds of both those who are explicitly striving to follow God's will and those who do not explicitly acknowledge God: they are all in response to God's grace. This, of course, is meant to guard against the heresy of Pelagianism. But it provokes a question: is there any way to distinguish between moral acts performed with the aid of God's grace and moral acts performed without the aid of God's grace? In other words, should we, like Rahner, assume that all moral acts are in response to grace, are supernatural in character, and therefore possibly saving? Or are only certain moral acts performed with the aid of God's grace, while others are merely non-saving natural moral acts? Since the qualifier "not with divine grace" is mentioned only in passing, and without further explanation, it is easy to see how one might conclude that grace should be assumed to be behind any moral actions performed by unbelievers. Whether the council intended to take a position on this matter is not clear. Rahner's thesis regarding the supernatural existential

---

<sup>152</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>153</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

is not excluded, but neither is it explicitly supported by the council.

### **How Non-Christians May Attain Salvation**

It is certainly clear that the conciliar text says that those who are inculpably ignorant of the Gospel and Christ's Church yet seek God and, moved by His grace, do his will as it is known to them through their conscience "*can* obtain eternal salvation."<sup>154</sup> But the text of *Lumen Gentium* itself says nothing about *how* such people can attain to salvation. In fact, the council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, explicitly refrains from giving an explanation on this matter:

Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us that comes from God is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery *in a manner known to God*.<sup>155</sup>

The council's Decree on Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, says something very similar:

[A]lthough God, *through ways known to himself*, can lead people who through no fault of their own are ignorant of the gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, nevertheless the church has both the obligation and the sacred right to evangelise.<sup>156</sup>

These statements from *Gaudium et Spes* and *Ad Gentes* may explain why the council never mentions salvation by implicit desire: perhaps they simply intended to not give a judgement on the matter. Further, by saying that the manner by which such people could be saved is "known to God,"<sup>157</sup> the council may have even been meaning to say that it is not possible to know it. Is the method by which God offers salvation to such people contained, in principle, in revelation, but

---

<sup>154</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862; my emphasis.

<sup>155</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 22; Tanner, DEC, 1082; my emphasis.

<sup>156</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 7; Tanner, DEC, 1017; my emphasis.

<sup>157</sup> GS, 22; Tanner, DEC, 1082.

currently “known to God” because we have not worked out the answer yet and made it explicit? Or is it “known to God” because the answer is not contained in revelation at all? If the latter is the case, then Rahner’s admission that his thesis is not found in Scripture or Tradition would be confirmed, but it would also mean that there is little theological work to be done on the question, since the answer cannot be known.

So, according to the council, does God make it possible for those who have not explicitly embraced the Gospel to be saved while they still lack an explicit belief in Jesus (as with Rahner’s anonymous Christian)? Or does God make it possible for such persons to attain salvation by making it possible for them to put their faith in Christ explicitly? In other words, does God offer salvation to those persons such that they can be saved while still in their current condition of ignorance of the Gospel, or does He make salvation possible to those who inculpably do not know the Gospel by making the Gospel known to them in some way? Not only does the council not take an explicit position, the text of the council appears to specifically refrain from taking a position, in spite of the footnote citing the letter of the Holy Office concerning the Fr. Feeney case, which teaches salvation by implicit desire.

### **The Church’s Missionary Mandate**

The council may be meaning to say that God makes salvation available to such persons by offering them the opportunity to put their faith in Christ explicitly in its next statement: “For whatever goodness or truth is found in them is considered by the church as a preparation for the gospel.”<sup>158</sup> Whatever goodness or truth found amongst them is not looked upon by the Church as

---

<sup>158</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

evidence that they are *already* counted among the adopted sons of God but “as a *preparation* for the gospel.”<sup>159</sup> This implies that they still need to receive the Gospel.

Is it possible that such people are prepared to receive the message of the Gospel explicitly because they have already implicitly responded favorably to God’s grace and are therefore living “in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope, and love”<sup>160</sup> as an anonymous Christian? In the sentences following this statement, the council reaffirms the need for missionary work, giving three reasons for doing it:

For this reason, to promote the glory of God *and the salvation of all these people*, the church is mindful of the command when he said, “Preach the gospel to the whole creation,” and so it sedulously encourages the missions.<sup>161</sup>

Missionary work is the work of making the Gospel explicit to people who are not already explicit believers. This would not be needed for “the salvation of all of these” if these people already had salvation implicitly.

The conciliar text further emphasizes the importance and necessity of missionary work in paragraph 17 of *Lumen Gentium*. The section begins by quoting the Great Commission Jesus gave to his Apostles:

Just as the Son was sent by the Father, he too sent the apostles, saying “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and look, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”<sup>162</sup>

The council then explains the seriousness with which the Church must take this missionary task given by Jesus himself, describing it as a “solemn command,” and calling the Gospel she proclaims as “the saving truth”:

---

<sup>159</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862; my emphasis.

