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Karl Rahner, SJ - IgnatianSpirituality.com

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7-9 minutes

One of the most important theologians of the 20th century, Karl Rahner was born in March 1904. He was the fourth of seven children, the son of a local college professor and a devout Christian mother. In 1922 Karl followed his older brother Hugo and entered the Jesuit community. As a Jesuit novice Rahner was formed in [the Spiritual Exercises](#) of St. Ignatius Loyola. This formation had a lasting influence on his spiritual and intellectual development.

But I think that the spirituality of Ignatius himself, which one learned through the practice of prayer and religious formation, was more significant to me than all the learned philosophy and theology inside and outside of the Order. (*Karl Rahner*, William Dych, NY: Continuum 2000, p. 7)

In his studies Rahner also became thoroughly conversant with the thinking of the Fathers of the Church, especially on topics such as grace, the sacraments, spirituality, and mysticism.

Karl Rahner's Academic Studies

In 1934 Rahner was sent to the University of Freiburg to study philosophy. In Freiburg Rahner studied with Martin Heidegger whose philosophical approach raised serious questions as to how the western philosophical tradition should be understood. Influenced by Heidegger, Rahner wrote his dissertation (later published as *Spirit in the World*), which taught that the human search for meaning was rooted in the unlimited horizon of God's own being experienced within the world.

Rahner's Catholic advisor, Martin Honecker, found his thesis unacceptable and refused to approve it. Rahner moved to the Jesuit University in Innsbruck where he completed a dissertation in theology in 1937.

A number of years later Rahner was asked by one of his students how disappointed was he when he received Honecker's rejection letter. Rahner replied,

"I was not disappointed at all." Had the dissertation been accepted he would have had to interrupt his theology studies, return to Freiburg, and spend months preparing for and taking his comprehensive examinations to finish the doctorate. "I was relieved to be delivered from that work," he said with a smile.

(Dych, p. 7)

Rahner taught at Innsbruck between 1937 and 1939—when the university was taken over by the Nazis. Rahner went to Vienna, Austria where he spent the war years teaching and as a pastor. After the war, Rahner returned to Innsbruck and later taught in Munich and Munster until his retirement in 1971.

In his "retirement" years Rahner lectured, wrote, and did pastoral

work in Innsbruck and Munich until his death in 1984.

Karl Rahner's Involvement in Vatican II

In 1962 Rahner was appointed as a *peritus* (expert advisor) by Pope John XXIII for the Second Vatican Council. Cardinal Koenig in Vienna selected Rahner as his private adviser on the Council documents. During the Council, Rahner worked with Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) to prepare an alternate text on the issue of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition that was accepted by the German bishops. (Later Rahner and Ratzinger would disagree on the direction of some of Rahner's writings.) Other topics discussed during Vatican II that showed Rahner's influence included the divine inspiration of the Bible, the relationship of the Church to the modern world, and the possibility of salvation outside the Church even for nonbelievers.

Publications by Karl Rahner

In an interview later in life, Rahner said he did not think people would find his life that interesting as it was basically concerned with studying and writing. The Church can be grateful for Rahner's attention to his studies when we consider the astonishingly productive works of scholarship that are the results of his efforts.

Rahner's publications include:

Twenty-three volumes of *Theological Investigations*, acting as coeditor of Herder's ten-volume *Lexicon fur Theologie und Kirche*; the six-volume *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*; *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum*

Mundi; and a 30-volume encyclopedia, *Christian Faith in Modern Society*. In all there are over 3,500 published works written or edited by Rahner.

Rahner's Pastoral Concerns

Rahner's academic interests were rooted in his pastoral concerns. Academic theology was never an end in itself, but always a way to serve the life and mission of the Church. Rahner's pastoral concerns are also revealed in the many retreats he conducted and the many prayers he wrote, gathered in *Prayers and Meditations: An Anthology of the Spiritual Writings by Karl Rahner*.

Rahner's students found him a simple and holy priest whose concern for them was expressed in many kind actions on their behalf. He was a close personal advisor and spiritual director. The students also speak of Rahner's continuing concern for those in need. They would spend hours with him finding money, food, clothing, and shelter for the needy. His outreach included missionaries working with the poor in foreign lands. At the academic convocation celebrating his 80th birthday Rahner made a public appeal for money to provide a motorcycle for a priest in the African missions.

To the end of his life, Rahner was ever more convinced that the meaning of life was bound up in the experiences, history, and sacramental life that are God's world of grace.

Throughout his spiritual writings and with greater vehemence in the latter part of his life, Rahner portrays God as inspiring the world to shape human destiny and to liberate people to see God

in all things, in order to know in that freedom that their search for meaning can only end in God. (*Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, Geoffrey B. Kelly, ed., Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press 1993, p. 29.)

Rahner was active in his last years until illness and exhaustion took their toll. He died peacefully on March 30, 1984, in the University Medical Clinic of Innsbruck.

By Jim Campbell

Quotes by Karl Rahner

“So You haven’t really sent me away from You, after all. When You assigned me the task of going out among men, You were only repeating to me Your one and only commandment: to find my way home to You in love. All care of souls is ultimately possible only in union with You, only in the love that binds me to You and thus makes me Your companion in finding a path to the hearts of men.” (*Encounters with Silence*, Karl Rahner, translated and foreword by James M. Demske, SJ, South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press 1999, p. 67.)

“Thanks to Your mercy, O Infinite God, I know something about You not only through concepts and words, but through experience. I have actually known You through living contact; I have met You in joy and suffering. For You are the first and last experience of my life. Yes, really You Yourself, not just a concept of You, not just the name which we ourselves have given to You! You have descended upon me in water and the Spirit, in my baptism. And then there was no question of my convincing or

excogitating anything about You. Then my reason with its extravagant cleverness was still silent. Then, without asking me, You made Yourself my poor heart's destiny." (*Encounters with Silence*, p. 30.)

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[Karl Rahner \(1904-1984\)](#)

Edited by Derek Michaud

An accessible and fairly comprehensive review of Rahner's thought, based primarily on *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*.

Thoughts on the Experience of God in the Theology of Karl Rahner: Gifts and Implications

Mary Steinmetz*
Boston College School of Theology & Ministry

This paper explores the concept of encounter with God in the writings of Karl Rahner and its relevance for academic study and spiritual practice today. In the first half of the paper, the author explores how Rahner addresses the experience of Ultimate Mystery in a variety of ways, by offering insights from his academic writings, prayers, and short articles. In the second half, particular attention is given to the possible applications of his understanding of the experience of God for Christians today, feminist theology, addressing the academic theology/spirituality split, and re-imagining the deep longing for tangible experience in the lives of many Christians.

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Introduction

Karl Rahner's theology does much to de-mythologize mysticism.¹ He approaches the experience of God as an ordinary occurrence, and this sense of normality is related to his understanding of the human person as one who is ultimately oriented toward transcendence. This makes his work particularly relevant to spirituality because he presents the divine as accessible while maintaining the incomprehensibility of Holy Mystery.² He avoids the trap of presenting God as a two-dimensional "buddy" by insisting on the utter transcendence of Mystery. At the same time, he believes that every human being has experienced this Mystery directly and needs only to be taught to recognize the encounter with the transcendent. His focus is on the ordinary experience of God, and not the extremes of many of the mystics, though he does not deny these experiences or their value for the Church.

This paper will examine the various ways that Rahner presents the experience of God and then explore the opportunities this presents for spirituality today. Since he saw himself as a spiritual theologian and his theology is found in prayers, interviews, and spiritual writing, as well as more academic pieces, this task will involve a review of various types of sources. This material will then be analyzed for potential contributions to spirituality, spiritual practice, and current, particularly feminist, understandings of the human/divine relationship.

The Human Person and the Experience of God

"The devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic,' one who has experienced 'something,' or he will cease to be anything at all."³ This is an often-cited Rahner quote, but what exactly does it mean? Rahner sees the human person as being consciously or sub-consciously aware of God, not necessarily in an obvious way but rather as the horizon of

¹ Following Rahner's lead, I will not try to define mysticism. As he says: "We do after all possess a vague empirical concept of Christian mysticism: the religious experiences of the Saints, all that they experienced of closeness to God, of higher impulses, of visions, inspirations, of the consciousness of being under the special and personal guidance of the Holy Spirit, of ecstasies, etc., all this is comprised in our understanding of the word mysticism, without our having to stop here to ask what exactly it is that is of ultimate importance in all this, and in what more precisely this proper element consists," "The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World," in *Theological Investigations III*, trans. Karl H. and Boniface Kruger OFM (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1967; originally published by Einsiedeln, Benziger in 1956 as *Zur Theologie des geistlichen Lebens*), 279-280.

² Rahner uses a wealth of terms to speak of God. The most common utilize the word "mystery," which Rahner uses to emphasize the idea that God is always beyond our ability to conceptualize or understand. To give the reader a sense of the richness of Rahner's language, different terms will be used throughout this paper. When he means to use a Trinitarian schema, Rahner uses the traditional "Father," "Son," and Spirit. Other than this traditional usage, Rahner's terminology is not gender-specific.

