

ORTHOPRAXIS AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD IN KARL RAHNER

On being asked to present this paper on the contribution of Karl Rahner's theological method to the theme of our convention, I immediately recalled Rahner's frequently expressed reserve on the subject. Once, for example, when at a friend's request I brought him a copy of her fine study on his theological method, he asked with a smiling frown whether indeed he *had* one. Nothing can, or should, stop doctoral students from probing the unexplored depths of major authors. Just as little, however, can we expect those authors either to wish or even to be able to say all that is on their minds. They always mean more than they can say, and work more carefully than they care to admit, which is the blessing of those who are later to read them or, depending on one's point of view, the curse of those who are to dissertate on them. Such a surplus of meaning and method is surely to be found in the vast corpus of Karl Rahner's writing, editing, lecturing and preaching. I hope these reflections may clarify what he says both directly and indirectly about the method of theology, particularly as it bears on the relation between Christian practice and Christian teaching.¹ And I am particularly happy to present them in conjunction with Matthew Lamb's discussion of Bernard Lonergan's importance for the theme. Having been students together at Münster, we have enjoyed many a conversation about these two authors who share a common year of birth and so much that is complementary in their contributions to the topic at hand.

My own piece has been written in four parts or movements, if you will. They might appropriately be marked *allegro transcendente*, *andante antropologico*, *scherzo spirituale*, and *tema e variazioni*. Each of the first three parts takes for its motif what I consider to be a prevalent misinterpretation of Rahner's method, together with correlative criticism of his work. The concluding part resumes the earlier three with more explicit attention to the relationship between faith's intelligence and its conduct. Thus the first section asks whether Rahner is not misinterpreted when he is viewed as pursuing a purely transcendental method. The second inquires whether his anthropological program is as restricted as it is often claimed to be. The third questions whether the foundations of his theology are primarily of a philosophical character. In trying to answer these questions, or at least to present a less one-sided reply to them, I wish to shed some light on the inner dynamic and development of Rahner's thought and thereby on its continuing relevance for the critical issues of Christian life and witness. I hope it may also appear how each of these misinterpretations sees Rahner giving a primacy to theory which would indeed minimize his significance for our

¹ Karl Neumann's *Der Praxisbezug der Theologie bei Karl Rahner* (Freiburg: Herder), promised for early 1980, was not yet available when I wrote this paper.

discussion of Christian orthopraxis in relation to orthodox teaching. The last part of the piece, then, seeks a final statement of the theme for which the earlier sections are so many variations. Throughout, I suppose it should be said, I am following a constructive method for interpreting Rahner as a theologian such as he himself has recommended in his approach to Aquinas as a philosopher. "We can never arrive at the true philosophical content of what is being taught," he wrote, "merely by assembling and summarizing the relevant statements. The only way of doing this is creatively to reconstruct the original line of reasoning of the philosopher himself."²

A TWOFOLD METHOD

The most common way to describe Karl Rahner's theological method, I think, is to call it "transcendental." Noting his schooling in Kant and German idealism, especially through private reading in Maréchal,³ commentators generally identify Rahner as a transcendental Thomist.⁴ His indebtedness to the tradition of Aquinas is thus coupled with his emphasis on "the anthropological turn" which focuses not on cosmic order but on subjective experience and which asks, with regard to any object or type of human knowledge, what conditions make such knowledge possible in the knowing subject. Sometimes this view of Rahner's work speaks in terms of its transcendental "starting point." At other times he is simply regarded, more generally still, as a transcendental theologian of existentialist inclination.

Accompanying this interpretation is a corresponding critique. While most readers will agree with Rahner's view, today a common one, that no field of knowledge develops without presuppositions, many of these same readers nevertheless take him to task for being unaware of the ideological elements in the theological material to which he applies his transcendental analysis. His approach is said to yield an appreciation not so much of contingent history as of generalized historicity. As a result, the argument goes, the method is insensitive to social problems and ineffectual in the realms of policy or social change.⁵ But the question today, it is urged, is not so much how we can know God but rather how our self-serving images of God can be shattered and replaced by images that call for a more just society.⁶

² *Theological Investigations* Vol. 13, p. 15.; cf. Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, translated by William Dych, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), pp. xlixff. Hereafter, *T.I.* will be used as abbreviation for *Theological Investigations*, Vols. 1-14, 16 (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1961-79; New York: Seabury, 1974-79); *S.* will be used as abbreviation for *Schriften zur Theologie*, 1-14 (Zurich: Benziger, 1959-80).

³ Cf. Herbert Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner: His Life, Thought and Works* (Glen Rock, N. J.: Paulist Deuss Books, 1966), p. 19; Francis P. Fiorenza, "Introduction," in *Spirit in the World*, pp. xxif.

⁴ In addition to standard works such as Coreth and Muck, see Rahner's own article, "Transcendental Theology," *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. 6 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 287-89.

⁵ Cf. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), especially pp. 60-70, 154-68.

⁶ Cf. Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1974), pp. 3-19.

Yet this common approach, I think it must be said, one-sidedly disregards Rahner's own intention and recommendation. Repeatedly in the course of his writing he has emphasized that in order to treat a theological question adequately one must approach it from both a transcendental and an historical perspective. In brief, and summarizing a position which of course shows a certain development, I would argue that he employs a twofold method whose moments are dialectically related. In 1952, for example, outlining his view on human dignity and freedom, he expressly said that for a genuine knowledge of human nature, including a concrete knowledge of the possibilities which human nature freely realizes, we "must rely . . . on a twofold method: on a transcendental method . . . [and] the reflection on the historical experience humanity has of itself."⁷ Eight years later, in a famous essay on nature and grace, Rahner emphasized that metaphysical reflection on the actual nature of humanity can be complete only "when human experience is viewed in the light of the whole history of humanity, where alone its development is fully realized."⁸ In 1969 at Montreal, in three lectures that constitute his most extended methodological reflections to date, he made it perfectly clear that he considered transcendental theology as a method to be only part of theology and that, as a result of the historical reflection which is essential to theology, it has a scientific character prior to any explicit transcendental analysis.⁹ Again, four years ago in the introduction to the Christological phase of his *Grundkurs*, he said as explicitly as possible:

When we say that at least today an a priori doctrine of the God-Man must be developed in a transcendental theology, this does not mean of course that such an a priori doctrine could be developed temporally and historically prior to the actual encounter with the God-Man. We always reflect upon the conditions of possibility for a reality which we have already encountered.¹⁰

Thus, in his approach to method, anthropology, grace and Christology, Rahner has repeatedly argued for the reciprocal interdependence of transcendental and historical reflection in theology. The interdependence of the methodological moments is correlative to the interdepen-

⁷*T. I.*, Vol. 2, 237, ET emended. Here, and in several other places which will be noted, the published ET has been emended, sometimes to transpose it to inclusive language, more often to correct mistranslations.