<sup>160</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 283.

<sup>161</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862; my emphasis.

<sup>162</sup> LG, 17; Tanner, DEC, 862; Matthew 28.19-20.



This solemn command of Christ, to announce the saving truth, the church has received from the apostles to fulfil right to the ends of the earth. Therefore it makes its own the words of the apostle: “Woe... to me if I do not preach the gospel” [1 Corinthians 9.16], and so it continues without ceasing to send out preachers until new churches are fully established and they themselves continue the work of evangelizing.<sup>163</sup>

After affirming that the Church is compelled by the Holy Spirit in her missionary work and that Jesus is “the principle of salvation for the whole world,”<sup>164</sup> the council lists five things the Church accomplishes in her missionary work:

By preaching the gospel [1] the church draws its hearers to faith and the profession of faith; [2] it disposes them for baptism, [3] draws them out of servitude to error and [4] incorporates them into Christ, so that through charity they may grow to fullness in him. [5] The result of its activity is that the good seed that is found in people’s hearts and minds, or in their particular rites and cultures, is not only saved from destruction but is made whole, raised up and brought to completion to the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of humanity.<sup>165</sup>

Notice that the Church’s missionary work is what prepares people for receiving the Gospel and baptism. But if most people are already living in a state of grace in friendship with God as anonymous Christians, as Rahner claims, would not they already have “faith,” as well as have the dispositions necessary for baptism? Why would the Church be “drawing them out of servitude to error”? And would not such people already be incorporated into Christ? These parts of the Church’s missionary work lose their purpose if most people are already anonymous Christians.

The fifth goal of the Church’s missionary work — the sanctification of persons and cultures — entails that there is sin present in people’s lives and cultures that needs sanctification. This is perhaps an acknowledgement of the “empirical experience” Rahner admits is “constantly

---

<sup>163</sup> LG, 17; Tanner, DEC, 862.

<sup>164</sup> LG, 17; Tanner, DEC, 862.

<sup>165</sup> LG, 17; Tanner, DEC, 862; numbers added.

undermining” his hope that all people, or at least most people, are anonymous Christians.<sup>166</sup> But if the Church is able to sanctify people and cultures, and if the same grace is not only available to non-Christians but is actually being used by all or most of them, then would not one expect to see some of the same kind of sanctification among anonymous Christians and their cultures? Of course, many self-professed Christians persist in sin and bear little evidence of grace working in their lives. But are there any model anonymous Christians that the Church could recognize and hold up as saints?

After mentioning the important role the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist play in building up the Church — both of which are not available to anonymous Christians — paragraph 17 concludes:

So the church prays and works at the same time so that the fullness of the whole world may move into the people of God, the body of the Lord and the temple of the holy Spirit, and that all honour and glory be rendered in Christ, the head of all, to the creator and Father of all.<sup>167</sup>

Note that the conciliar text says that the Church is working for the people of the world to “*move into* the people of God, the body of the Lord and the temple of the holy Spirit.”<sup>168</sup> If most people in the world are already anonymous Christians, most people would already be a part of those things, even if not visibly. The work of the Church would not be to bring people into the fold of the People of God, as the council states, but to make their incorporation manifest. Yet the council clearly speaks of the primary goal of the Church’s mission, preaching the Gospel, to be what Rahner’s thesis of the anonymous Christian seems to make unnecessary: namely, translating people from being enemies of God in the clutches of Satan to being incorporated into the People

---

<sup>166</sup> Rahner, *Wintry Season*, 167; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 103.

<sup>167</sup> LG, 17; Tanner, DEC, 862.

<sup>168</sup> LG, 17; Tanner, DEC, 862; my emphasis.

of God.<sup>169</sup>

Sullivan writes that Rahner took very seriously the question of how his thesis affected the Church's missionary work, and spent a great deal of time and space in his writing responding to objections that his thesis undermined the Church's work:

The objection which Rahner seems to have taken most seriously, and to which he devoted the most space in his writings, was that his theory would effectively deprive the church's missionary task of its necessary motivation.

In other words, if people are already "anonymous Christians," and if they can find salvation in their own religions, there would seem to be no point in trying to convert them to Christianity.<sup>170</sup>

J. P. Kenny states the objection this way:

Here we need to front up to an objection that has been alluded to more than once. There is a fresh awareness today that (I) salvation is offered to all men, (II) that Christianity cannot boast of any monopoly of the Spirit, (III) that Christ is hiddenly at work beyond the confines of Christianity, (IV) that, therefore, salvation does not depend unconditionally on the preaching of the gospel.