³ Karl Rahner, "Christian Living Formerly and Today," in *Theological Investigations VII*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 15 as quoted in Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 338. Here, as elsewhere, Rahner uses the masculine pronoun when speaking of the human person or of God. While the author of this article objects to such usage, she would like to acknowledge her belief that this is a result of the time in which Rahner wrote and not any desire to denigrate women or to assign "maleness" to God. In respect to Rahner, his words will not be edited to make them more palatable to those offended by sexist language, but the author hopes that the reader will overlook the unintentional sexism.

consciousness. This means that he begins with a definition of the human person that makes relation to God a defining principle. It is not surprising that the experience of God then becomes an important part of his theology. In doing this, he opens the realm of the sacred to include every aspect of human life. Since Rahner's theological anthropology is foundational for understanding his approach to the experience of God, it is important to begin with a closer look at this facet of his theology.

For Rahner, the human person is understood as one who is created for the self-communication of God. This orientation toward Ultimate Mystery is the foundational characteristic of being human. Starting from this perspective, the experience of God is not something unusual; rather, to be human is to be open to the possibility of God's self-communication. This radical orientation to mystery at the root of humanity is what is meant by Rahner's phrase "supernatural existential."⁴ This openness to Mystery as the horizon that is always ever greater is the possibility for the receipt of grace, which is defined as the communication of God's own self. Thus, the potential to respond to God's offer of Godself, or obediential potential (or potency), is a result of what the human being is created to be. "To Rahner, God's self-offer as holy mystery, revelation, and love actually constitutes human identity. To be human in its most radical sense means to be the addressee of God's offer of self."⁵

This understanding of the human person leads Rahner to insist that everyone has had experiences of God, whether they are unrecognized (unthematic) or more explicit (thematic). The unthematic experiences that he identifies as encounters with Mystery are deeply human:

Have we ever kept quiet, even though we wanted to defend ourselves when we had been unfairly treated? Have we ever forgiven someone even though we got no thanks for it and our silent forgiveness was taken for granted? ... Have we ever sacrificed something without receiving any thanks or recognition for it, and even without a feeling of inner satisfaction? Have we ever been absolutely lonely? Have we ever decided on some course of action purely by the innermost judgment of our conscience, deep down where one can no longer tell or explain it to anyone, where one is quite alone and knows that one is taking a decision which no one else can take in one's place and for which one will have to answer for all eternity? ...For the experience meant here is the experience of eternity.⁶

⁴ More specifically, God creates humans in such a way as to be recipients God's love, which is Godself. Rahner makes it clear that the human person has no right to this gift, that it is pure grace, a gift from God, and thus "supernatural." This grace is freely offered to all. This is a concrete foundation of each person's existence (thus "existential"). See Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs #23* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press, WB Eerdmans, 1998), 171-172.

⁵ Harvey D. Egan, SJ, "Introduction" in Karl Rahner, *The Need and Blessing of Prayer*, trans. Bruce W. Gillette (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997; originally published by Verlag Herder GmbH & Co. KG. as *Von der Not und dem Segen des Gebetes*), xi.

⁶ Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Experience of Grace," *Theological Investigations III*, trans. Karl H. and Boniface Kruger, OFM (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1967; originally published by Einsiedeln, Benziger in 1956 as *Zur Theologie des geistlichen Lebens*), 87-88.

God is experienced, albeit often unknowingly, in ordinary life. Rahner believes that the easiest “place” to notice this is in the depth or liminal experiences, where human beings are confronted with their own limitations, finitude or strength. Thus, for Rahner, the first way that humans experience God is simply through the mystery of who they are. “In Rahner’s view, everyone is conscious of God, not as the ‘predicamental’ object of one’s consciousness, but as the ‘transcendental horizon’ of consciousness itself. This ‘implicit,’ ‘unthematic’ form of God-consciousness—an actual mystical consciousness—forms the ambience, the undertow, or the basal spiritual metabolism, of daily life.”⁷

It is impossible to talk of the human person outside the context of this core identity. This also accounts for the restlessness of spirit experienced by so many: “The God-experience is the cause of our dissatisfaction with life, for nothing measures up to that which rests at our deepest center. The immense longing speaks to us, even if at times only in a whisper: this or that finite thing is ultimately not where we have set our hearts.”⁸ Thus, the experience of God often exists as the experience of knowing something is wrong, or that there is a standard against which evil can be judged: “Where do atheists and agnostics acquire their often acute sensitivity to injustice, evil, suffering, and death if not from an even deeper experience of ultimate life, fulfillment, and meaning? In short, what provides the grounding for a radical experience of ‘what ought not to be’ for those who deny ultimate meaning a priori?”⁹ This type of experience is foundational, perhaps “utterly inescapable.”¹⁰ Rahner attributes this unavoidable nature of the experience of God to the identity of human beings as transcendent.

This basic orientation to transcendence means that we are already, and always, open to the experience of Godself through grace, which is God’s self-communication. Rahner speaks of a mysticism of everyday life, a recognition that the way to a more explicit faith for Christians is through the often boring or monotonous daily grind of life. We find God, not only in profound encounters, but also in the ordinary aspects of life. “The simple and honestly accepted everyday life contains in itself the eternal and the silent mystery, which we call God and his secret grace, especially when this life remains the everyday...Wherever people are, there they are creatures who unlock the hidden depths of reality in their free, responsible actions.”¹¹ Because of who the human person is, these encounters with the often-difficult reality of life are also experiences of God, and one purpose of religion is to help people recognize more explicitly these experiences. “To Rahner, the prayer of everyday life exists not only as the immense longing, or even only as the undertow, vector, or implicit call to holiness found in every person’s deepest interior. It becomes more explicit in the many good and lovely experiences that punctuate even the most

⁷ Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 339.

⁸ Harvey D. Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 60-61.

⁹ Egan, *Karl Rahner*, 67.

¹⁰ Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner*, *Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs #23* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press, WB Eerdmans, 1998), 116.

¹¹ Karl Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life: Sermons, Prayers and Essays*, trans. and ed. Annemarie S. Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 173.

banal lives.”¹² Rahner writes about walking, sleeping, sitting down, working, eating, and even about laughter.¹³ His comments range from reflections to searing questions. When writing about sitting down he says, “Do we have the courage, the discipline, and the freedom of heart to be quiet, to sit down? Do we become immediately bored when we have to sit down quietly and, while driving or travelling, throw ourselves into constant activity because we cannot endure ourselves, the quiet and the silence? Do we always have to be on the run because we are running away from ourselves?”¹⁴ In speaking of the ordinary nature of the experience of God, Rahner is attempting to make the implicit *explicit* and help people to grow into a stronger and more firmly based Christian faith. In the words of Harvey Egan:

Rahner’s theology of the mysticism of everyday life challenges everyone to look more closely at what is actually going on in the depths of their daily lives. What is implicit, hidden, anonymous, repressed, or bursting forth from the center of all we do? To Rahner, there is nothing profane about the depths of ordinary life. Whenever there is a radical self-surrender, an absolute yielding of everything, a surrender to the mystery that embraces all life – there is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ, the mysticism of everyday life.¹⁵

In stressing the ordinary nature of experiential knowledge of Holy Mystery, Rahner rejects “what he calls an élitist interpretation of Christianity. In his reflections on spirituality and mysticism, he insists that *everyone* is called to the immediacy of God’s self-presence, a call which, of course, can be rejected. Underlying this assertion is God’s universal salvific will, and radical self-communication to all.”¹⁶ This universality of the offer of salvation is key for Rahner. “In Rahner’s view, every Christian is called to a mysticism of everyday faith, hope and love that differs only in degree, and not in kind, from the extraordinary experiences of recognized mystics.”¹⁷ In fact, for Rahner, this is an offer for all people, not just Christians, because all, by virtue of being human, are open to and actually *are* experiencing the transcendent.

Another way to approach this “ordinary” nature of the experience of God is through Rahner’s prayers. Through his prayers we see a God that Rahner struggles with in the everyday. He wrestles with his attempts to understand this God, and to understand his own experience. They are, in a very real sense, “an attempt on Rahner’s part to highlight and facilitate in his readers that encounter (*Begegnung*) with God, which, in his view, lies at the heart of prayer and spirituality.”¹⁸

Thanks to your mercy, O Infinite God, I know something about You not only through concepts and words, but through experience. I have met You in joy and suffering. For

¹² Egan, “Introduction,” in *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer*, xiii.

¹³ See *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life* for selections entitled “A Little Song,” “About Seeing and Hearing,” “About Work,” “About Walking,” “About Sitting Down,” “About Seeing,” “About Eating,” “About Laughter,” and “About Sleeping.”

¹⁴ Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*, 177-178.

¹⁵ Egan, *Karl Rahner*, 76-77.