⁸*T. I.* Vol. 4, 182f. The immediate argument of the text bears chiefly on the graced character of the present order in which, for Rahner, "our actual nature is *never* 'pure' nature" (*ibid.*, p. 183).

⁹*T. I.*, Vol. 11, "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," 68-114; see especially pp. 84, 90ff., 99, 110. Speaking a year later at the International Lonergan Congress, Bernard Lonergan emphasized that his own conception of functional specialties relates them not chronologically but by presupposition and complementarity; cf. "Bernard Lonergan Responds," in Philip McShane, ed., *Foundations of Theology* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), pp. 223-34, at p. 229; more completely: *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), chap. 5.

¹⁰*Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated by William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), p. 177; henceforth abbreviated as *Foundations*. For comment on the German and English titles of this book, see my review article in *RSR* 5 (1979), 193-98.

dence of the essential and historical dimensions of the theological reality, for the human world God calls to share in God's life can only achieve that genuine fulfillment by living through its own time towards God's absolute future. Put theologically, Rahner's work may be understood as an effort to recognize God in time; philosophically, this implies an effort to understand the essence of created reality as intrinsically historical. The essence of the finite is temporal, symbolizing the communicable reality of a God who is eternal. But this means that theology does not first clarify the conditions of possibility for the saving reality about which it then discovers it can speak. Just as little does it mean that a raw (or wholly unreflective) experience of salvation comes chronologically first, only subsequently to be appreciated as something interiorly related to the subjects of grace.¹¹ Rather, the one history of the world called and moving towards God is structured always in terms of possibilities of fulfillment in God which are being either realized or lost in the concrete historical events without which there is neither possibility nor actuality for the world. It is through our history that we are open to transformation in God, and Rahner's theology accordingly recommends explicitly and itself intends to maintain a twofold perspective on the structures of our openness which realize themselves through the contingencies of time.¹²

Rahner is well aware that transcendental reflection "is always in danger of interpreting the a priori element as what alone is important, in danger of not suffering and enacting history but instead seeking to approach it theoretically or aesthetically and so to neutralize its effects."¹³ It must therefore recognize its own limitations and in fact limit itself through its attention to the saving details of time. "But this self-restriction of the transcendental self-understanding of humanity is also (in principle and especially in the present situation of philosophy and theology) a task of fundamental *theology*."¹⁴ Fundamental theology must thus present the possibility, as dogmatic theology presents the actuality, of God's saving word entering our history and being accepted there as salvation. Theology, and still more deeply faith itself, "should always speak what is the historically concrete in its underivability and precisely while doing that make intelligible that this concreteness of history can really concern human beings in their ultimate existence and subjectivity."¹⁵ To read real meaning in the concrete is surely a lesson

¹¹How are we to understand, for example, the response of the disciples to the call of Jesus? Did it come to them wholly from without, or did it not rather meet, while indeed transforming, their innermost longings for the just one of Israel? Rahner's Christology has long been accustomed to address this question and to encourage Christians in their efforts to follow in the footsteps of the disciples—an approach, it seems to me, that is in substantial accord with the method of Edward Schillebeeckx's *Jesus*. For Rahner's most recent discussion of his "searching Christology," see *T. I.*, Vol. 16, 220ff., and *A New Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), pp. 3ff.

¹²*T. I.*, Vol. 11, "Theological Observations on the Concept of Time," 288-308; *T. I.*, Vol. 9, "Self-realisation and Taking Up One's Cross," 253-57.

¹³*T. I.*, Vol. 11, 89, ET emended.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 99, ET emended.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 100, ET emended.

Rahner has learned from Aquinas, but just as surely has he learned from modernity that meaning can become real only through the history of the particular.

Finally, it seems to me that this dialectical union of transcendental and historical perspectives is nowhere more clearly and centrally urged than in Rahner's doctrine of the Trinity. As is well known, his axiomatic thesis is that the economic Trinity is identical with the immanent Trinity, and vice versa. Through a cumulative effort of the Christian community to understand how God's saving presence is revealed in an irreducibly threefold manner, the argument maintains, we have come to a conception of God, Word and Spirit which summarizes and interprets an actual history always in search of deeper self-understanding and self-commitment. In developing his conception of the immanent Trinity from the historical experience of the economic Trinity, in fact, Rahner has explicitly noted that he is pursuing a middle way "between a priori deduction and a merely a posteriori gathering of random facts."¹⁶

To be sure, while pursuing this middle way or twofold method, Rahner has undoubtedly concentrated his efforts on the transcendental moment. This may be explained in terms of his own intellectual preferences, but I think a deeper reason is to be found in the need to overcome the excessive objectivism and extrinsicism that was endemic to the neo-scholastic revival despite all its scholarly attainments. Throughout his career, and with remarkable continuity, Rahner has argued for the essentially interpretative character of human life, for the constant and ever present interaction of experience and reflection, for the mutual conditioning, as I am arguing, of history and transcendence. While espousing a twofold method, he has felt the greatest urgency in the appropriation of the hermeneutic character of modern subjectivity. Edward Schillebeeckx, you will recall, discussed this issue in the first section of his opening address to us at this convention. To my mind, we are all in Karl Rahner's debt for his insistence that we cannot return to Christian historical experience—probably the great imperative for twentieth-century theology—unless we have an interpretative sense with which to read history. For there are no facts, whether of oppression or of liberation, without the commitment which interprets them.¹⁷

Nevertheless, one should not overlook the implicit historical moment that has characterized Rahner's theology over the years. There are directly historical studies which will not be forgotten, especially those on penance. But whether arguing for the charismatic character of the Church or for the development of a concrete existential ethic, for a more experientially integrated view of the sacraments or for the possibility of Christianity's dialogue with other religious traditions, he has shown his sense of history primarily in the choice of the topics he has treated, as well as in his active collaboration in decisive church events. Everyone will acknowledge his role at Vatican II, even if not everyone will con-

¹⁶ *The Trinity*, translated by Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 100, n. 18.