Why, then, bother about the foreign missions? Does not the doctrine of the anonymous Christian effectively dig the grave of the missionary endeavor?<sup>171</sup>

Missionary Eugene Hillman reports that Rahner's thesis of the anonymous Christian undercut the primary reason most missionaries were doing their work and contributed to the Church's "crisis in the missions":

The implications of this notion [of the anonymous Christian] have contributed notably to the so-called "crisis in the missions." The missionary in the field tends to state the question something like this: "If men can be saved without visibly belonging to the Church, then where is the urgency of missionary work?" ...

It is not enough simply to repeat over and over again that missionary activity is necessary, and that it involves the salvation of the whole world somehow, because the Church is essentially missionary. This is profoundly true, but why?<sup>172</sup>

<sup>169</sup> cf. Council of Trent, Session 6; Tanner, DEC, 671-681.

<sup>170</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 173.

<sup>171</sup> Kenny, *Roman Catholicism*, 112; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 113; numerals in original.

<sup>172</sup> Hillman, *Anonymous Christianity and the Missions*, 362, 379; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 114.

Conway also acknowledges that Rahner's thesis eliminates the traditional reason for missionary activity:

[Rahner's thesis] demolishes the assumption which was central to the traditional theology of mission... [and that] the missionary who previously believed that his work was necessary if souls were not to be lost, might now feel that his or her task had been robbed of much of its urgency and importance.<sup>173</sup>

If Rahner's thesis of the anonymous Christian is correct, the primary reason traditionally given for missionary work has been incorrect.

Indeed, Rahner argues that "we can no longer base missionary effort on the motive that no one can be saved without explicit Christian faith, baptism, and membership in the church."<sup>174</sup>

Sullivan explains Rahner's position further:

Any Catholic who wishes to justify the work of evangelization must reckon with the optimism which is now the Catholic Church's official attitude regarding the salvation of people who will never become Christians.<sup>175</sup>

Rahner insists that missionaries must recognize that most people are already living in a state of engrafted friendship with God.

But if most people are already anonymous Christians, and if their non-Christian religions can aid them, even imperfectly, to get to heaven, might it be better to simply leave people alone in their current state, rather than putting them and missionaries through the hardship and sacrifice of conversion? Converts can suffer greatly for leaving their culture's dominant religion, and missionaries often sacrifice comforts, time, energy, other opportunities, and even their lives. Even if there could be some benefits to bringing anonymous Christians into the fullness of the Christian faith, do those benefits outweigh the potential costs?

---

<sup>173</sup> Conway, *The Anonymous Christian*, 25; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 114.

<sup>174</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 173.

<sup>175</sup> Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 173.

While he does say that “we cannot deduce the meaning and necessity of the Church’s missionary task primarily or exclusively from the salvation of the individual,”<sup>176</sup> Rahner also says that his position “in no sense involves any assertion that mission has no connection whatever with the personal salvation of the individual.”<sup>177</sup> This is because Rahner thinks missionary work “improves the situation in which salvation can be achieved and the opportunity of salvation of the individual.”<sup>178</sup> Missionaries can still make it easier for a person to be saved.

Rahner says he means “in no sense to assert” that the opportunity for salvation is “equally present at all times”<sup>179</sup> in his thesis of the possibility of the anonymous Christian. This is confusing, since, as we have already seen, Rahner claims that the supernatural existential is present with all people at all times and that all a person has to do to respond to that grace is to do actions that are not against their conscience in an “ultimate sense.” Why, then, would salvation not be “equally present at all times”? It appeared that it was precisely this constant access to salvation which led Rahner to advocate optimism regarding universal salvation. The important word for Rahner is probably “equally.” Even if the supernatural existential makes salvation always available, missionary work could make salvation even easier for a person to obtain. But given Rahner’s low threshold for salvation for anonymous Christians, along with the fact that he thinks most or even all people are already saved anyway as anonymous Christians, any benefit would have to be marginal at best.

---

<sup>176</sup> Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church” in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 12: 176.

<sup>177</sup> Rahner, “Missionary Task of the Church,” 176.

<sup>178</sup> Rahner, “Missionary Task of the Church,” 177; Sullivan misrepresents Rahner on this point in his book *Salvation Outside the Church?*. On page 174, Sullivan writes that Rahner believes that missionary work does not make salvation “easier,” when in fact Rahner states that it “improves” a person’s situation for salvation. It’s possible that Rahner said different things in different places in his writings, but since Sullivan provides no footnote for his claim about Rahner, it’s not possible to verify this.

<sup>179</sup> Rahner, “Missionary Task of the Church,” 177.