¹⁶ Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 61-62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

You are the first and last experience of my life. Yes, really You Yourself, not just a concept of You, not just the name which we ourselves have given You!¹⁹

This God to whom he speaks is met in joy and suffering, the ordinary facets of life. This is the same Mystery he encounters in eating and sleeping and walking. Yet he also lets his prayer lead him more directly into transcendence, where he faces the experience of relinquishing control and the experience of powerlessness implicit in being a creature:

Without You, I should founder helplessly in my own dull and groping narrowness. I could never feel the pain of longing, nor even deliberately resign myself to being content with this world, had not my mind again and again soared out over its own limitations into the hushed reaches which are filled by You alone, the Silent Infinite. Where should I flee before You, when all my yearning for the unbounded, even my bold trust in my littleness, is really a confession of You?²⁰

As passionately as he speaks of the experience of God as a positive presence, he also struggles intensely with God's silence and seeming absence.

Why are You so silent? Why do You enjoin me to speak with You, when You don't pay any attention to me? Isn't Your silence a sure sign that You're not listening? Or do You really listen quite attentively, do You perhaps listen my whole life long, until I have told you everything, until I have spoken out my entire self to You? Do You remain silent precisely because You are waiting until I am really finished, so that You can then speak Your word to me, the word of Your eternity? Are You silent so that You can one day bring to a close the life-long monologue of a poor human being, burdened by the darkness of this world, by speaking the luminous word of eternal life, in which You will express Your very Self in the depths of my heart?²¹

With these prayers, Rahner lets his readers see his own struggles and in this process invites them to an encounter with Infinite Mystery. He does not promise understanding but rather an engagement that is both incomprehensible and intimate. "Prayer, to Rahner, is the last moment of speech before the silence; the act of self-surrender just before the incomprehensible God disposes of one; the reflection immediately proceeding the act of letting oneself fall – after the last of one's own efforts – and full of trust – into the infinite fullness and silence that reflection can never grasp."²²

From this exposition of Rahner's prayers, it is clear that Rahner considers prayer as an important part of the encounter with the Infinite. Through prayer he seeks to move past the basic spiritual experience that is revealed through everyday life. He believed that "prayer is best grasped by its practice [and this] means that when a person accepts him or herself in the totality of their existence and so experiences him or herself as confronted with the incomprehensible mystery embracing this existence, then such a person is living out what prayer really is and

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, *Prayers for a Lifetime*, ed. Albert Raffelt (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1984; originally published by Verlag Herder Freiburg im Breisgau in 1984 as *Gebete des Lebens*), 17.

²⁰ Rahner, *Prayers for a Lifetime*, 11.

²¹ Karl Rahner, *Encounters with Silence*, trans. James M. Demske, SJ (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999; originally published by Verlag Felizian Rauch, Innsbruck, Austria in 1938 as *Worte ins Schweigen*), 20-21.

²² Egan, Introduction to Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer*, ix.

means. Prayer, then is the event of the *experience of God himself*.²³ Furthermore, prayer is the mechanism by which the human person actively appropriates the gift of grace and opens oneself to the transcendent.

It is important to note that Rahner was not, however, interested in trying to evoke an experience of religious enthusiasm such as is seen in the Catholic charismatic movement, though he did not condemn such experiences, which he called “mysticism in ordinary dress” or “mysticism of the masses.”²⁴ This type of spiritual enthusiasm focuses on the external signs and the overwhelming experience. “For Rahner, to assume that the experience of the Spirit is limited solely to particular, isolated, special occasions is to adopt a fundamentally mythological understanding of the relationship of God to the world.”²⁵ Rahner, when possible, worked to demythologize the Christian faith. This idea of “magical” or “extraordinary” phenomena was one of his main concerns about so-called charismatic experiences, which could be cautiously accepted after having been tested for authenticity. Rahner did not deny the reality of this type of experience, but he was more interested in a calmer, more “sober” experience of the Spirit: “There is a mysticism of daily living, the finding of God in all things, the sober drunkenness of the Spirit mentioned by the Fathers of the Church and ancient liturgy, which we dare not reject or disdain just because it is sober.”²⁶

Clearly, Rahner spoke about a deeper experience of God than people recognize in their everyday actions and that is different from the enthusiasm of the charismatic. He recognized and honored the experiences of the great saints and mystics, but did not see visions and extreme psychic phenomena as the sole or even suggested pathway for ordinary Christians. What then was the alternative? As a Jesuit, Rahner was firmly rooted in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. He spoke and wrote of a mysticism that was a result of prayer and study that taught the believer how to find God in all things. This is an experiential knowledge of God, but it is not the ecstasy of the saints, nor the humdrum of everyday. Perhaps the clearest explanation of this type of experience is given to us by Rahner when he speaks as though he were Ignatius speaking to Jesuits today:

I encountered God; I experienced God’s self. Even then, I could already distinguish between God’s self and the words, the images, the particular limited experiences that somehow point to God... Godself I experienced – not human words about God. God, and the sovereign freedom that is proper to God, the freedom that can only be experienced as coming from God, not from the intersection of earthly realities... That’s what it was, I say. Indeed, I would say this: you can have the same experience too, if you allow your skepticism – driven as it is by an underlying atheism – about such a claim to reach its limit, not just in eloquently expressed theory but also in actual bitter experience. For then something happens.²⁷

²³ Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 73.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, “Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace,” in TI XVI as quoted in Egan, *Karl Rahner*, 70.

²⁵ Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 148.

²⁶ Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965-1982*, trans. Harvey D. Egan (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1986), 297.

²⁷ Karl Rahner, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit” as quoted in *Spiritual Writings*, ed. Philip Endean, Modern Spiritual Masters Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 38.

An openness to this type of encounter with God involves active work for a person. In order to open oneself to the grace or free offer of God's self-communication, a person must choose to open her/himself to Ultimate Mystery. This happens in prayer, contemplation, and in often-difficult conscious choices. Rahner saw the direct encounter with the divine as crucial for Christians today:

For me in my theology the givenness of a genuine, original experience of God and his Spirit is of fundamental importance. This precedes logically (and not necessarily temporally) theological reflection and verbalization and is never adequately overtaken by this reflection. What Christian faith teaches is never communicated merely by a conceptual indoctrination from without, but is and can basically be experienced through the supernatural grace of God as a reality in us...an awakening, a mystagogy into this original, grace-filled religious experience is today of fundamental importance.²⁸

This type of encounter with God requires great courage. For Rahner, a true and committed faith was not an easy thing. This is particularly true in modern times when Christian faith is not a real, intrinsic part of the culture:

In such a situation the lonely responsibility of the individual in his or her decision of faith is necessary and required in a way much more radical than it was in former times. That is why the modern spirituality of the Christian involves courage for solitary decision contrary to public opinion, the lonely courage analogous to that of the martyrs of the first century of Christianity, the courage for a spiritual decision of faith...Such a solitary courage, however, can exist only if it lives out of a wholly personal experience of God and his Spirit.²⁹

This claim of a genuine, perceivable experience of God is urgently needed in the world today, given the hunger for spirituality or experience in general, and the ongoing abandonment of formal religion. Rahner's own assertion that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist gives us the greatest reason for urgency.³⁰

Applications for Spirituality Today

Rahner has a great deal to offer contemporary spirituality, which is currently quite a challenging mix of disparate practices and ideas, encompassing everything from traditional practices like *lectio divina* and contemplative prayer, to practices inspired by native or Eastern religions. Perhaps it would be helpful to begin with defining spirituality, since there is quite a discrepancy in the various understandings of this word. Perhaps the most basic definition is "how one lives one's life in light of one's ultimate values."³¹ This understanding is too broad for our purposes, as is Hans Urs von Balthasar's definition: "that basic practical or existential attitude

²⁸ Rahner, *Dialogue*, 328.

²⁹ Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*, eds. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1986), 21-22.

³⁰ See footnote 4 above for full quote and reference.

³¹ I am indebted to Louis Savary, Ph.D. for this definition.

(*Grundhaltung*) of a person which is the consequence and expression of the way in which they understand and live their religious – or more generally, their ethically committed – existence.”³² We need a working definition of a specifically Christian spirituality. Sandra Schneiders offers a detailed definition:

The particularity of Christian revelation is constituted by the specificity of revelation focused in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the revelation of the transformation through death of humanity into God. This is the foundation of the sacramental intuition, the reading of all creation which is the unique Christian "take" on the real relation of Transcendence to immanence, the mediation not only of transcendence but of the Transcendent in human being, human experience, human particularity, human history, human destiny. Christian spirituality is the experience of living that reality. . .³³

In short, a definition of Christian spirituality might be: the reality of living the experience of being radically oriented toward Ultimate Mystery within the Christian context (i.e., through Christ, in the Spirit).

This definition elucidates the first thing that Rahner has to offer contemporary spirituality: an understanding of the human person that is flexible and open to the possibility of growth and development. This type of anthropology is something desperately needed by contemporary society, which is suffering from a lack of engagement with philosophy and theology. Old philosophical definitions of the human person from ancient Greek philosophy are no longer being studied as a regular part of school curricula. It could be argued that this is due to a lack of perceived relevance today. Instead, ideas about who the human person is come from the physical sciences, such as biology and chemistry, and the social sciences, particularly sociology and psychology. This is supplemented by mass media caricatures and illusions. Contemporary society needs a common understanding of the human person that is positive, growth-oriented, and flexible, without being in conflict with either science or scripture. Rahner offers this type of understanding.