¹⁷ Cf. Leo J. O'Donovan, ed., *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), Preface.

tinue to draw on its substance so courageously and with such prophetic vision for the Church's future.¹⁸ But we should not underestimate his work with Msgr. Karl Rudolf in Vienna during World War II nor, during the last decade, his decidedly critical participation in the International Theological Commission and the German Pastoral Synod. If such collaboration is to be distinguished from historical reflection in the ordinary sense of the term, it surely deserves to be called historic in a number of other senses.

Finally, I would certainly admit the need for an explicit development of the historical moment in Rahner's method. It seems clearly required for the programs of political theology in Europe, liberation theology in South America, and public theology in the United States. Rahner himself has recognized increasingly the institutional dimension of truth and the extent to which it can be measured by its social effectiveness.¹⁹ "Theology is only of interest," he has said, "when it is reflection—in a critical way, of course—on the faith of a church which freely acts on the basis of its faith."²⁰ We must continue to explore, however, both the roots and the implications of such a development, and here we can legitimately take our cue from Rahner himself. For contemporary culture, he has suggested, probably does not reach an understanding of itself through language and conscious reflection alone—as so many theologians, and especially dogmatic theologians, have been accustomed to think. As theologians, we must ask whether there are not equally original sources for human self-understanding "which consist on the one hand in images and on the other in the concrete action of practical reason, sources which cannot be adequately mediated by the insights of theoretical reason."²¹ The second of these sources suggests the pragmatic dimension of truth. If we examine it further, I think we may hope for both a more accurate discernment of our human historicity and also a more compelling assessment of its distortions. I shall return to the point in the final section of this paper.

AN OPEN HUMANITY

For the moment, however, let us reflect on the other source of self-understanding to which Rahner points, namely, the imagination. This may also serve as a transition to discussing a second misconception of Rahnerian method which holds that it is anthropological in an exclusive sense. Here again one may speak either of Rahner's method or of his starting point as anthropological. Whichever one emphasizes, it is clear that he has consistently sought to root the grace of God in the soil of human experience, recalling again and again that unless we appreciate the scope of the human we cannot appreciate how God's own life may be its innermost origin and ultimate goal. In *Hearers of the Word* Rahner

¹⁸Cf. *S.*, Vol. 14, "Theologische Grundinterpretation des II Vatikanischen Konzils," 287-302; *Ibid.*, "Die bleibende Bedeutung des II Vatikanischen Konzils," 303-18. The first of these essays has been translated in *TS* 40 (1979), 716-27.

¹⁹Cf. *T. I.*, Vol. 11, 80.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 81, ET emended.

²¹*Ibid.*, 74, ET emended.

approached his point by showing the equivalence of general ontology and metaphysical anthropology. In early reflections on the renewal of dogmatic theology he began to make his anthropological program explicit.²² Anthropology was conceived as deficient Christology and Christology as self-transcending anthropology,²³ while eschatology was understood as a transposition of anthropology and Christology in terms of their fulfillment.²⁴ The broad outline of this program was perhaps most concisely stated in an essay from the middle sixties on "Theology and Anthropology."²⁵ In the late seventies it clearly informs the entire structure of the *Grundkurs*, whose first way to the mystery of God's presence is significantly entitled "The Hearer of the Message." But through all these years, with their various subtle developments, I would point to something many critics have neglected, that is, Rahner's abiding fidelity to the Thomistic axiom that all human knowledge depends on *conversio ad phantasma*,²⁶ a point which might be translated into contemporary terms by saying that all genuine knowledge of humanity in its historical experience pivots on the imagination and its symbols. Just as history has been essential to Rahner's method from its beginning, so too has been the image.

This is of special importance considering much of the criticism that has been directed against Rahner's anthropological perspective and its practical implications—or want of them. His earlier discussions of human activity focused often on the individual knower's relation to objects of knowledge, and many have read this as leading to an inescapable intellectualist individualism in his thought. It is said to show an excessive dependence on the rationalist individualism of modern society and to be insensitive to the social urgencies of an interdependent, post-industrial society. In addition, Rahner's reflective portrait of the human is frequently presented in broad strokes, with clear indebtedness to the German philosophical tradition. This is said to isolate his anthropology in an idealist realm and to prevent it from responding to the actual abasement of the human condition which is so pervasive in our presently anguished world. Again, Rahner's effort to show the affinity between his theological anthropology and an evolutionary world-view has led critics to think his evolutionist interpretation of world process incompatible with genuine political struggle in a none too assured historical journey—for which the eschatological perspective of the Bible would be much more appropriate. Like Teilhard de Chardin, it is said, Rahner has misplaced his confidence, relying too much on a view of nature which in any case is still theoretically unclear, concerned too

²²See the central position given to theological anthropology in "A Scheme for a Treatise of Dogmatic Theology," *T. I.*, Vol. 1, 24-37, and note that Rahner includes the moral life in it. Also, Rahner's article "Anthropologie, theologische," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Vol. I, 618-27.

²³Cf. *T. I.*, Vol. 1, 164, n. 1.

²⁴*T. I.* Vol. 4, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," 323-46.

²⁵*T. I.*, Vol. 9, 28-45. From the same year: "Grundentwurf einer theologischen Anthropologie," *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* 11/1, 20-38.

²⁶Cf. *Spirit in the World*, esp. Part Two, Chap. Four, "Conversio ad phantasma"; also, Part Three, "The Possibility of Metaphysics on the Basis of the Imagination."

little with a view of history which in our time is more urgently needed than ever.²⁷ Each of these objections relates as well to a fourth, that Rahner's anthropology represses the conflict and negativity of life, all too apparent in ordinary experience and cast in deeper shadows still by the light of biblical revelation. Where in such a theology, it is asked, are the horrors of the Holocaust or of Hiroshima, of the Third World's poverty or of the First and Second World's power?