Further questions are provoked by the fact that Rahner also claims that “the anonymous Christian is the only possible hearer of the gospel message.”<sup>180</sup> So he does not think that preaching the Gospel makes it easier for a person to enter into friendship with God, since he thinks the person’s friendship with God is actually a necessary prerequisite for a person to respond favorably to the Gospel. Then in what sense does preaching the Gospel “improve the situation in which salvation can be achieved”?<sup>181</sup> It could be that, in Rahner’s view, bringing these anonymous Christians the Gospel and the sacraments of the Church makes it easier for them to persevere in the faith. If this were the case, the purpose of missionary activity would have to be changed from bringing salvation to people who are otherwise lost to merely giving people aids to maintain their already existing friendship with God. But even then, the explicit Gospel and access to the sacraments of the Church must not improve a person’s situation too much, since most people do not have either the explicit Gospel or the Sacraments, and yet Rahner believes most people will attain heaven. Thus, while Rahner does not absolutely rule out the usefulness of missionary activity for “the salvation of all these people,”<sup>182</sup> he does substantially weaken the role of that particular motivation to the point where it provides almost no benefit to the eternal welfare of the souls of its recipients.

Though they do not definitively rule out the possibility of anonymous Christians, the texts of the Second Vatican Council do not warrant Rahner’s strong claim that “there should be no room for doubt among Catholic theologians or Christians”<sup>183</sup> that there can be anonymous Christians as he has defined the phrase.

---

<sup>180</sup> Rahner, “Missionary Task of the Church,” 171; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 115.

<sup>181</sup> Rahner, “Missionary Task of the Church,” 177.

<sup>182</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>183</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 283.

## Chapter 4

### *Evaluating Additional Claims*

In this chapter, I will evaluate other important claims Rahner makes about his thesis. These include his claims regarding the existence and number of anonymous Christians, whether his thesis entails optimism for universal salvation, and the implications of what Rahner says is the relationship between his thesis and Scripture, Tradition, and the Second Vatican Council. I will argue that all of his claims are either unfounded, exaggerated, or incorrect.

#### **The Existence and Number of Anonymous Christians**

Rahner does not simply claim that there *can* be anonymous Christians: he goes further and says that there “should be no room for doubt” that there “actually are”<sup>184</sup> anonymous Christians and that it is “impossible”<sup>185</sup> to think God’s grace is ineffective in the lives of most people. It should be pointed out that Rahner is only claiming that it is certain that there exist people who are living “in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope, and love, yet who [have] no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.”<sup>186</sup> He is not claiming that he knows who such people are specifically, though he thinks it

---

<sup>184</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>185</sup> Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 123-124; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 102; emphasis in original.

<sup>186</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

is most people. The Council of Trent has already ruled out the possibility of knowing specifically who will attain salvation in this life under ordinary circumstances, teaching that, “apart from a special revelation, it is impossible to know whom God has chosen for himself.”<sup>187</sup>

While the documents of the Second Vatican Council neither definitively support nor rule out Rahner’s thesis regarding the possibility of an anonymous Christian, it is certain that the Second Vatican Council makes no claims about the actual existence of anonymous Christians at any point in history, including the present time. It is not clear how Rahner or the council could even presume to have such knowledge, unless Rahner thinks that it is simply a truth of the faith that God will always ensure that there are at least some anonymous Christians living somewhere at all times. But since he has already ruled out both Scripture and Tradition as the basis of his thesis, and since it is certainly not a truth accessible by reason alone, Rahner’s basis for making this very strong claim is not apparent.

### **Optimism for Universal Salvation**

Rahner also claims that “optimism of universal salvation [is] entailed”<sup>188</sup> by his thesis that there can be and actually are anonymous Christians and that “[t]his optimism concerning salvation [is] one of the most noteworthy results of the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>189</sup> While the council does clearly say that salvation is made available to all,<sup>190</sup> the council also speaks about the barriers to salvation that are “more often” found among people:

More often, however, deceived by the evil one, people have gone astray in their thinking and exchanged the truth about God for a lie and served the creature rather than the creator, or living and dying in this world without God they are exposed to the extreme

---

<sup>187</sup> Council of Trent, Session 6, Ch 12; Tanner, DEC, 676.

<sup>188</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>189</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 284.