In addition to the lack of common consensus on the human person, there is also much that is problematic in Christian spiritual practice, particularly among Catholics. At present, there is an unhelpful distinction between theology and spirituality. Within the academy, theology is often perceived as a strictly academic pursuit, and, as such, is seen as divorced from “messy” experience or popular piety. The practice of faith and the articulation of theology are often approached as totally separate. Instead, theology has gained a reputation for being too intellectual and inaccessible and separate from practice or practicality, particularly among non-academics. “Rahner resolutely refused to divorce theology and spirituality into separate disciplines because of his conviction that one cannot exist without the other.”³⁴ For Rahner: “All

³² Hans Urs Von Balthasar, “The Gospel as Norm and Test of all Spirituality in the Church” as quoted in Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 18.

³³ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Spirituality and the God Question” in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Vol 10, No 2, Fall 2010, 249. Note that this definition seems to incorporate some of Rahner’s thinking.

³⁴ Harvey D. Egan, “Theology and Spirituality” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, eds. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 2007), 14.

theological reflection, all theological statements, have their root in the holy mystery of God.”³⁵ Because of this refusal to separate theology from experience, Rahner’s writing gifts his readers with an understanding of an “...experiential union with this faith by leading them into their own deepest mystery.”³⁶ So strong is this conviction that he identifies this split as “the horrible difference which is often to be observed in later theology, between theology and spiritual life.”³⁷ This is something that needs to be more deeply explored. The wealth of Christian tradition is not being made accessible to the average “person in the pews.” Rahner³⁸ brings the rich, experiential tradition into modern terms and accessibility. He draws on the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola for his grounding in this area. What Rahner offers is a broad based theological foundation for his experiential claims. He engages spirituality with the same academic rigor and depth that he uses for more traditional academic topics.

This is particularly important because there is much that passes for spirituality today that is not grounded in theology or other academic disciplines. All that is needed to become a spiritual teacher is a creative idea and a persuasive personality. While there has been a decline in active participation in formal religion in recent years, there has been an upsurge in interest in spirituality. This can be seen in the large number of books and seminars dedicated to spiritual practices, particularly in the category known as “new age,” and an increase in the number of people eschewing formal religion and claiming to be “spiritual” but not “religious.” This trend may be interpreted as an expression of frustration with doctrines, dogma, and rules, as well as a corresponding desire for experience. People are hungry for something more, and those who are not finding sustenance and help in their religious tradition or practice are often willing to try new things. Many practices that have deep roots in non-Christian religious traditions are being separated from the discipline of their original contexts and presented as worthwhile spiritual practices in isolation. The marketplace is filled with chakra meditations, crystals, shamanic journeys, Kabbalah for non-Jews, and many other things that lead searching people from one “experience” to the next, without any real grounding in tradition or life.

Rahner offers a complex and remarkably complete theology, which is both a result of prayer and experience of God, and a possible entrance for the serious student into this encounter with Mystery. His material will challenge the most intellectual of thinkers, while offering a more direct experiential entrée through his spiritual writings. This is a new understanding of an experiential Christianity that starts from Rahner’s anthropology, meaning that it begins with how he understands human identity. He reclaims the concept of personal relationship within a context of Christian sacramental community for Catholics. As such, Rahner can be called a mystagogical theologian, or one who draws his readers into their own encounters with Mystery.³⁹ This is a melding of “orthodoxy” with experience that would meet the needs of many people if it were made more accessible. As Rahner himself says:

³⁵ Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, xli.

³⁶ Egan, “Theology and Spirituality,” 15.

³⁷ Karl Rahner, “Thomas von Aquin” as quoted in Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 43.

³⁸ And others, such as Teilhard de Chardin, Anthony DeMello, and Margaret Silf.

³⁹ Egan, “Theology and Spirituality,” 15.

I am convinced that such an immediacy between God and the human person... is of greater significance today than ever before. All the societal supports of religion are collapsing and dying out in this secularized and pluralistic society. If, nonetheless, there is to be real Christian spirituality, it cannot be kept alive and healthy by external helps, not even those which the Church offers, even of a sacramental kind...but only through an ultimate, immediate encounter of the individual with God.⁴⁰

This conviction is based on the fact that the “starting point” of Rahner’s theology and spirituality is his “own personal experience of God (with its insights as well as its questions). From this concrete starting-point, he attempts to understand the traditional faith of the Church. He also invites others to discover similar experiences in themselves, or even to consider theologizing from quite different experiences.”⁴¹

Sadly, contemporary Catholic faith and practice lacks understanding of the offer of God’s direct self-communication to humanity. Many active Catholics are unaware that an experiential encounter with God is part of their rich tradition. Instead, their focus is on the mediation of God through sacrament and scripture. Rahner offers an option that is firmly rooted in these traditions of word and sacrament, while stressing, and even evoking, an experience of Ultimate Mystery. This type of experiential knowing is desperately needed in the church today in order to give people a more robust faith and a deeply spiritual practice. As modern communication makes the world smaller and people from distant countries become “neighbors,” Christians need a faith that will help them to expand hearts and minds. “Every authentic religious epiphany or encounter, every true experience of God in whatever form, makes a person less insular, less complacent, and less isolated – and more restless, more inspired and more engaged with the world and humanity.”⁴² This makes the need for a genuine experience of God quite urgent for people today. Rahner offers a way to this encounter that is not shrouded in mystical (or magical) language, and is not outside the ability of the ordinary person.

There is a very practical and concrete purpose in Rahner’s desire to bring people to a recognition of their own encounter with Mystery. “...The aim of Rahner’s approach is to bring the person to a *decision* or choice which embraces the whole of one’s existence, and which will lead to the radical re-ordering of one’s transcendental nature towards the immediate reality of God.”⁴³ In other words, Rahner’s approach is oriented towards encouraging a person to make a fundamental option for God. This has obvious applications today when faith and religious commitment are choices within a large field of options.

⁴⁰ Rahner, *Dialogue*, 176.

⁴¹ Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 69-70.

⁴² Anthony J. Gittins, *A Presence that Disturbs: A Call to Radical Discipleship* (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2002), 12.

⁴³ Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 150.

Rahner's Contributions to Feminist Theology and Spirituality

In addition to the gifts he offers to general spiritual practice, Rahner offers some particular resources for feminist theology and spirituality, some of which have already been incorporated. Many feminists have adopted his language and way of speaking about God as a starting place for new speech about the Holy. Terms like Mystery are non-gendered and thus very welcome as alternates to male terminology and pronouns for God. In expanding language about God in this way, Rahner opens the way for theologians like Mary Daly, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Rosemary Radford Ruether to explore the implications of using gendered language for God. Elizabeth Johnson has enhanced the discussion by building on this foundation to develop the theological grounding for feminine language for God in *She Who Is*. She relies on the rich tradition of the incomprehensibility of God, which was reasserted by Rahner in contrast to a framework that had become too formulaic. Unfortunately, he is often criticized for the language that puts an emphasis on transcendence and ignores immanence. This is unfair and an incomplete understanding since his focus on experience is all about a personal encounter and relationship, while maintaining the absolute “otherness” of Mystery.

Catherine Mowry LaCugna sees Rahner as foundational for reintroducing “interest in trinitarian theology.”⁴⁴ She builds on this interest, as well as Rahner’s assertion that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa, as well as his understanding of grace as God’s Self-communication, to develop her Trinitarian theology. Nancy Pineda-Madrid acknowledges her indebtedness to Rahner, and others, in the area of salvation involving engagement with the world. This is the foundation on which she builds her “reimagination of salvation.”⁴⁵

Despite Rahner’s significant influence on feminist theology, there is one area that has received less attention by feminists than it deserves. This is his overall emphasis on the experience of God. While feminist theology begins from the experience of women, it often focuses primarily, or sometimes exclusively, on the concrete daily experiences of women, and their ways of naming and understanding the divine. Many feminist writers shy away from talking about direct encounters with a personal God. There are several excellent reasons why this may be the case. The first is that the maleness of Jesus has been used in particularly problematic and totally unnecessary ways to denigrate women. Examples include using the maleness of Jesus to assert that women cannot image Christ, using the maleness of Jesus to insist on male leadership in church and society, using the fact that the male Jesus used the male term Abba (Father or “Daddy”) for God to make the male experience normative and to insist on the dominance of the male in the family and in society. A second possible reason for the relative silence on this issue is association of emotion or feeling with the “feminine,” which is contrasted with the rational or unemotional masculine. Experiences that involve intuition, emotion, or anything else that is not

⁴⁴ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993, original publication date 1992), 210.

⁴⁵ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 1.

measurable by scientific means, become problematic and cannot be addressed by women lest their seriousness or scholarly credentials be doubted. Anything that can add to gendered stereotyping is potentially a problem.