But once again I suggest that Rahner's critics have read him one-sidedly and unconstructively. They have not let his text truly live, in either its development or its imaginative power. For in fact his anthropology is inclusive rather than exclusive, containing the seeds for the very developments about which his critics have rightly been exercised. Rather than being individualistic, Rahner's thought has shown a steady development towards "a richer understanding of the world itself. It is now clearer than ever that the world is not merely the world of discreet [sic] *sensa* but is also the world of historicity, relativity, intersubjectivity, and personalism."²⁸ This emphasis on the social and historical aspects of human life qualify his anthropology as dialogic rather than individualist; it is inclusive at its root and not simply by application.²⁹ Similarly, Rahner's anthropological program has also been accompanied by an increasingly critical sense, whether with respect to human self-understanding, to the organization of secular society or to the Church itself. One can see this inclusion of the self-critical power of human intelligence clearly if one compares his first reflections on the mystery of God with his later recognition of the mystery of human life in God's image, or if one notices his increased attention to the future and to Christian participation in planning human society, or if one adverts to the development in his appreciation of the charismatic dimension of Christian living in *The Dynamic Element in the Church* and later in *The Shape of the Church to Come*. To me, the freer criticism in each case is a fruit of Rahner's theological anthropology and not a mere accretion to it.

To the objection that this anthropology is regrettably evolutionist, I would respond, on the one hand, that it uses the concept of evolution only in the generalized sense that one may also find in a liberation theologian such as Segundo³⁰ and, on the other hand, that theology cannot afford to concern itself so exclusively with political reality that it ignores developments in natural science.³¹ Rahner's argument for the

²⁷ Cf. J. B. Metz, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

²⁸ John C. Robertson, Jr., review article on *Foundations*, *RSR* 5 (1979), 190-94, at 191.

²⁹ Let me note just one emphatic text on this point: "Freedom is always the freedom of a subject who exists in interpersonal communication with other subjects. Therefore it is necessarily freedom vis-à-vis another subject of transcendence, and this transcendence is not primarily the condition of possibility for knowing *things*, but is the condition of possibility for a subject being present to himself and just as basically and originally being present to another *subject*. But for a subject who is present to himself to affirm freely vis-à-vis another subject means ultimately to love" (*Foundations*, p. 65).

³⁰ See his *Evolution and Guilt* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1974).

³¹ Cf. Leo J. O'Donovan, "Making Heaven and Earth: Catholic Theology's Search for a Unified View of History and Nature," to appear in Marquette University's *Festschrift* for Rahner, ed. by William J. Kelly, S.J.

affinity between the evolutionary world-view and Christian faith is prompted by a desire to think faith within the horizon of a natural environment which has been entirely reconceived, and temporalized, over the last century and a half. Without taking his model of reality in any exclusive way from natural science, he nevertheless recognizes that while humanity reaches towards the God of justice, it always retains its roots in the soil of this earth and its kinship with the animal kingdom.³² Both earth and animal are part of human history and its imagining, in whatever spiritual experience it undergoes. A new task is thus posed for theology's appreciation of divine immanence in nature, a point on which Edmund Dobbin's presentation on "Orthopraxis and Pneumatology" contributed some very helpful reflection. And in this sense, Rahner has proved to be a splendid materialist, like Aquinas before him, while also mining faith's genuinely eschatological hope for the resurrection of the body of this world, for the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.³³

If critics have found the acknowledgement of conflict too little present in this hope, they may have overlooked Rahner's repeated assertions that a biblical faith expects the tensions of world history to become more serious in time rather than less so. More centrally, however, I think we find the element of conflict concentrated above all in Rahner's theology of death. Here, both symbolically and axiologically, the central threat to human life is compressed in its most inescapable form: the possible annihilation of all dreams and possibilities, the frustration of every human hope and love. It may take imagination to see how Rahner's analysis of the active and passive moments in death can contribute to an account of human effort on behalf of life wherever it is imperilled and of human trust in the One who alone can guarantee that every perishing may be a seed of eternal life. But I think we are urged in this direction by Rahner—and again will return briefly to the point in the final section of this paper.

In any case, imagination is indeed required to see how a theological anthropology may be inclusively dialogical, critical, aware of its relation to the natural environment and realistic about the conflictual pattern of human history. We cannot simply think out the implications of our human situation or reflect on it in historical terms alone; we must also learn to imagine and re-imagine it. Rahner's theological epistemology calls us to this task as insistently as possible.³⁴ If he has not concretized his own recommendation as fully as one might wish, it is nevertheless an essential moment in his method. A critic like Hans Urs von Balthasar has argued that Rahner's approach implies an anthropological reduction

³²In addition to the many essays related in one way or another to the issue of an evolutionary world-view, there are two essays on theology and interdisciplinary study with other sciences, including natural science, in *S.* Vol. 10 and another in *S.* Vol. 14.

³³Cf. *T. I.*, Vol. 10, "The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of the 'New Earth,'" 260-72, and "Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World," 273-89.

³⁴For an instructive correlation between his way of thinking and imagining and William Lynch's, see William V. Dych, S.J., "Moving on to Fresh Horizons: The Discoveries of Karl Rahner and William Lynch," *Catholic Mind* 77 (September 1979), 8-19.

of the gospel; he himself urges the need for a theological aesthetic which would allow us to respond anew to the sheer grandeur and glory of God's presence.³⁵ But this criticism from the right disregards a dialectic in Rahner which allows his anthropology to move from the Ignatian desire to find God in all things towards the Pauline hope that all might be found in God (cf. 1 Cor 15:25; Phil 3:9a).³⁶ Both foci in this dialectic, it should be noted, have ineradicably symbolic moments. In the first, the realities of the world manifest the mystery of God which they symbolize, while, in the second, the mystery reveals itself directly to the world which has been, and in glory will forever remain, its full and genuine symbol.³⁷ Like Rahner's critics on the left, von Balthasar has minimized the importance of symbols and images in Rahner's anthropology. It seems clear to me that our author's own injunction is to pay them full heed indeed.

SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION

Thus far I have been arguing *against* a one-sidedly transcendental and anthropological interpretation of Rahner's method and *for* a double development that would further concretize the method along symbolic and socio-political lines.³⁸ In this connection let us recall that Vatican II begins in the Constitutions on the Liturgy and on the Church with a new attention to signs and symbols while it closes in the Pastoral Constitution and the Decree on Missionary Activity with a new statement of secular responsibility. The inner movement of the Council, it might be said, was from worship to the world and then again from the world to worship.³⁹ In Rahner, similarly, we have a dialectic of graced experience in time which moves from the recognition of the presence of holy mystery, through the discovery of true human community in graced freedom, towards a worship without words.⁴⁰

What is likely, then, to be the original inspiration of such a theology? Is it plausible that its foundations are in the first place of a philosophical character? This is certainly the impression given by several fine studies.⁴¹

³⁵ See Leo J. O'Donovan, "God's Glory in Time," *Communio: International Catholic Review* II (1975), 250-69.

³⁶ See *T. I.*, Vol. 3, 277-93; *T. I.*, Vol. 9, 127f; *Foundations*, 445f. Further examination of this same dialectic would constitute, I believe, a response to the view that Rahner is fundamentally a neo-orthodox theologian, as David Tracy suggests in *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

³⁷ Cf. James J. Buckley, "On Being a Symbol: An Appraisal of Karl Rahner," *T. S.* 40 (1979), 453-73.

³⁸ Cf. *RSR* 5 (1979), 198.

³⁹ Cf. *SC*, arts. 2, 8, 10; *LG*, arts. 48f.; *GS* arts. 39ff., 93; *AG*, art. 7.3.

⁴⁰ See, for example, *T. I.* Vol. 11, 112.

⁴¹ One clear example is Peter Eicher's excellent study *Die Anthropologische Wende: Karl Rahners philosophischer Weg vom Wesen des Menschen zur personalen Existenz* (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 1970). Anne Carr, *The Theological Method of Karl Rahner*, AAR Dissertation Series 19 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), and Klaus P. Fischer, *Der Mensch als Geheimnis: Die Anthropologie Karl Rahners* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) are well aware of Rahner's effort to philosophize *within* theology. (Fischer even begins his book by studying the spiritual origins of Rahner's thought.) My question is

Once again, however, I believe such a view unduly restricts both his intention and his practice. For a final corrective to current misinterpretations of Rahner's method, I shall accordingly suggest that it is not a theological method erected on a philosophical foundation but rather, from start to finish, a religiously inspired theology which has generated a philosophy within itself in order to foster its own further development.

If any text would belie my thesis, it is surely the philosophy of religion Rahner outlined in *Hearers of the Word*. Doesn't this text prepare for, rather than presuppose, a possible revelation from the Lord of the history in which, Rahner argues, we must look for a saving word if it is to be given? Isn't an effort clearly made here to pursue a purely rational analysis of the conditions of possibility for a genuine revelation from God's own self? And isn't the whole plan of the book really analogous to the late neo-scholastic apologetics which prepared its readers for recognizing a God who revealed his purposes through a divine legate who founded a church with its visible center in Rome?

Now it is surely defensible in many respects to interpret *Hearers of the Word* in this way. It certainly seems to have been the recent approach of even so astute a reader as Eberhard Jüngel.⁴² But I think it can be more plausibly argued that the lectures comprising this book were not written as an explanatory argument to ground the intellectual conviction that human beings are open to a possible revealing word from God in their history. Rather, an argument is developed from the lived conviction that God's word heard in history opens us to new clarity about the possibilities of our true natures. It is true that in 1937 Rahner had not yet proposed his thesis on the supernatural existential, but it is likewise true that he had at this point already written five articles for the *Zeitschrift für Ascese und Mystik* and three for the *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*. He had also published *Encounters with Silence*, had contributed substantially to the German edition of Marcel Viller's *La spiritualité des premiers siècles chrétiens* (Paris 1930), and had begun teaching theology at Innsbruck. Judging from the circumstances of his life, then, as well as from the thrust of the text itself, I would argue that *Hearers of the Word* does not prescind from faith in order to inquire into its foundations; instead it asks what understanding of reality (general ontology) and what correlative understanding of the human world (metaphysical anthropology) theology can appropriately use in its reflection on faith.

But even if this retrospective reading of *Hearers of the Word* may be debated, numerous essays from the early 1950's document Rahner's

whether these authors fully capitalize on and carry through the spiritual content and context of the theology in question. Much the same might be asked of Gerald A. McCool's *A Rahner Reader* (New York: Seabury, 1975), in which the principle of organization has this remarkable anthology's texts move from philosophical preparation through theological development towards spirituality.

⁴²See his masterful study on the doctrine of God, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1977), esp. at p. 357, n. 1. Note also how Jüngel's philosophical reading of the text influences his polemical attitude towards the *Romanità* which appears in the text's last lines, especially in its first edition.

thesis that the world we experience is touched from the start by the gracious presence of God; as a result of grace's being everywhere, then, our concept of human nature can only be an analytic one.⁴³ No experience and no reflection are purely natural, on this account, and so it would be "unreasonable" to attempt a purely rational apologetic or philosophy of religion—which is not to deny that every reasonable effort should be made in such studies to bring them as rigorously as possible into dialogue with critics of religion. In his classic study of "Theos in the New Testament," Rahner specifically addresses the relation between the revealed Word and natural knowledge of God. He argues that they are related not by chronological succession but by mutual conditioning:

Thus the Word of revelation and natural knowledge of God mutually condition each other. The revealed Word presupposes a person who really, despite the sinful lying and lostness which idolizes the world, knows something about God; and on the other hand this concealed knowledge of God only breaks through human hardness of heart and becomes really conscious of itself when it is released by the Word of God who reveals God's self as utterly beyond the world.⁴⁴