<sup>190</sup> GS, 22; Tanner, DEC, 1082.



despair.<sup>191</sup>

Martin notes that both Rahner and his supporters almost entirely ignore these lines in their commentaries on *Lumen Gentium* 16:

It is remarkable that many of the finest commentators on Rahner's theory, and on related issues... completely ignore the final section of LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862. and seem to assume almost as a "given," without critical examination, the alleged "optimistic teaching" of Vatican II.<sup>192</sup>

Martin concludes regarding *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 16:

Those who read the text of LG 16 more closely, including LG 16c, must certainly qualify any use of the word *optimistic*.<sup>193</sup>

If the negative things described by *Lumen Gentium* are "more often" true in people's lives, then it means that most of the time most people are not responding to God favorably. If one were to employ the categories of optimism/pessimism, would that not lead to pessimism for the salvation of most people? In addition, the council seems to speak of the state of non-Christians when it says that the Church in her missionary work "draws them out of servitude to error"<sup>194</sup> and that pagan cultures are elevated by the Gospel "to...the confusion of the devil."<sup>195</sup> Do these words of the council also entail optimism of universal salvation? Is it really "impossible,"<sup>196</sup> as Rahner claims, to read these lines and not remain optimistic for universal salvation? Rahner's strong claims obviously do not cohere with the totality of the conciliar text.

Even if it is granted for the sake of argument that the council did teach that there can be and actually are anonymous Christians as Rahner has defined them, it is simply not logically the

---

<sup>191</sup> LG, 16; Tanner, DEC, 861-862.

<sup>192</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 108.

<sup>193</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 109.

<sup>194</sup> LG, 17; Tanner, DEC, 862.

<sup>195</sup> LG, 17; Tanner, DEC, 862.

<sup>196</sup> Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 123-124; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 102.

case that such a thesis *entails* optimism of universal salvation. It would be very possible, logically speaking, for a person to hold Rahner's thesis regarding the possibility of anonymous Christians, and even believe in their positive existence, and yet also hold that the opportunity is difficult to take advantage of and/or very few, if any, individuals are currently living in such a state. In addition, one could also hold that, while at all times there are at least some anonymous Christians, most, or even all, anonymous Christians do not remain anonymous Christians for very long, and few, if any, anonymous Christians actually persevere and gain heaven. Of course, if Rahner's thesis is true, it would also be possible that many or even all non-Christian people gain heaven as anonymous Christians. But neither position is logically entailed by Rahner's thesis, as Rahner claims is the case.

Regarding Rahner's claims of optimism about universal salvation, Martin argues that Rahner is highly selective in his reading of the conciliar texts and use of other sources of theology, including Scripture:

Rahner's completely optimistic description of the conciliar teaching on the salvation of non-Christians is only possible when the complete text is ignored (along with the New Testament texts and empirical evidence that he admits are relevant but doesn't himself confront), and yet he persists in claiming a one-sided optimism as the teaching of the Council. Ratzinger calls it an "astonishing optimism."<sup>197</sup>

The part of the conciliar text that Martin thinks Rahner is ignoring is the last part of *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 16 (which begins "But often men..."), already quoted above. Jen-Guy Pagé goes further and calls Rahner's claims of optimism for universal salvation "ridiculous":

[T]he Constitution [Lumen Gentium] does not veer towards a ridiculous optimism which would not be able to see the errors threatening those who do not enjoy the benefits of the full gospel revelation.<sup>198</sup>

---

<sup>197</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 107.

<sup>198</sup> Pagé, *Qui Est L'église?*, 53; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 109.

Pagé is particularly disturbed by Rahner's disregard of Scripture, so much of which Pagé sees as clearly witnessing to the "pervasive and deep reality of the profound resistance to God and hatred for him that is found in the work of the evil one and in the human heart given to sin."<sup>199</sup>

Rahner's optimism for universal salvation, Pagé argues, simply cannot be squared with the repeated teachings of Scripture.

### **Implications of the Relationship Between Rahner's Thesis and Revelation**

Incredibly, Rahner does not disagree with Pagé's assessment of his thesis' relationship to Scripture. Rahner admits that many problems arise when his thesis of the anonymous Christian is compared with Scripture:

[There are] very great obstacles which are inherent in the New Testament statements concerning the necessity of salvation coming through the Gospel which is preached in its power.<sup>200</sup>

But Rahner is not entirely dismissive of the importance of revelation. Among the theological work left to be done for his thesis, he mentions reconciling his thesis with the teachings of the New Testament:

We should have to enquire how all those new perspectives of saving history and the history of faith entailed in the theory we have put forward are to be reconciled with the viewpoint from which the New Testament regards the process by which salvation is gained and also saving history itself, albeit with very notable variations.<sup>201</sup>

Rahner still sees value in working to make his thesis cohere with the teachings of Scripture, in particular the New Testament.

It should be noted that Rahner does not view the reconciling work to be primarily one of

---

<sup>199</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 109.

<sup>200</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 287; quoted in Martin *Will Many Be Saved?*, 109.

