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Introduction: Improbable Encounters?

Paul G. Crowley, S.J.

There are times when I wish I could sit down and have a conversation with Karl Rahner and ask him what he thinks about all the criticisms that have been leveled against his theological project: that it is heady, abstract, and idealist, ultimately ahistorical; that it is too transcendental and speculative; that his Christology is too incarnationalist, not adverting enough to the Cross; that it is too transcendental, not historical enough in its reference; that it is too individualistic in its reference, not sufficiently communal and historical; that is makes insufficient use of Scripture and the use it does make is superficial; that it is too Eurocentric, not adverting enough to the pluralism of religions and possible human experiences lying outside the horizon of a provincial German-Austrian form of Roman Catholicism. And the criticisms go further: that Rahner's theology is a theology of the optimistic sixties, modern rather than postmodern in its confidence; that it is radically hermeneutical, even demythologizing, and, in contrast to that of von Balthasar, for example, does not take sufficient account of theological sources and experiences that lie outside German idealism; that it supports an ecclesiology, and ecclesial understanding, that is typically rationalist and post-Enlightenment, suspicious of authority, and, therefore, ultimately subversive; that it has been superseded but stands as a monument to the Catholic theological projects of the mid-twentieth century that culminated in Vatican II, Rahner's "liberal" council; that it is a relic that is now properly shelved and may never be read seriously again. In short, Rahner is dated.

I do wonder what the great theologian would say to all of that. I wonder especially in view of the fact that we live now in a world of religious pluralism that has exploded our categories about what "Christianity" is or will be

in the future. In his recent book, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity,* Philip Jenkins writes of the coming of a new forms of Christianity that will render the assumptions of Atlantic-North American theological paradigms somewhat beside the point in another fifty years.[1] In a similar vein, though with perhaps less pessimism than we find in Jenkins, Lamin Sanneh asks to whom Christianity "belongs" in the wake of its transformation into a largely non-Western religion, a religion of the Southern Hemisphere.[2] And Diana Eck describes a scene in the United States, once robustly a "Christian" nation, where the boundaries between cultures and religions are melting into a rich pluralism beyond the dreams of our ancestors.[3] Jenkins, Sanneh, Eck, and others are speaking of a religious pluralism that Rahner himself could only have begun to glimpse in his later years, for virtually no one had an inkling how utterly changed the religious landscape of the planet would become in a mere twenty years. Nor could Rahner himself have quite predicted the outcome of theologies such as those of Jacques Dupuis, who was only at the time of Rahner's death beginning to publish the works that would later give him such notoriety in Rome and in the eyes of the world, as he attempted to bring the Christian theological traditions of the West into theological dialogue with the theological and spiritual traditions of Hinduism.[4]

On the other hand, however, I would like to suggest that Rahner found a way of anticipating much of this. He was hardly a historically naïve theologian and had indeed devoted a great deal of his energies not only to the unfolding of theology through history but also to a fundamental understanding of history itself. In this much, the German tradition of the philosophy of history is not to be underestimated as a fundamentum in Rahner's overall theological project. In fact, I would like to suggest that history, critically and philosophically understood, provides for Rahner the tacit context for the development of some of his most central doctrines. I would like to argue, but cannot develop here, that Rahner has been fundamentally understood in his reception in the United States as a theologian working out of the German idealist and Heideggerian traditions, with their emphasis upon the transcendental subject (Dasein), and that this hermeneutic has set the tone for understanding Rahner and for criticizing his work as ahistorical and idealist. In fact, however, an examination of his earliest work, from *Spirit in the World*, all the way through his later essays, will reveal a theologian who takes history very seriously, if not as a universal *arche*, then as the convergence of time and space within human existence, notably in the crucibles of human suffering.[5] It is in this historical context, indeed in a seemingly ceaseless unfolding of historical contexts, that the self-communication of God to human subjectivity, the *interpersonal* reality of subjectivity, takes place.