Cautiously appropriated, Rahner's theology provides a corrective in both of these areas. A major theme of Rahner's experiential theology is the encounter with Mystery as mystery. It is not that Rahner has no emphasis on Jesus, but that one need not start with Jesus to look for God, since the experience of transcendence is part of being human. Encounter with the risen Christ in prayer takes us to a new level but it does not start the experience. While maintaining the central significance of Jesus, Rahner does not emphasize his maleness. This means that we can retrieve his experiential focus without needing to fear this area. In fact, though many feminists have now moved away from Christology as such, Elizabeth Johnson has found rich resources in Rahner:

Karl Rahner has envisioned that because of the Word of God in our midst, it can now be seen that each of us is a little word of God. The one Word of God uttered in our midst reveals to us our own beauty, for we are each a little word and together we will spell out something great. Again, he describes each of us as a letter of the alphabet; when we are all assembled we will spell out a great word to the glory of God: "Human nature is the grammar of God's self-utterance." Our human nature is so made that God can speak in and through us. All of this flows out of the incarnation, which is real and not a pretense on God's part. That God actually became one of us leads us to value all human beings as gifted with a tremendous dignity precisely as human.⁴⁶

For Rahner, the experiential encounter is always directly with God, who is not male, female or any other category we might design. This means that his experiential focus has great potential for feminist theology and spiritual practice. One example is the need for women to regain and claim their true selves. Johnson uses Rahner's theology to stress this point: "Personal development of the self also constitutes the development of the experience of God; loss of self-identity is also a loss of the experience of God... Consequently, when a person claims the self in freedom... or affirms oneself in trustful acceptance, then the changing history of this self-revelation also entails living through a changing history of the experience of God."⁴⁷ The theology of Rahner feeds this dynamic envisioning of the process of human growth into full personhood.

In *She Who Is*, Johnson draws on Rahner in her work of reclaiming the basis of Trinitarian language in the experience of God:

For this language is not a literal description of the inner being of God who is in any event beyond human understanding. It is a pointer to holy mystery in trust that God really is the compassionate, liberating God encountered through Jesus in the Spirit. It is language which affirms that what is experienced in Christian faith really is of God; that what we are involved with is nothing other than saving divine mystery. At rock bottom it is the language of hope.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1990), 33.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2009), 65-66.

⁴⁸ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 200.

This reclaiming of the experience of God at the root of doctrine gives feminist theology a vibrancy that comes from the integration of theology and spirituality. This energy has much to offer the larger church and there is more work to be done in reintegrating the ongoing, and not simply historical, encounter with God into the daily lives of believers.

Implications for the Church Today

Rahner's emphasis on the encounter with Mystery should make Rahner's theology vibrant and alive for ordinary Christians, but this has not been the case. Paradoxically, one of the primary factors in the relative inaccessibility of Rahner to ordinary Catholics is the fact that we have moved farther from his ideal envisioning of Church rather than closer. He dreamed of a church where the local community has far more influence and importance; where the focus is on love and community. He also saw the possibility for a church where power is shared and Christian unity might be a real possibility.⁴⁹ This type of community is much more able to be open to experiential encounter, because it is less encased in rigid structures, and less afraid of innovation, questions, and change.

While this envisioning of a different understanding of power is a gift to the Church all by itself, the local church he envisions is very important. Each member will take ownership of her/his faith: "The Church at the level of the local community will be the community of those who freely believe, of those who have taken their own personal decision."⁵⁰ He sees a Church centered around love and the personal relationship with Ultimate Mystery. This church requires the kind of experience of God around which Rahner's theology is focused. This is a powerful vision:

The community of the new Church must be a community of love, and love is extremely practical. But it is better for us to admit to ourselves in all honesty that as yet we hardly know what outward shape a community living by practical love in this way can assume. We are only capable of obtaining something when we do not believe that we already possess it, and this applies here also.⁵¹

Unfortunately, this is not the direction the Church has taken in recent years. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council settled on an understanding of the church as the people of God, replacing "the juridical, hierarchical definition of church with more biblical and symbolic images and clearly articulated a sense of the church as taking its form and function from its relationship to the kingdom of God."⁵² In the years since the Council, there have been several moves to

⁴⁹ See Karl Rahner, "Dream of the Church," *Theological Investigations XX*, trans. Edward Quinn, ed. Paul Imhof, SJ (New York: Crossroad, 1981; originally published by Einsiedeln, Benziger, 1980 as *In Sorge um die Kirche*), 133-142.

⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, "The New Image of the Church," *Theological Investigations X*, trans. David Bourke (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1977; originally published by Einsiedeln, Benziger in 1967 as *Theologische Vorträge und Abhandlungen*), p. 25.

⁵¹ Rahner, "The New Image of the Church," 26-27.

⁵² *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, eds. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 171.

consolidate central, or papal power.⁵³ The move away from a church of the people of God and toward a more magisterial understanding of church has worked against the incorporation of Rahner's theology as a resource for spiritual practice. The very thing that his theology could help counteract – a focus on doctrine to the exclusion of experience – renders his work inaccessible for many theologians and ordinary Christians. Perhaps this could be “countered” by a focus on the more spiritual writings for now, in the hope that a time of greater openness to the Spirit is coming. For that is really the issue here. Rahner's theology seeks an engagement of the Church with the Spirit of God, a fearless encounter in love. This kind of experience requires both courage and love. It has the potential to radically change Church structures and breathe new life into the traditions. The Church of the future, and the Christian of the future, will be different from what exists now. This kind of change can be frightening, but Rahner has great confidence in both humanity and in the Spirit of God. His spiritual writings provide a mystagogical introduction to the explicit experience of God, offering a firm foundation for a future integrated theology, and spirituality open to the gifts of the Spirit.

Ultimately, the question that Rahner asks us to consider is the question of Jesus: “Who do you say that I am?” Despite an impressive corpus of work, his answer is an unexpected invitation from Jesus: “Come and see.” Rahner encourages us to enter the conversation. His desire is that people will speak of and take seriously the God they have encountered. His theology shies away from easy answers and either/or thinking. He asks us to let love cast out fear and to stay in the place of tension between experience and tradition, prophecy and obedience, presence and absence, and between new and old. He demands the integrity of both/and thinking – intellectual and spiritual, kataphatic and apophatic, creativity and obedience. He has great gifts for the church as we move into the future; if we will only find a way to embrace them as we accept the challenge of our questions and our doubts.

⁵³ See, for example, the discussion of the Council in Edward Schillebeeckx, *I am a Happy Theologian: Conversations with Francesco Strazzari*, trans. John Bowden (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1994), 13-29.

PORTIA NELSON¹, “AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE SHORT CHAPTERS”

I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost ...I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes me forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I'm in the same place.
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... It's a habit.
My eyes are open,
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

¹ From *Wikipedia*: **Portia Nelson** (May 27, 1920 – March 6, 2001) was an [American](#) popular singer, songwriter, actress, and author. She was best known for her appearances in the most prestigious 1950s cabarets, where she sang an elegant repertoire in a soprano noted for its silvery tone, perfect diction, intimacy, and meticulous attention to words. In 1965 she portrayed the cantankerous Sister Berthe in the film version of [The Sound of Music](#); she also had a minor role as Sarah in the musical [Doctor Dolittle](#); on TV's [All My Children](#) Nelson played the long-running role of nanny Mrs. Gurney. Her book of poetic musings, *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk: The Romance of Self-Discovery*, became a mainstay of twelve-step programs.

IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

Welcome! You are now logged in.

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MARCH 30, 2009 ISSUE

Reading Karl Rahner: Twenty-five years after his death, Rahner's works still illuminate.

Leo J. O'Donovan, S.J.

March 30, 2009

On Ash Wednesday 1984, the day after the city of Innsbruck had celebrated the 80th birthday of Karl Rahner, S.J., I drove him on a tour that was to be the last we made together. In the neighboring town of Schwaz, we visited the Church of the Assumption, which interested him especially because of its two naves, one for the upper classes and one for the workers. At a restored Franciscan cloister he corrected me quickly when I observed a scene of “the resurrection of the dead.” “No, no,” he objected, “the resurrection of the body!” Over dinner it was clear that he paid little attention to the body’s nutritional needs, ordering only an elaborate local dessert of apple pancakes. Weeks later, back home in the United States, I grieved upon learning of his death on March 30.

Important publications, especially from a new generation of German scholars, continue to research the roots of Rahner’s thought. Successive volumes of a landmark new edition of his *Sämtliche Werke* (“Complete Edition”) have been appearing regularly, with 23 volumes now available out of the planned 32. The English translation of an important book of essays by German-speaking colleagues and friends, *Encounters With Karl Rahner*, is forthcoming.

Reading Rahner can be a lifetime’s occupation or, better, a resource for a lifetime. For wayfaring Christians perhaps more than for academic theologians, pages in even his most difficult essays still illuminate in startling ways. Rahner writes like a poet whose creativity has been constrained in order to serve the community’s shared questions—or

like a mystic willing, though always discreetly, to share profound intimations of divine presence.

How might we in a new century read this legendary figure? I offer five guiding questions.