<sup>201</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 292.

reconciling one part of Scripture with another part, or even reconciling a part of the Tradition with Scripture. Rather, he says that his thesis cannot be found in either Scripture or Tradition at all: “No truly theological demonstration of this thesis can be supplied here from scripture or tradition.”<sup>202</sup> Since the revealed Word of God has been passed down to us only through Scripture and Tradition,<sup>203</sup> and since “no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our lord Jesus Christ,”<sup>204</sup> Rahner is thus saying that his thesis has not been revealed by God. But since his thesis does not appear to be of the kind that could be argued from reason (there is no indication God has revealed through nature that there can be and actually are anonymous Christians), it is not clear what Rahner thinks the ultimate source of his thesis is or even how his thesis could be the proper object of Catholic theology. If it is true that his thesis cannot be found in Scripture, Tradition, or the dictates of reason, that would be a decisive argument against his thesis. Further, calling for his thesis to be reconciled with Scripture, rather than basing his thesis on Scripture in the first place, is counter to the Second Vatican Council’s call to *ressourcement* and is precisely the opposite of how Catholic theology is supposed to be done.

Martin says that Rahner “does not address these New Testament statements”<sup>205</sup> that he admits appear to be contrary to his thesis but instead “makes rather sweeping statements about what the ‘gospel’ warrants us to assume, believe, etc.”<sup>206</sup> But the Gospel is revealed and passed down to us in Scripture and Tradition. If Scripture and Tradition, the sources of divine revelation, do not support Rahner’s thesis, but “the gospel” does, to what Gospel is Rahner

---

<sup>202</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>203</sup> CCC 76.

<sup>204</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 4; Tanner, DEC 973.

<sup>205</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 109.

<sup>206</sup> Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 109.

referring? One is reminded of St. Paul's warning to the Galatians regarding turning from the Gospel as it was originally preached to them:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.<sup>207</sup>

Since Rahner admits that his thesis is not found in Scripture or Tradition but “has only gradually become clear and asserted itself in the conscious faith of the Church,”<sup>208</sup> would his thesis not fall under St. Paul's condemnation? If so, is this another teaching of Scripture that simply needs to be “reconciled” with his thesis?

Richard Schenk argues that Rahner's theological anthropology, which includes his doctrine of the supernatural existential, mixed with German idealism, led Rahner to not feel obliged to examine the sources of revelation more thoroughly:

This system freed Rahner, in the issue under discussion here, from the need to examine individually the texts of Scripture and tradition which seemed to point towards final loss, of which he apodictically declares that they are all meant as mere threats, with an uncertainty not characteristic of their parallel promises.<sup>209</sup>

Schenk says that Rahner is highly selective in his use of Scripture: if a verse seems more optimistic about universal salvation, he accepts it; if it seems more pessimistic about universal salvation, he dismisses it as something not to be taken seriously.

But even if more “pessimistic” verses are to be taken merely as threats, it is not clear why the threats should no longer be taken seriously anymore as real threats. Are they threats that we have outgrown, moved beyond, or no longer need? It would seem to be a kind of historical

---

<sup>207</sup> Galatians 1.6-9, ESV.

<sup>208</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>209</sup> Schenk, 139; quoted in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 109.

snobbery to think that ancient peoples needed such threats, but that we modern people are more sophisticated and can dismiss them. In fact, it would seem that threats that most people will be punished with eternal damnation are given precisely to counteract optimistic notions of universal salvation. If they can be dismissed as empty threats, it is not clear why they are given by God in Scripture in the first place.

Despite the fact that Rahner admits that his thesis cannot be found in Scripture or Tradition, he says that he can nonetheless trace the development of his thesis in the writings of the Church father Ambrose, the medieval doctrine of *baptismus fluminis* and the *votum ecclesiae*, the Council of Trent, and finally, most recently, in the magisterium of Pope Pius XII.<sup>210</sup> In doing so, he is implying that the teachings of these sources, which includes the dogmatic teachings of an ecumenical council, also cannot be demonstrated from Scripture or Tradition. While it is possible that a particular teaching of a Church father or medieval theologian, or even a particular non-dogmatic teaching of a Pope is not truly representative of the Word of God as it has been passed down in Scripture and Tradition, the same is not possible of the dogmatic teaching of an ecumenical council, since that is what a dogma is. The Catechism explains:

The Church defines dogmas... when it proposes, in a form obliging the Christian people to an irrevocable adherence of faith, truths contained in divine Revelation or also when it proposes, in a definitive way, truths having a necessary connection with these.<sup>211</sup>

For an ecumenical council to teach something dogmatically is for the council to infallibly propose that doctrine as being revealed by God, and thus being contained in Scripture and/or Tradition, or being necessarily connected to them. If Rahner's thesis is truly supported by the dogmatic teaching of the Council of Trent, as Rahner claims, then Rahner's thesis is *ipso facto*

---

<sup>210</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 283.