The most well known of his approaches to this historical and interpersonal dimension of human existence as it is met by the self-communication of

God, and one that runs like a tacit theme through many of the essays of this volume, is the confuted and much misunderstood notion of the "anonymous Christian." Virtually interchangeable with its correlative term "anonymous Christianity," this notion itself, so readily dismissed by postmodern consciousness, has a historical pedigree not only within theology itself but also within Rahner's own theological project. Since this Rahnerian doctrine figures explicitly or implicitly in a number of the chapters in this volume, a glance at its development within Rahner's own thought is in order.

One of the earliest usages of the term is found in his mid-1960s essay "Anonymous Christians."[6] Here the problematic situation is not only a pluralism of religions but also the challenge posed to Christian faith by secularism and atheism and the "diaspora" situation in which Christians find themselves, especially in desacralized cultures of the European–North Atlantic axis. Rahner poses the need to understand what it means to be a Christian in a world where this is by no means to be taken for granted.

In this essay, the theological response to the question is an ecclesiological one: there are degrees of membership in the Church, from the explicitness of baptism to a nonofficial or "anonymous" form of Christianity. Rahner arrives at this position by starting with what can be said of the human being as spirit, that is, unlimited openness to the being of God, a capacity for God, an innate tendency toward God. In turn, the Incarnation, where God enters into human reality and becomes human being, reveals the fundamental ordering of God toward the human person (a subject in an interpersonal, intersubjective historical situation). Explicit Christian faith, which is expressed within the interpersonal communion of the Church, expresses what is always and already an implicit experience among human beings qua human. So, if a human being who does not explicitly profess Christian faith nevertheless says yes to her life in relation to the horizon of grace that we call God, then that person could be called a Christian, albeit anonymously, even though that person is not an explicit member of the Church. Such was the state of the question when Rahner was looking at it in the late 1950s and mid-1960s: a matter of ecclesiology, membership in the Church through the radical acceptance of God's grace in a human life in a mode that is intrinsically Christian.

This emphasis shifted somewhat in a later essay, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church."[7] Here he addresses the fact that the term "anonymous" would seem to eliminate the need for explicit confession by Christians of their faith, much less the sense on the part of the Church as a whole to go out to the world, proclaiming the baptism of repentance and life. So the question arises, in this essay, how the notion of an anonymous Christianity affects the Church's missionary vocation to non-Christian peoples and religions. Here the issue of pluralism is religions, and the salvific integrity of those religions, is the focus. This question became

especially acute in light of *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council, that welcome declaration on the Church's relation toward non-Christian religions that nevertheless opened a Pandora's box of theological conundrums about the exclusive claims of Christian faith vis-à-vis the claims of non-Christian religions.

Rahner takes up the challenge in three steps. First, the term anonymous here suggests that some people are simply unaware of what they really are, much as genius might be so "anonymously," not knowing that she is in fact a genius. So, he says, Christian faith is already present in an incipient state in some people, though not yet expressed visibly, socially, or historically in their lives. Second, he again invokes elements of the traditional Catholic doctrine of grace, which holds that the grace of justification can be operative even before an explicit sacramental (ecclesiastical) act, and that it is operative even when there is no explicit orientation toward Christian faith as such. Finally, he argues that the Church's missionary task must presume, then, that God is already at work in human beings even before explicit Christianity arrives. Mission is concerned with the realization of the radical freedom of individuals and is manifest "here below in all its possible forms and in all historical spheres and contexts."[8] Thus, it is not the Church's duty to see to it that every human being has explicit Christian faith. Mission does not equate to proselytism or conquest; it rather implies and demands the humility of authentic interreligious dialogue. Here he seems to anticipate, without saying so, the kind of comparative theology that was later to be undertaken by such scholars as Professor Clooney, who offers the lead chapter in this volume.