1. How did Karl Rahner understand human reason and its capacity for truth? Well, quite differently from both 18th- and 19th-century science and from the First Vatican Council, which too easily defended reason on terms it accepted from that science. Like other great humanist thinkers of his time—Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, for example—Rahner warned repeatedly against reducing reason and the language through which it expresses itself to technical and instrumental uses. He admired the advances of science and was grateful for them (fast cars and escalators fascinated him, and he knew the value of an occasional sleeping pill), but he repeatedly insisted that the mind's deepest need is communion in what can never be ultimately defined—in love, fidelity and trust. "What if it is essential and constitutive of true knowledge," he asked in a famous essay of 1959, "of [knowledge in its deepest, fullest sense], of its growth, self-awareness and lucidity, to know by knowing also that it does not know, to know itself oriented from the start to the incomprehensible and inexpressible, to recognize more and more that only in this way can it truly be itself and not [just] come to a halt at some regrettable limit?"

He was speaking as a believer in search of understanding, as someone who felt himself addressed, welcomed and embraced by a holy mystery for whom the word "God" is a necessary, perhaps, but terribly faltering term. The more reasonable we are, the more we realize that only the horizon and term of our mind's endless, questioning dynamism can satisfy the hunger of human hearts. The insight had roots in Augustine and Aquinas, but also, by contrast, in the self-confidence of modernity—of which Rahner was one of the most trenchant and profound critics. (This against the often-advanced view that he adopted a philosophical starting point and sought God and the incarnate Word of God from that point.)

2. In Rahner's thought, what is the relationship between knowing and loving? Do they stand next to each other, does one follow upon the other, is one primary (as in the tradition of heaven as beatific vision)? Or are they more intrinsically and dynamically

related, neither being really itself without the other? His answer came as early as his famous lectures on the philosophy of religion, *Hearers of the Word* (1941), in which he understands knowledge as ordained to fulfillment in love. Refusing to choose between intellectualism and voluntarism, he draws on Bonaventure's notion of ecstatic reason and sees knowledge and love as mutually related, as indwelling each other: "In the heart of knowledge stands love, from which knowledge itself lives." Here the commonplace misunderstanding that we can choose only what we first understand yields to the experientially more accurate sense that inquiry is always motivated, that it is the inquiry of subjects who have concerns, commitments and convictions. Rahner writes: "Thus will and knowledge can only be understood in a relationship of reciprocal priority with one another, not one of linear sequence."

Rahner restates this view often. In his essay on the Trinity, for example, he speaks of truth as "first the truth that we do, the deed in which we firmly posit our self for our self and for others, the deed which waits to see how it will be received." We are the truth of lives that only love can guarantee. Thus, knowledge is only momentarily an end in itself; it must always be guided by love, just as, in strictly Trinitarian terms, Christian believers can accept God's Word only if they are guided by the Spirit of God (see I Cor 12:3; Jn 14:26, 16:12).

3. Of whom is Rahner really speaking? Often his theme is taken to be the relation between the individual human subject and the God who redeems us in Christ. But this interpretation does an injustice to his thought. Rather than considering individuality a primordial anthropological given ("first the 'I'"), Rahner actually had a profoundly, even mystically, social conception of humanity and of all created reality. As early as *Hearers of the Word*, he wrote: "We are human beings only within humanity." In contrast to the extrinsicist, objectivistic and a-historical neoscholasticism in which he was educated, he became steadily more emphatic that our social character as human beings must be grounded, not merely psychologically, sociologically or ethically but through a religiously motivated ontology, that is to say, through a view of reality informed by faith. It is in our historical journey as human subjects toward what we religiously call the "holy mystery of God" that we become increasingly aware of ourselves as responsible subjects.

In a crucial essay in 1971, Rahner wrote:

In the unity of the experience of God and the experience of one's self, on the one hand, and in the unity of the experience of the self and encounter with the neighbor, on the other hand, we see that these three experiences are fundamentally one experience [in the sense not of a temporal moment but rather of an ongoing life] with three aspects which mutually condition each other [God, self, community]. But that means, reciprocally, that the unity of the love of God and neighbor is only conceivable if we presuppose the unity of the experience of God and of the self. [It is in being drawn to God that we become truly aware of ourselves.] What first appears as a purely philosophically formulated and indirectly grounded unity of the experience of the self and of God is also an implication of the fundamental Christian statement on the unity of the love of neighbor and of God.

Neither an intellectualist nor an individualist, Rahner was also not primarily a theoretical thinker. That brings us to our fourth question.

4. What was the role of practice in Rahner's thought? In his early meditations *Encounters With Silence* (1938), he spoke of the true wisdom of experienced love. Rahner's work under Karl Rudolph at the Pastoral Institute in Vienna during the war years had a lasting influence on his thought. And his practical bent became most obvious in the five-volume *Handbook of Pastoral Theology*, for which he served as co-editor (and frequent contributor) from 1964 to 1972. In an interview for his 70th birthday he said, "Behind everything I did stood a very immediate, pastoral and spiritual interest." Church teaching, he thought, should be subordinated to church praxis, and theology should be conceived not primarily as a theoretical but rather as a practical discipline.

Why? Most fundamentally because Rahner believed that in our shared and fallible freedom we are called to participate in the justice and generosity of God's own freedom. From the very beginning, he understood Christian faith not simply as knowledge about God, but as trust in the saving grace of God. Revelation is not information about God but is God's own self-disclosure to us. Jesus is not a messenger with unexpected news but a mediator of all-encompassing, divine grace. The Spirit is not a universal instinct

but a transforming power. And the church is not meant to be a self-sufficient institution but a sacrament, an effective sign of salvation for all of us poor, wayward human beings.

Rahner held that our knowledge is truest in action, not in prior speculation. “Theology is directed toward living out hope and love, in which there is a moment of knowledge which is not possible without them,” he wrote. “Orthodoxy [thinking rightly] and orthopraxis [acting rightly] mutually condition each other in a primordial nameless unity, which is known, if at all, only through praxis [emphasis added]. And this is because all [religious] knowledge is valid only in saving action, when it has fulfilled itself in love and thus remains as theory.”

In suggesting each of these four questions on the place of knowledge, love, community and practice in Rahner’s thought, I have emphasized the dynamic interaction of the elements involved, a mutual conditioning that charges life and history forward, even when it falters. That brings us to the last question.

5. What might have most originally inspired this sense of dialectic, of interaction that promises or at least offers progress?

From Klaus Fischer’s groundbreaking study of Rahner’s anthropology through fine studies by Harvey Egan, S.J., and Philip Endean, S.J., the spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola and his Spiritual Exercises have been suggested as the deepest source of Rahner’s worldview. He himself said as much, implying it most memorably in the essay that he often called his last will and testament, “St. Ignatius Speaks to a Jesuit of Today” (1978). Less noted, however, is that the Exercises are a school of freedom—freedom from the false self that imprisons us and freedom for the call of Christ to serve beneath the banner of his cross—and a freedom that undergoes transformation.

The journey of the “Four Weeks” of the Exercises does not unfold all on the same terrain. It moves from a recognition of graced life and repentance for how we distort it toward a readiness to hear the call of Christ, which leads then to assimilation to his way of life, humbled wonder at the depth of suffering love shown in his self-emptying death, and then to rejoicing with his Easter joy and hoping in his Spirit. Each moment in the journey raises a question whose answer carries us to the next stage and a new

question (“To what is Christ calling me?”), which then carries us toward another answer and another question (“What will it cost?”) and further still to a prayer that wagers all we are can be surrendered into the immense and infinite love of God (the “Contemplation for Attaining God’s Way of Loving”). The hope of the Fourth Week is present as goal in the meditations of the First Week, but only passage through each of the “weeks,” or stages, can allow that real hope to be born. The prayer of the Exercises, then, might best be described as dialectical. And so too at its root is Karl Rahner’s theology.

But see for yourselves: take and read, and pray, certainly. Above all, hope to find nourishment for life. Having a few good questions to ask at the beginning may help you to understand what your faith calls you to do. Good questions bring light for understanding. I remember Karl Rahner, on entering the church in Schwaz, going first to a statue of the Virgin and lighting a candle there. When I started to do the same, he held me back. “No, one light is enough.”

“Indeed it is,” I thought, “if it is yours.”

Leo J. ODonovan remembers Karl Rahner on our podcast.

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UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER AND LOVE

How Spirituality Illuminates the Theology of Karl Rahner

Ingvild Røsok

IN PHILIPPIANS A BEAUTIFUL HYMN describes the descent of Jesus Christ, saying that he,

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness (Philippians 2:6–7).

The words ‘emptied himself’ refer to the term *kenosis*, from the Greek verb κενωω. Jesus demonstrated throughout his life a humble and obedient attitude, which led him all the way to the cross. This attitude, based on love, can properly be called *kenotic*. In the introductory words of the hymn St Paul encourages the readers to attain the same attitude as Christ (Philippians 2:5). We should ‘empty ourselves’ as Christ did: an ongoing act with many connotations and implications. As with the self-giving act of Christ, human *kenosis* is obviously connected with unconditional love.