<sup>211</sup> CCC 88.

supported by Scripture and/or Tradition. Likewise, if Rahner's thesis cannot be found in Scripture or Tradition, then it is not truly supported by the dogmatic teaching of the Council of Trent. But Rahner's thesis cannot be both supported by the dogmatic teaching of the Council of Trent and yet still not be found in Scripture and Tradition.

So then on what theological basis is Rahner proposing his thesis? Rahner cites the Second Vatican Council as the most immediate and definitive source of support for his thesis of the anonymous Christian:

Whatever may be the course of this development, whatever theological grounds there may be for justifying it, it can at all events be said that at least since the Second Vatican Council there can no longer be any room for doubt...<sup>212</sup>

The level and kind of concern Rahner displays about the ultimate source of his thesis ("whatever theological grounds there may be for justifying it") is noteworthy, particularly since he has already explicitly ruled out Scripture and Tradition as possible sources. He appears to be unconcerned about the sources of his thesis, as though finding legitimate sources for his thesis is a secondary concern. Yet, in fact, as has already been explained, determining whether his thesis can be found in Scripture and Tradition (or reason) is decisive for whether or not it can be admitted to Catholic theology.

Regarding his claim of the Second Vatican Council as his source, the Second Vatican Council itself and its subsequent Magisterial interpretations specifically reject the notion that the council's teachings are not based on revelation or are a break from the previous magisterial tradition. In the opening paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* itself we see that, regarding the task to "declare with greater clarity to the faithful and the entire human race the nature of the church and

---

<sup>212</sup> Rahner, "Observations," 284.

its universal mission,” the council writes that it intends to do so in “continuing the teaching of previous councils.”<sup>213</sup> And in his speech given in the act of promulgating *Lumen Gentium*, in November of 1964, Pope Paul VI proclaims:

There is no better comment to make than to say that this promulgation really changes nothing of the traditional doctrine. What Christ willed, we also will. What was, still is. What the Church has taught down through the centuries, we also teach. In simple terms, that which was assumed, is now explicit; that which was uncertain, is now clarified; that which was meditated upon, discussed, and sometimes argued over, is now put together in one clear formulation.<sup>214</sup>

Pope Paul VI did not think the teachings of *Lumen Gentium* represented a break from the Church’s previous teachings or sources of revelation but instead was a true development. This understanding of the council’s ecclesiological teachings was echoed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) in 2007:

The Second Vatican Council neither changed nor intended to change this doctrine, rather it developed, deepened and more fully explained it. This was exactly what John XXIII said at the beginning of the Council. Paul VI affirmed it and commented in the act of promulgating the Constitution *Lumen gentium*... [...] The Bishops repeatedly expressed and fulfilled this intention.<sup>215</sup>

The Second Vatican Council, according to the CDF, did not represent a break with the “officially received theology concerning all these questions, which was more or less traditional right down to the Second Vatican Council,”<sup>216</sup> as Rahner claims, but instead faithfully passed down, albeit in a developed fashion, what had been passed down to it. Further, *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 16 itself references St. Thomas Aquinas, a letter of the Holy Office from the 1940s, the 4th century writer Eusebius of Caesarea, and Scripture six times — including Romans chapter one, which is

---

<sup>213</sup> LG, 1; Tanner, DEC, 849.

<sup>214</sup> Paul VI, Address of November 21, 1964, quoted by the CDF in ‘Responses to some questions regarding certain aspects of the doctrine on the Church’; DH 5108.

<sup>215</sup> CDF, ‘Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church’, response to the first question; DH 5108.

<sup>216</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 284.



among those passages of Scripture that ostensibly would be hard to reconcile with Rahner's thesis.

The Second Vatican Council views its teachings as being based on Scripture and Tradition and as being in accord with the traditional teaching of the Church. As with his claims about the Council of Trent, Rahner must be either wrong that his thesis is supported by the Second Vatican Council or wrong that his thesis is not found in Scripture and Tradition.

## Chapter 5

### *Conclusion*

The Second Vatican Council does not rule out the possibility of there being anonymous Christians. Some passages in the conciliar documents seem to support the idea, while others seem to weigh against the possibility. The conciliar documents are best understood as being non-definitive on the topic. But the rest of Rahner's claims regarding his thesis do not stand up to scrutiny.