Rahner's final formal contribution to the topic appears as "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian.'"[9] Here he gives his "updated" version of the term: "[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."[10] While Rahner does not move here beyond the position of a salvation constituted in Christ for all persons, he is trying to deal with the human reality that remains after Christian faith has encountered non-Christian realities in the form of other religions: that human beings do not necessarily become explicitly Christian by virtue of that encounter. And, therefore, he concedes, this theory of anonymous Christianity is not sufficient in itself ("solely") to engage with non-Christian religions. For, he concludes:

> the [person] of today is first and foremost a [person] who feels himself at one . . . with humankind as a whole. For all his harsh experiences of what it is be a historical being and of history itself, whenever it is the ultimate in [the human

> person,] as a whole and as finally definitive that is in question, he feels himself at one with all. He does not seek any heaven from which some other [person] is excluded from the outset. . . . There must be a Christian theory to account for the fact that every 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 [or sister] to Christians in God's sight. This is what the theory of the anonymous Christian seeks to say, and, in so far as it is valid, what it implies.[11]

We seem to have moved here from an ecclesiological doctrine, rooted in the diaspora situation that Christians may themselves experience in Rahner's kind of culture, to an emphasis on God's grace already at work even outside explicit Christian faith, to a fundamental and basic recognition of our shared humanity in the realm of God's grace. Indeed, one wonders why Rahner clings to the term in that final essay. For the term itself develops and is by no means stable in its meanings or applications. It is a historically conditioned theological term, even within Rahner's own corpus. It is small wonder, then, that by the end of his life, he says that he is not particularly concerned about the tenability of the term, nor even of a particular theological doctrine of anonymous Christianity, but that he is simply trying to make a statement about the absoluteness of God in relation to human beings who live in hope and love.[12]

What remains at the end of this development, however, is a constant that Rahner usually only tacitly addresses under the rubric of anonymous Christianity, and that is the mystery itself of "God." For in the encounter of religions, cultures, and spiritualities that has happened throughout the history of Christianity, starting with that original encounter between Jerusalem and Athens, the matter of who God is, what the very referent of the word "God" might be, is what was fundamentally at stake. This is why every encounter between Christianity and the pluralism in which it has always found itself must result not only in an ecclesiology nor even a theology of grace but also finally in a theology of God. And this is precisely why the encounter between Rahner's theology and the realities of the Pacific Rim, which stand for all pluralisms that one can encounter in the world today, is so important to address. For whatever one might think of the continuing pertinence of Rahner's theology in itself, the fact remains that it is still being seriously engaged, and the human reality to which it refers is not fundamentally changed. In the end, we are all dealing with whatever is disclosed to the Christian theological imagination by the word God in these encounters with a pluralistic universe.

And so the structure of these chapters is threefold, moving from the encounter with religions (where Christians can find themselves in any one

of several diasporas), to the encounter with their underlying cultures (what the Church meets in its mission to cultures), to the encounter with theologies, ethics, and spiritualities (where the question about God is raised as a matter of the meaning of human existence before God). These are not three utterly distinct fields of inquiry, for we will find that theology, ethics, and spirituality inform encounters with religions and cultures, just as encounters with religion and cultures inform these other paths of inquiry.

Still, the extremely complicated "map" of religion, culture, theology, ethics, and spirituality within the Pacific Rim results in what might seem to be an improbable encounter between Rahner and this new world. Just how effectively can his theology in fact speak to this situation? Alternatively, how, in various ways, can Pacific Rim realities speak to Rahner's theology, both challenging it and perhaps spotlighting aspects of it that are both old and new for us? While the chapters in this book are all appreciative and respectful of Rahner's work, they offer two fundamental responses.

The first set of responses holds that while Rahner has opened up important questions, his theology, and even his method, does not necessarily position him to be able to address them adequately. We must build upon what he has given us, but in a critical fashion. Rahner remains a tremendous inspiration, in fact a bold thinker who models for theologians how to ask questions and to push them through. But his theology cannot stand alone in the face of realities to which it was not in fact responding.