I would like to explore this connection as it is found in the thought and spirituality of Karl Rahner (1904–1984), one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. His immense and varied writings often demonstrate that reflective theology is dependent on spirituality and on lived experience. In this article I emphasize the importance of this relationship for understanding human *kenosis* and love.¹ While Rahner rarely speaks directly about *kenosis* as an attitude, there is still

¹ This article is based on my thesis research: see Ingvild Røsok: ‘Surrender to Life—A Systematic Theological Analysis of Human Kenosis in Karl Rahner’s Thoughts, with Reference to Ignatian Spirituality’, Norwegian School of Theology, 2010.

quite a lot about the issue in his work. Leo O'Donovan asserts *kenosis* to be a paradigm in Rahner's writings:

The paradigm, though I do not recall a text where Rahner explicitly notes this, is the *kenosis* (self-emptying) of Christ as described by St Paul in the hymn of Philippians 2:5–11. To intimate the dynamics of this experience of self-domination, Rahner strained language to its limits, ringing changes on a range of words at once ordinary and poetic. He spoke of our giving ourselves to God, of surrendering ourselves, of giving or risking ourselves away, of denying ourselves, of no longer really disposing of ourselves, of letting oneself go, of no longer belonging to oneself.²

In order to understand the connection of *kenosis* to love, we have to start with a brief look at some foundational ideas in Karl Rahner's thought.

Starting with the Human

One characteristic feature of the work of Karl Rahner is to take the human being as a starting point for theology. His *transcendental* approach implies an investigation of the human being's conditions of having knowledge of God. Based on this, he claims a transcendent openness reaching beyond itself.³ According to Rahner the human being is constituted to receive the word of God, to receive God's self-communication. The fact that the human being always asks questions about origin and meaning is for Rahner a sign of transcendent openness to the mystery we name God. Furthermore, while grasping our finiteness, we become aware of and search for the infinite and absolute being that might encompass our finite being. This basic, transcendental experience implies openness towards God as the ground of our being. It is often 'unthematic': existing prior to our concrete experience. It is

² Leo J. O'Donovan, 'On Reading Rahner in a New Century', in *Finding God in All Things*, edited by Mark Bosco and David Stagaman (New York: Fordham, 2004), 141. German terms in parentheses omitted. In this part of his essay, Father O'Donovan treats the influence of Ignatian spirituality on Rahner.

³ Karl Rahner's use of the term 'transcendental' is very varied: in many ways he builds on the Kantian tradition, referring to an investigation of the subject's constitution, of what comes before the knowing. But he also often uses the term by drawing on the roots of the word *transcend*, which means to go beyond oneself and one's own knowledge. Thus he can speak of 'transcendental revelation' and 'transcendental experience'. For more on this, see Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner—Theology and Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 32–37.

important to keep in mind this transcendental mode of being in the world when investigating further the aspects of *kenosis* and love. The conditions for a human *kenosis* lie in this constitution of human nature and in the dynamic interplay between its necessary openness toward God and the free offer of God's self-communication.

The Universality of Surrender

Owing to the approach described above, Karl Rahner claims universality for the human being's relationship to God. Based on the belief that humanity is originally *one*,⁴ he asserts that self-transcendence towards the immediacy of God had to take place in at least one person to have universal significance—which happened when the absolute immediacy of God was actualised through Jesus Christ: '... the Incarnation itself is already an intrinsic moment and a *condition for the universal bestowal of grace* to spiritual creatures'.⁵ Although every person has the freedom to accept or reject this grace, Rahner seems to think that acceptance is almost universal, whether explicit or not.

According to Rahner it is only by a total surrendering to God that one really 'returns to self', which is another term for subjectivity:

... such radical self-discovery of the subject is possible in the unconditional surrender to the mystery which we call God—a surrender which comprehends the whole of existence.⁶

In abandoning itself to the mystery, the human being is actually returning to itself, realising the self:

It is its very *meaning*, and not just an accidental side activity which it could also do without, to be given away and to be handed over, to be that being who realizes himself and *finds himself by losing himself* once and for all in the incomprehensible.⁷

The words 'finds himself by losing himself' echo those of Jesus talking about the cost of following him (see Mark 8:35). Rahner sees this

⁴ See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 181–183.

⁵ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 199, emphasis added.

⁶ Karl Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', *Theological Investigations*, electronic edition (Limerick: Mary Immaculate College, 2005), volume 17, 98.

⁷ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 217, emphasis added.

abandonment not only as the meaning, but also as the real essence of human being's nature. This was demonstrated in the *kenosis* of Christ:

The Incarnation of God is the unique and *highest* instance of the actualization of the essence of human reality, which consists in this: that man is in so far as he abandons himself to the absolute mystery whom we call God.⁸

In other words: *to be is to abandon oneself*. If it is the real essence of human being to abandon oneself, then *kenosis* is to be seen as a fulfilment of human nature. The implied universality of these statements provides a first perspective on human *kenosis*: the human being is constituted to abandon itself to the mystery called God. This kind of abandonment is nevertheless not always a *conscious* relationship with God.

Rahner's universalistic view of the human relationship with God has met with considerable objections. Hans Urs von Balthasar criticizes Rahner for what he regards as an excessively anthropologically orientated theology, in which faith seems to be watered down 'to a bland and shallow humanism'. Balthasar thinks that the theology of God's self-communication as universal makes Christ's cross superfluous. He is sceptical about 'modern' theology, such as Rahner's, which he finds too bland to be able to provide a motivation for a radical following of Christ, also including readiness for suffering.⁹ This critique might gain assent if we limited Rahner to the single perspective of transcendentalism. But I will argue that Rahner's theology should not be separated from his spirituality. Then we will find that, in encounter with Jesus Christ, human *kenosis* becomes radical and challenging.

**Rahner's
theology
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Three Ignatian Keys to Kenosis: A Radical Surrender

The *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola consists of a series of meditations, organized into four Weeks. Ignatius introduces the theme of surrender in his description of the purpose of the Exercises, which is

⁸ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 218.

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 126. See also Declan Marmion, 'Karl Rahner and His Critics: Revisiting the Dialogue', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 68 (2003), 195–212.

‘the overcoming of self and the ordering of one’s life on the basis of a decision made in freedom from any ill-ordered attachment’ (Exx 21). My intention here is not to present or discuss the *Spiritual Exercises* themselves, but rather to show how Karl Rahner’s spirituality gives another and radical perspective on surrender, working from talks given by him at Ignatian retreats.¹⁰ I have highlighted three exercises to exemplify radical surrender—three Ignatian keys to *kenosis*.

Indifference

The first key to *kenosis* is taken from the very beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In the First Principle and Foundation the term ‘indifference’ is introduced: we ‘need to make ourselves indifferent to all created things ...’ in order to move ‘toward the end for which we are created’—which is to ‘praise, reverence and serve God Our Lord’ (Exx 23). Rahner is clear about the challenge of indifference. It has to be practised as a process, to be appropriated and integrated into all parts of one’s life. It demands an existential distance from things that enables the person to be freed from prejudice and to act accordingly. But because we actually love these ‘things’ we can never arrive at a perfect distance from them or from the world. Therefore we have to rely on God. ‘This active indifference is surrounded and protected by man’s humble *handing over of himself* to God’s good pleasure’, Rahner says.¹¹ To hand oneself over is the kenotic act that we are called to in the exercise of ‘The First Principle and Foundation’, and in any event throughout our lives, in order to undertake decisions according to the will of God.

Readiness

The second key to *kenosis* I find in the Call of the King. By meditating on Jesus as a king who needs help to conquer the world, one’s readiness for possible suffering is tested. The attitude of the follower is tested before any decisions regarding the concrete way of following are taken. Ignatius indicates the ‘*direction* my choice should follow, since he speaks of insults, injuries, poverty, and so forth’,¹² but only provided that Jesus is actually calling in this direction, because the issue is, right to the

¹⁰ See Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, translated by Kenneth Baker (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

¹¹ Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 24, emphasis added.

¹² Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 134.



Karl Rahner

possible suffering and even death. This clearly shows that Rahner understands *kenosis* as a radical surrender and not only as an unthematic, transcendental abandonment to the mystery.

Love

My third chosen exercise is the Contemplation to Attain Love, the very last exercise in the whole process (Exx 230–237). It demonstrates how closely *kenosis* is connected to love. The goal of this exercise is, for Rahner, the goal of the entire retreat. The love searched for is ‘the love of *surrender* to God and Christ’,¹⁴ and should be attained by contemplating things in the world as coming from God. But finding God in a seemingly cruel world depends on *meeting* God:

Finding God in all things and experiencing the transparence of things toward God is accomplished only by the person who meets

¹³ Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 134, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 271, emphasis added.

end, to search for the will of God. Keeping indifference in mind—one should not have any preferences, whether for injuries or health, friendship or insult—the question at stake here is rather *readiness*. At this crucial and decisive point in the Exercises it is, according to Rahner, ‘the readiness for the *kenosis* of the Lord Jesus Christ’ that should be revealed.¹³ It is notable that Rahner here uses the word *kenosis* to express the radical following of Jesus Christ. To be ready for this *kenosis* means to be prepared to go wherever God wants you to go, taking the risk of

this God at that point where he descended into utter darkness and abandonment: on the cross of Jesus Christ!¹⁵

Rahner here connects the Ignatian principle of ‘finding God in all things’ with the descent of God into the world, the events of the incarnation and the cross. The love that is asked for in this contemplation can only be attained by accepting the truth of Christ, surrendering to him by sharing his mission. For Rahner this is not a contradiction but an actualisation of the transcendental approach of *kenosis*. We will now see how this twofold view of *kenosis* is reflected in and related to his thoughts on love.