Rahner claims that the Second Vatican Council leaves no room for doubt that anonymous Christians are a possibility; in fact, the Second Vatican Council leaves much room for doubt that anonymous Christians are a possibility. Rahner claims that the council also leaves no room for doubt that anonymous Christians exist, and in fact make up the vast majority of the non-Christian population; yet the conciliar documents do not even address the subject. Rahner claims that his thesis, with support from the Second Vatican Council, entails optimism for universal salvation; in fact, neither his thesis nor the conciliar documents logically entail optimism for universal salvation, and the conciliar documents actually provide good reasons to not be optimistic for universal salvation.

Most concerning are the impact of his thesis on missionary activity and the relationship between his thesis and Scripture, Tradition, and previous magisterial teaching. In the midst of a mass exodus from the Christian faith, the Church should be even more concerned with

missionary activity, which is precisely what Rahner's thesis undercut. While trying to give despairing Christians hope, Rahner's thesis perversely led people to pull back from sharing with others the only true source of hope: the Gospel.

And if his thesis truly cannot be found in either Scripture or Tradition, as Rahner says, then his thesis is not a proper object of Catholic theology, and in fact this is a decisive argument against his thesis. Further, his assertion that the Second Vatican Council really reversed the centuries-old official position of the magisterium regarding the possibility of salvation for non-Christians would be a serious mark against the Church's claims of divine guidance for her teaching authority.

Given the manifold problems with his thesis — problems that go all the way to the core of how Catholic theology is done — it is puzzling that his thesis as a whole was taken so seriously by so many Catholic theologians. It seems probable that there were forces coming from outside the Church that impacted both Rahner in his theology and the reception of his work by others. It is outside the scope of this thesis to investigate what those forces may have been, but it is a topic that others could work on.

Notwithstanding the serious problems in his assertions and methods, Rahner's thesis still can and should be mined for possible insights. The Second Vatican did in fact clearly teach that “the holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery in a manner known to God.”<sup>217</sup> Assuming that the council did not intend to teach that the manner in which the Holy Spirit accomplishes this is known *only* to God and is thus unknowable to humans, it remains a task of theologians to determine how this might be the case. Rahner's thesis, though

---

<sup>217</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 22; Tanner, DEC, 1082; my emphasis.

flawed in important ways, represents an attempt at answering that question. As noted earlier, the Second Vatican Council does not appear to definitively rule out the possibility of there being anonymous Christians. Provided that support could be demonstrated from the sources of revelation and that it could be reconciled with the traditional motivations for evangelization, some version of Rahner's thesis might still be tenable.

## Works Cited

- Burke, Patrick. *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Major Themes*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2002.
- Conway, Eamonn. *The Anonymous Christian: A Relativized Christianity? An Evaluation of Hans Urs von Balthasar's Criticisms of Karl Rahner's Theory of the Anonymous Christian*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lange, 1993.
- Denzinger, Heinrich, Peter Hünermann (DH), ed. *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, Latin - English, 43rd edition, San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012.
- Hillman, Eugene. "'Anonymous Christianity' and the Missions," *The Downside Review* 84, no. 277 (1966).
- Kenny, J. P. *Roman Catholicism, Christianity and Anonymous Christianity: The Role of the Christian Today*. Hales Corner, WI: Clergy Book Service, 1973.
- Kilby, Karen. *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction*. New York: Herder & Herder, 2007.
- Martin, Ralph. *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012.
- Ott, Ludwig. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 1974.
- Pagé, Jen-Guy. *Qui Est L'église?: Le Peuple de Dieu*, 3 vols. Montréal: Les Editions Bellarmin, 1979.
- Rahner, Karl. "Anonymous and Explicit Faith" in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 16.
- "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church" in *Theological Investigations*, Confrontations 2, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 12.
  - "Anonymous Christians" in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 6.
  - "The Christian Among Unbelieving Relations" in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 3.

- "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 5.
- *Faith in a Wintry Season*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.
- *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. New York: 1978.
- "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian'" in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1976, 14.
- "On the Theology of the Incarnation," in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 4.
- *The Shape of the Church to Come*, tr. Edward Quinn. London: SPCK, 1974.
- "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," in *Theological Investigations*, tr. David Bourke. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 16.

Ratzinger, Joseph. "Salus Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Est," *Documentatie Centrum Concilie*, Series I, no. 88, Rome (1963).

Schenk, Richard. "The Epoché of Factical Damnation," *Logos* 1, no. 3 (1997).

Sullivan, Francis A, S.J. *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Church's Response*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002.

The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, "Analecta: A Letter from the Holy Office," *American Ecclesiastical Review* (AER), Vol CXXVII, October (1952): 311-315 (English), 307-311 (Latin).

Tanner, Norman P., S.J., ed. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1990, 2.

Thomas Aquinas. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Vol 2. New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947.

Vorgrimler, Herbert, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought*. New York: Crossroad, 1986.