We do experience grace, and not merely our own spiritual striving, Rahner urged; and when we trustingly let ourselves go in the face of ultimate threats to our existence *or* in the blinding light of all but inexpressible blessings to life, then "it is not merely the spirit but the Holy Spirit who is at work in us."⁴⁵ Here nature is unmistakably a moment within a larger dialectic of the history of grace which bears our world towards God's own life, there to constitute a new heaven and a new earth. The starting point is not philosophical but decidedly theological *or*, more accurately still, religious. Correspondingly, Rahner's reflections on the relations between theology and philosophy have consistently placed the latter within the former, as a moment in theology's effort to seek a living understanding of faith.⁴⁶

Where, then, does Karl Rahner's theology begin? With some tact, we can be quite biographical. In a moving essay two years ago, Rahner spoke in the voice of Ignatius of Loyola "to a Jesuit of today." And where did he have Ignatius begin? With "God's own self. It is God's own self whom I have experienced, not human words about God. God and the underivable freedom that is God's alone and that can be experienced only from God's own self and not as the intersection of finite realities

⁴³See especially *T. I.*, Vol. 1, "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," 297-317. *Restbegriff* is translated here (p. 313) as "remainder concept"; it seems clearer, even if the translation is interpretive, to speak instead of an "analytic concept." *T. I.*, Vol. 12, 26, on the other hand, speaks of "pure nature" as a "limit concept" (*Grenzbegriff*).

⁴⁴*T. I.*, Vol. 1, 98, ET emended. Cf. *Foundations*, 55ff.

⁴⁵*T. I.*, Vol. 3, "Reflections on the Experience of Grace," 86-90, at 89.

⁴⁶See *T. I.*, Vol. 11, 85; *T. I.*, Vol. 13, 61-79; *Foundations*, 10f., 24f. For Bernard Lonergan's similar approach to the philosophy of God within theology, see his *Philosophy of God, and Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973). For a somewhat earlier statement, see Lonergan's "Philosophy and Theology," in W. F. J. Ryan and B. J. Tyrrell, eds., *A Second Collection* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), pp. 193-208, a paper written in 1970.

and calculations about them."⁴⁷ From an interview on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, as a friend has remarked to me, it seems clear that the great influence on Rahner's life has in fact been God's own.⁴⁸ With more reserve, Rahner has remarked in a reflection on his life's work that while there was indeed a time when he was meant to be a professor of the history of philosophy, his own concern in the main has simply been to be a theologian. Understanding himself not as a theological specialist but as an "unscientific [*unwissenschaftlicher*] theologian," he has sought to address the living questions of the faith he shares, striving to speak directly to actual questions of salvation in the only way one can today, with a concern for basic needs and how they relate to one another.⁴⁹ Isn't this effort to discern the most urgent issues of faith for the Christian community's present history a "science" of its own?

Rahner has been wary of excessive attention to method, then, not because he does not value precision and scholarship, but because he is convinced there are questions that cannot be postponed.⁵⁰ He has pretended to no system, not because he does not value systematic thinking, but because he is convinced that historical consciousness achieves statements of truth which do not allow of a positive synthesis.⁵¹ At the same time, it seems to me, no twentieth-century theologian has been so concerned with the practice of the hermeneutic and apologetic moments in theology—not simply because faith must be interpreted and accounted for to a world beyond faith, but equally because faith's own world now recognizes these questions as its own.

It is not so much, then, that Rahner is a pastoral theologian⁵² as that his theology is centered in the current urgencies of living faith. This leads him to move both to the lecture platform and to the pulpit, to be a theologian among theologians but also a pastor among pastors.⁵³ In an age of cultural confusion and theological reassessment, he has striven to think from a moving center which sees faith whole, so that it may commit itself wholly. Faced with the enormous fragmentation and complexification of modern consciousness, he has recognized the need for simplification in the expression of our faith, so that it might be incarnate now. Robert Bellah has put this point well:

⁴⁷"Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit," in Karl Rahner, S.J. and Paul Imhof, S.J., *Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), pp. 11-38, at p. 12, ET extensively emended.

⁴⁸"Living into Mystery: Karl Rahner's Reflections at 75," *America* 40, No. 9 (March 10, 1979), 177-80.

⁴⁹S., Vol. 12, "Einfache Klarstellung zum eigenen Werk," 599-604. This essay originally appeared as a closing letter in Peter Eicher, *op. cit.* Cf. the similar letter in Klaus Fischer, *op. cit.*, pp. 400-10.

⁵⁰Cf. *T. I.*, Vol. 11, 83f.

⁵¹Perhaps the most famous example of his dialectical approach to such truths is found in the essay "On the Theology of the Incarnation," *T. I.*, Vol. 4, at pp. 112ff. Cf. *The Trinity*, 81; *T. I.*, Vol. 9, 136ff., 143; *Foundations*, 71ff.

⁵²G. A. McCool, *op. cit.*, p. xxviii.

⁵³"For a true theology of proclamation is nothing else than the one theology, which takes its religious task so seriously with all the scientific means at its disposal, that it becomes at once more scientific and more kerygmatic" (*T. I.*, Vol. 1, 200).

... [T]he need to integrate the whole, known and unknown, conscious and unconscious, grows stronger. Somehow or other men must have a sense of the whole if they are to live; they must have something to believe in and to commit themselves to. Life in its immediacy will not yield to objective analysis, will not wait till all the research results are in.⁵⁴

Rahner's lifelong concern to meet this need puts him in the company of the founder of his Order, Ignatius of Loyola, whose Spiritual Exercises serve growing human freedom in its response to the call of grace and in its commitment to Christian service.⁵⁵ The breadth of his concern also puts him unmistakably in the tradition of classical Christian spirituality from the Fathers through the Middle Ages, a tradition which he studied earnestly with his brother Hugo well before his Freiburg years and the writing of *Spirit in the World*.⁵⁶ Rahner's intellectual roots may be found in this soil, where theology and piety, humanity and nature, doctrinal reflection and historical experience, are remarkably intertwined. It is no wonder, then, that his way in theology—his method, if you will—has led him, as it did his spiritual predecessors, to write prayers and homilies of such depth and beauty. He is far from being primarily a philosopher who starts by exploring the transcendence of human spirit open in its world to all reality. Nor is he a theologian who is principally the contemporary exponent of the centrality of grace as the communication of God's selfhood to humanity. Rahner's thought springs even more fundamentally from the mysterious personal relatedness of all reality which is effected by the approach of God.⁵⁷ A theology rooted here cannot help but issue also in works of prayer and preaching that are of enduring significance for the Church. I wonder if there is any surer test for a theologian's attunement to the times.