The Transcendental Constitution of Love

Love of neighbour is often seen as being secondary to or a mere consequence of the love of God. This could, according to Rahner, wrongly lead to an understanding of charity as something that loses itself in the depths of the love of God. It is important to see that each of these two aspects of love ‘does not exist and cannot be understood or exercised without the other, and that two names have really to be given to the same reality if we are to summon up its one mystery’.¹⁶ In the effort to grasp this mystery, Rahner explores the nature of love. In the essay ‘Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God’ he unfolds this in rather technical terms, according to the transcendental constitution of the human being. I shall summarise and simplify his argument with the help of another essay, ‘Who are Your Brother and Sister?’¹⁷

Corresponding to the transcendental constitution of the subject, Rahner speaks of a transcendental constitution of love. While the structure of the subject enables it to classify and comprehend objects, it is simultaneously dependent on those objects. Without the encounter with *the other* no transcendental experience will come to be. Love is grounded in this encounter with the other, and is as such ‘the all-embracing act of man which gives meaning, direction and measure to

¹⁵ Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 271–272.

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, ‘Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God’, *Theological Investigations*, volume 6, 232.

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, ‘Who Are Your Brother and Sister?’, in *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

everything else'.¹⁸ The love of the other is thus to be seen as the fulfilment of the transcendental nature of humanity.

On the other hand, this loving act could never take place without God's grace. The transcendental structure of the human being and its openness towards the other is brought about by God's self-communication. Thus, the movement towards the neighbour is simultaneously a movement towards God, thematically or not:

There is no love for God that is not, in itself, already a love for neighbor; and a love for God only comes to its own identity through its fulfillment in a love for neighbor. Only one who loves his or her neighbor can know who God actually is. And only one who ultimately loves God (whether he or she is reflexively aware of this or not is another matter) can manage unconditionally to abandon himself or herself to another person, and not make that person the means of his or her own self-assertion.¹⁹

Since the mutuality of the love of neighbour and the love of God is grounded in the constitution of the subject, it has an *ontological necessity* which makes it universal. This is in accordance with the universal aspect of *kenosis* mentioned above. Even the explicit act of loving God is borne by the love that takes place in the encounter with *the other*.²⁰ This is so because 'the *original* experience of God ... is always given in a "worldly" experience. This, however, is only present originally and totally in the communication with a "Thou".'²¹ There is, nevertheless, always the freedom of rejecting or accepting God's self-communication, which is expressed in the encounter with the other respectively as hatred or love of neighbour.

Owing to this universality and the ontological connection between the concrete act of love of neighbour and the primary act of loving God, Karl Rahner has been accused of 'undermining the absolute priority in Christianity of the love of God for us by "identifying" love of

¹⁸ Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God', 241.

¹⁹ Rahner, 'Who Are Your Brother and Sister?', 71.

²⁰ '... even the explicit love of God is still borne by that opening in trusting love to the whole of reality which takes place in the love of neighbour. It is radically true, i.e. by an ontological and not merely "moral" or psychological necessity, that whoever does not love the brother whom he "sees", also cannot love God whom he does not see, and that one can love God whom one does not see only by loving one's visible brother lovingly.' (Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, volume 6, 247).

²¹ Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God', 246.

God with love of neighbour'.²² I see this as a misunderstanding of Karl Rahner's overall concern with God's gratuitous self-communication, and suggest emphasizing the kenotic perspective of love to see how Rahner's transcendental and spiritual aspects mutually enrich each other. I shall make my case by considering the love and dependence of Jesus Christ.

Love as Unconditional Self-Abandonment

In *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* we see how Karl Rahner regards love as an *act of kenosis* and how he connects the transcendental constitution of love with christology. In Jesus Christ the unity of love was fully realised. His self-surrender to God was concretely borne by his act of love towards the people for whose sake he willingly died. In our brief look at the *Spiritual Exercises* we saw how the radical challenge of following Jesus was dependent on a personal encounter, out of which a desire to follow him lovingly grows and ripens. Rahner describes the love for Jesus as something very real:

I think one can and must love Jesus, in all immediacy and concretion, with a love that transcends space and time, in virtue of the nature of love in general and by the power of the Holy Spirit of God.²³

To love Jesus is like loving another human being, and we have already seen that the love for him implies a total surrender. It is about a willingness to share even in his destiny of death.

How, then, is this radical love related to our concrete love of neighbour? In one way Karl Rahner claims that there is a fundamental difference between the genuine love for Jesus and the love between two persons in general. By contrast with love in general, love for Jesus is a *definitive* love. However radical and unconditional human love might *like* to be, it is marked by a reservation and a threat. It could scarcely be otherwise, Rahner says:

... if such earthly love, out of the will to unconditionality and definitiveness, were to seek to deny this inner sense of threat,

²² Marmion, 'Karl Rahner and His Critics', 196. Marmion refers to Hans Urs von Balthasar, but without providing the specific source.

²³ Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 23.

it would be basically denying its own nature. It would be inauthentic.²⁴

The wish to love unconditionally meets its limit because surrendering totally to another person implies the absurd risk of following that person even to hell. The only person who can really be loved unconditionally is the one who possesses the divine characteristics found in Jesus Christ. In him, we have ‘the only one who can be loved with absolute security and reliability ... who possesses the purity and unconditionality and who is totally accepted and united with God’.²⁵ Hence, a love for Jesus cannot be compared to the absurdity of the willingness to surrender as far as damnation.

Nevertheless, if the love of neighbour is to be seen as being in unity with the love of Jesus, then the absurdity of loving surrender to a human person has to be questioned. According to the Gospel of St John, Jesus’ command is to love each other as he did and to ‘lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (John 15:12–13). In so far as the kenotic act of Jesus is sufficient for the universal bestowal of grace, is it not possible that interhuman love might be definitive—at least to the extent that the person who is to be loved is united to God?

Karl Rahner gives a rather brief reflection on this by asserting that Jesus can be loved *anonymously*. On the one hand, he confirms that it is only with and through Jesus that we have the absolute affirmation of God’s irreversible love for the world. If then, one loves a human being as someone in radical union with God, either reservation prevails *or* the love will be absolute, but existing under the condition that God has ‘embraced and assumed this loved person in the absolute affirmation he has bestowed upon Jesus (and upon him alone)’.²⁶ The problem remains that in this life one can never be certain of this affirmation. On the other hand, such unconditional human love can still be experienced. Rahner says:

Where love can really abandon all reservations, definitively and with absolute assurance, where love can really live out to the last

²⁴ Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 40.

²⁵ ‘... [This] unconditionality [of love] must precisely include a reservation, since no one is permitted to dare to wish to go to hell with another. Such a wish would destroy the basis of this love—destroy its very roots.’ (Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 42.)

²⁶ Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 43.

its most proper, most original nature as unconditional self-giving and surrender to the other, there Jesus is 'co-loved' as the Ground of this love—even where the blessed Name is as yet altogether unknown to the one who loves.²⁷

In spite of a certain ambiguity in Rahner at this point, the passage could be suggesting that loving one's neighbour is no longer constricted or conditioned since Jesus Christ is the Ground of definitive love, even when this is not known to the one who loves. Without God's irreversible love and Jesus' *kenosis* it would be meaningless and absurd to abandon oneself to another person. This would put a different perspective on the unity of loving God—or Jesus—and loving your neighbour: by loving someone unconditionally, you are actually embraced by the love of Jesus. A reading like this corresponds to the parable of Jesus in Matthew 25 that concludes: 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40).

This interpretation leaves us with the question of the risk that Rahner speaks of. If the act of unconditional love of a human being utterly rests on God's affirmation of Jesus Christ, even without this being known, what then is the risk of love? Of course there will always be emotional risk but, as I understand ontological christology, we are destined to love our neighbour unconditionally. By establishing 'anonymous love' Rahner does, in my opinion, evade the risky element of love, establishing a christological basis for unconditional love of the neighbour. Jesus Christ has brought God's irreversible love to the world; he is the one who is to be loved and followed radically. The 'risk' that remains is the feeling of losing control when giving oneself over to the unknown mystery, while the whole act of love is borne by grace, marked by a promise of everlasting life.

In exploring some specific aspects of Karl Rahner's spirituality I have shown here that a twofold approach to *kenosis* and love provides a deep conviction of the total, comprehensive love of God for all people. By defining love as transcendental, Karl Rahner shows how love and grace are intertwined, since God thus enables us to love. This love is a love of surrender both to God and to our neighbour. While there are numerous reasons for people in the world not to relate

²⁷ Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 44.

consciously to the Christian God, every person who really encounters God in Christ is met by the challenge of a radical surrender to the cross. That is the only way to the real self—the Surrender to Life.

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