There are several critical chapters here that open us up to dimensions of Rahner's thought that might prove a challenge to those who are perhaps deeply committed to the Rahnerian theological worldview. Chief among chapters of this type are the first four, led by the flagship essay of Francis X. Clooney, S.J. Clooney undertakes a careful reading of some of Rahner's later work and finds in Rahner an "integral" theologian, who, despite the limitations of his methods and findings, prompts us to ask what such an "integral theology" would look like for those of us living in the twenty-first century. The task is not to remain true to Rahner's conclusions, nor even to his methods, but to his own sense of what it means to be a theologian, asking the hard questions. This approach opens us up to many possibilities that might not have been anticipated by Rahner himself. Responding to Clooney, Thomas Sheehan follows up with a philosophical critique, suggesting that if Rahner's theology is going to function in a radically pluralist religious and cultural situation, then the underpinnings of his project need to be reexamined. This will require, too, a reevaluation of such basic parts of Rahner's project as his Christology, which is certainly at stake in the encounter among religions. Focusing on the bodily mediation of transcendental experience, he concludes with a radical (though Rahnerian) revaluation of the function of religions, revealed in Jesus, as "blessing."

Responding to both Clooney and Sheehan, Catherine Bell raises the fun-

damental question of the limits of theology to encompass, or include within itself, any pluralism. Could we be expecting too much of Rahner's project, or of theology itself? Focusing on Islam, David Pinault joins her in cautioning against any easy relativism on the part of Christians in engaging other religions. Both urge a certain restraint in the reach of theological projects. Further challenges to Rahner are posed by Nancy Pineda-Madrid, who finds in the image of Guadalupe a nexus of religion, culture, and spirituality that raises questions about Rahner's theology of symbol, while Robert Lassalle-Klein looks at recent theology from the Americas, notably that of Ignacio Ellacuría, as challenging Rahner's transcendental paradigm. Both argue that religion on the ground in its Latin American forms and historical realities does not fit easily into a Rahnerian view which emphasizes the individual spiritual subject.

The complementary voice in this volume, and the other response to Rahner, is represented by those who ask what Rahner's theology continues to have to say to us today, even in the pluralist world circumscribed by the Pacific Rim. For example, George E. Griener, S.J., compares the cultural context of Rahner's theological origins with the cultural context of Asia today, where Rahner's thought is receiving a reception that Rahner himself probably could never have anticipated. In many ways, Asian theologians are not only appropriating Rahner, but challenging Western assumptions about the cultural limitations of Rahner's thought. Following in an ecumenical vein, Lutheran theologian Lois Malcolm revisits Rahner's often overlooked theology of the Cross and demonstrates how it is apposite to the wide range of suffering found along the Pacific Rim today, especially as noted by feminist scholars. David Decosse echoes this focus on the Cross, noting how Rahner's ethics, rooted in discipleship and suffering love, lead us away from deontological categories of moral judgment. Michael C. McCarthy, S.J., mines Rahner's work on sinfulness in the Church to address the massive religious disillusionment that has beset Catholics themselves, especially in the wake of the priest sex abuse scandals. Mark F. Fischer offers a classic Rahnerian appraisal of a quirky form of popular religion found in California, while G. Donald Maloney takes us back to the encounter of religions and spiritualities, this time with an appreciation for what Rahner opened up, especially for Christians involved in Zen practice.

These two approaches to Rahner's encounter with the Pacific Rim raise a further question: Where do these reflections take us? Where do we go from here? Tom Powers, S.J., whose work has taken him to Peru, where he has studied the lives of women doing theology there, situates Rahner beyond the Pacific Rim and suggests that, precisely as a Jesuit, Rahner's contribution lies beyond any one particularity, be it religious, cultural, or spiritual. He thus echoes, in a different voice, the idea that the enduring significance of Rahner lies beyond Rahner himself. And nothing could have pleased Rahner more,

I suspect, than to know that this is what people might be saying about him today, far from Europe, on the edge of the Pacific Rim.

NOTES

1. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
2. Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
3. Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).
4. Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).
5. See, for example, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 140–46.
6. *Theological Investigations* 6.390–98.
7. *Theological Investigations* 12.161–77.
8. *Theological Investigations*, 12.176.
9. *Theological Investigations* 14.280–94.
10. *Theological Investigations*, 14.283.
11. *Theological Investigations*, 14.293–94.
12. See *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965–1982*, eds. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, trans. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 218–19, 268.