A WHOLE SCIENCE

Not only in its outcome but throughout its course as well, theology is a way of leading the Christian community deeper into the true mystery of its life. It is "the science of the mystery," as Rahner says, a "mystagogy."⁵⁸ For such reflection on faith, the relations we have considered in

⁵⁴ *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 206. Cf. *T. I.*, Vol. 16, "The Foundation of Belief Today," 3-23, at 23: "Christianity is a total whole, and therefore at one and the same time simpler and more mysterious, harder and easier than anything else. In this sense we can all of us merely say: I hope to be a Christian."

⁵⁵ Cf. *T. I.*, Vol. 16, 24-34; the logic of such existential decision is classically explored, of course, in Rahner's "The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola," *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), pp. 84-156.

⁵⁶ See Karl H. Neufeld, "Unter Brüder. Zur Frühgeschichte der Theologie K. Rahners aus der Zusammenarbeit mit H. Rahner," in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Wagnis Theologie: Erfahrungen mit der Theologie Karl Rahners* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979), pp. 341-54.

⁵⁷ Cf. A. Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 268: "The method will ineluctably move from the manifold truths or mysteries of Christianity to an ultimate *reductio in mysterium*: their fundamental unity will be approached in the single mystery of human existence as the single mystery of the nearness of God." The method moves not only *to* the mystery, I would add, but also *from* it.

⁵⁸ See *T. I.*, Vol. 7, 14f. (where the German *Mystagogie* is scarcely recognizable in the ET); *T. I.*, Vol. 9, 159f.; *T. I.*, Vol. 11, 101-14, esp. 102, 111; *T. I.*, Vol. 13, 40ff.; *T. I.*, Vol.

the three previous sections of this paper—historical flux and transcendental dynamism, human self-understanding and self-transcendence, spiritual experience and existential decision—are all variations on a single theme: finding God in all things and through the course of time letting God be all things. This is the concrete dialectic of historical transcendence.⁵⁹ At the first level of reflection on it, theology is not simply faith seeking understanding. It is rather, on the one hand, the effort of Christian historical experience to express its faith as a whole in a contemporary way and also to justify such faith before the demands of intellectual honesty. On the other hand, precisely as a *reductio in mysterium* it is a reflective effort to open Christian life to ever greater and more active faith.⁶⁰ "Theology is only of interest," we have heard Rahner say, "when it is reflection—in a critical way, of course—on the faith of a church which freely acts on the basis of its faith."⁶¹

The central task of theology reflects the central thrust of human hearts. Restless until we rest in God, we seek to find the mystery of God—and to be found there as the images of mystery that we are for God and for one another. "The question of man's knowledge of God is thus, for Rahner," as Nicholas Lash has said, "primarily a practical, rather than a merely theoretical question. Perhaps no theologian since Schleiermacher has placed such weight on the question of man's *experience* of God." Lash also notes quite correctly that "it follows from Rahner's insistence on the primacy of experience, on the primacy of the practical, that theological reflection on that experience is always tentative, provisional, incomplete."⁶² Reflection on the concrete dialectic of our historical transcendence may rightly seek, indeed it must seek, to be as systematic as possible. But what it begins to build in Romanesque style, it may well have to complete in Gothic, or leave unfinished altogether.

It should not be thought, however, that Rahner's theological dialectic is pragmatic in a facile way. The transformed conception of truth it entails rests more basically on the insight that truth itself is transformative, a creative power that grounds correspondences in reality because it expresses itself faithfully, that is to say, *is* self-revealing fidelity. There are countless passages in which Rahner has indicated this conception of truth. Without pretending to trace the development of the idea here, let me note at least some of the more signal statements. None is more striking than a passage in *Hearers of the Word* where Rahner reflects on the relation between freedom and intelligibility. Uniting the two, he speaks of love as "the light of knowledge" and of knowledge as "the luminous radiance of love." Arguing from the creative freedom of God

14, 174; *T. I.*, Vol. 16, 72; *S.*, Vol. 12, 594f.; *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie*, Vol. II/1, 269-71; *ibid.*, Vol. III, 528-34; *Foundations*, 58f.

⁵⁹ Cf. *T. I.*, Vol. 16, 24.

⁶⁰ Among earlier essays on this theme, see "Being Open to God as Ever Greater," *T. I.*, Vol. 7, 25-46.

⁶¹ *T. I.* Vol. 11, 81.

⁶² "The Mystery of Karl Rahner," *The Month* CCXL, No. 1344, (September 1979), 310-12, quotes at pp. 311, 312.

as absolute, he maintains that "because and insofar as God loves the finite, it shares in the luminosity of pure being. . . . Only in the logic of love does logic reach the understanding of pure being." In human living, then, all knowledge that wishes to be true to itself must be transformed into "knowing love." At the center of human transcendence there is not disinterested or dispassionate inquiry but a love which ultimately longs for God. Indeed, for Rahner, "as an inner moment of knowledge [human love for God] is both its condition and its ground."⁶³

Rahner orchestrates this theme of the self-transcendence of knowledge towards love in many subsequent contexts. Writing of the New Testament authors' unquestioning assurance of God's reality, and in particular of Paul's conviction that God can be known from the evidence of the world, he notes that "in spite of its certainty this possible knowledge of God, which is moreover always somehow present in actual fact, . . . always essentially involves the moral and religious decision of human beings."⁶⁴ Years later, reflecting on the eschatological dimension of such knowledge of God, Rahner maintains that God as our absolute future can only be grasped "in an act of freedom which only understands itself if and when it is actually performed."⁶⁵ In the time between, he had often spoken of the primordial practical intent of theology, rejecting any purely theoretical interpretation of its task. "A living, questing, questioning theology," he said, for example, "is working today for the preaching of tomorrow, so that it can reach the spirit and heart of man."⁶⁶ Likewise, he had emphasized the epochal sense of responsibility for the human community and its world which characterizes modern secular consciousness.⁶⁷ The men and women of this culture experience God in an existential and not merely theoretical manner, he insisted.⁶⁸ "The intellectual of today is the spiritual child of historicism and the natural sciences—a terribly sober, careful and disillusioned person—a person who suffers from God's remoteness and silence This is the kind of person with whom the Church must concern herself."⁶⁹

In Christological terms, Rahner's dialectic of self-transcending truth is expressed most frequently in his appeal to the parable of the great judgment in Mt 25:31-46. Someone whose life exemplifies this parable already knows the essential truth of Christology, Rahner is convinced.⁷⁰ In more systematic terms, he has developed his understanding of the living and saving truth of Christ as that of the unique mediator who is nevertheless associated with many mediations.⁷¹

⁶³ Cited from G. A. McCool, *op. cit.*, pp. 40, 41.

⁶⁴ *T. I.*, Vol. 1, 95, ET emended; see also pp. 96, 117.

⁶⁵ *T. I.*, Vol. 11, 99, ET emended.

⁶⁶ *T. I.*, Vol. 4, 188.

⁶⁷ A salient example can be found in *T. I.*, Vol. 6, "The Person of Today and Religion," 3-20.

⁶⁸ *T. I.*, Vol. 5, 39.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 87, ET emended.

⁷⁰ See, for example, *T. I.*, Vol. 11, 204.

⁷¹ Cf. "One Mediator and Many Mediations," *T. I.*, Vol. 9, 169-84; "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," *T. I.*, Vol. 16, 199-224.

Wherever a person's truth makes a saving difference for human life, we may say from the perspective of our present discussion, that person stands in saving solidarity with the one Christians confess as "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). For we cannot love human beings genuinely, at the cost of self-sacrifice, without loving God at the same time, just as we cannot love the God who has given up his own Son on our behalf without loving at the same time those whose lives stand equally threatened by the powers of sin and death. Thus in ethics too, Rahner's view of truth is transformative: knowledge of God and humanity in relation to one another is meant to lead to one love for the God who has become our neighbor and the neighbor whom God has given us.⁷²

But to find most focally how Rahner understands the dialectic of truth and love in interaction with each other, we must turn to his understanding of the most central and summarizing doctrine of all, the Trinity. In addition to the axiomatic thesis to which I have already referred, a thesis that has won wide approval, Rahner has also proposed his own systematic approach to Trinitarian doctrine along the lines of what one might call an historical rather than a psychological analogy. Prescinding here from an evaluation of that proposal, I wish simply to note the conception of truth that emerges in its course. Clearly enough Rahner is determined "to make the doctrine of the Trinity fruitful for practical Christian living."⁷³ What may have attracted less attention, however, is the strict harmony he establishes between human truth and God's Word. He wishes to conceive the former as a mediating moment in all human experience so that it may stand as analogy for the latter, just as later he will ask what relation there is between the spirit of human love and God's Spirit. Rahner asks, therefore, how we should understand truth and how it can represent also the origin of the offer of God's grace through the course of human history. His answer may seem to some a reprise of Heidegger, or even perhaps a hasty German version of American pragmatism. But I think it is more genuinely evangelical than that, and more indebted to the living tradition of Christian spirituality. For "truth," he says, "is first the truth which we *do*, the deed in which we firmly posit ourself for ourself and for others, the deed which waits to see how it will be received."⁷⁴ Truth is the word that waits to see how it will be received, that wishes to be accepted, that can bear fruit only if it is welcomed. *We* are the truth of lives that only love can guarantee. Here again, knowledge is only momentarily an end in itself; it must always be guided by love, just as, in strictly Trinitarian terms, Christian believers can only accept God's Word if they are guided by the Spirit of God (cf. 1 Cor 12:3; Jn 14:26, 16:12ff). Theology is equally incapable of saving truth unless it, too, is guided by love.

If this brief outline of the interplay between knowledge and love seems merely an excerpt from a theology of glory, if the fulfillment of

⁷²For brief commentary on Rahner's moral ideal, see James F. Bresnahan, "An Ethics of Faith," in *A World of Grace*, pp. 176 ff.

⁷³*T. I.*, Vol. 16, 256.

⁷⁴*The Trinity*, p. 96. Cf. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*, no. 230.1: "Love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words."

knowledge in love seems too general and unhistorical a hope, let me recall again Rahner's theology of death, as well as his reflections on the bonds of human freedom and its enduring concupiscence. Sinfulness and final surrender to a judgment that is God's alone are far from being secondary aspects of the method we have been discussing. On the contrary, they are existentials of the human situation which a genuine theological method must include essentially—if it is to be a theology of the passover and not a sentimental evasion of suffering.⁷⁵ There is no genuine resurrection faith that overlooks the causes of the cross. Beyond even the moments of knowing and loving, Christians according to Rahner know a final silence that lives in all worship, giving tongue to our finitude, a silence that comes at the end of every endeavor, whether personal or communal, recognizing that only the worship of a new Jerusalem can reveal our every and all endeavor's final worth. In the finite dialectic of truth and love, there is, in addition to their synthesis in lives that look to redemptive fulfillment, the further moment of surrender in adoration to the One who has called us in truth, led us in love, and alone can finally renew for ever the world to which our knowing love seeks to commit itself.

With this dialectic of knowledge, love, and worship or praise, we come back again, I think, to Rahner's efforts to think both transcendently and historically, to conceive the human situation as openly as possible, to ground his theology in Christian spiritual experience. Christian reflection, however critical, and Christian love, however committed, must always involve a surrender to the mystery of God, a final trust and adoration, a silence that is full. (As Enda McDonagh has reminded us at this convention, the practice too of discipleship is primarily a gift.) Seen from this hidden liturgical moment in Rahner's thought, Christian life transcends questions such as whether religion is primarily practical, whether faith is active or passive, whether the goal of philosophy is to change the world rather than merely to understand it. With Ignatius of Loyola before him, or Teilhard de Chardin in our own century, Rahner boldly subsumes those questions under the saving purposes of God on the one hand and the poised freedom of Christian faith on the other.⁷⁶ Believing that the Kingdom of God can be fully achieved only by God brings a poise to Christian life that has classically been called detachment. But believing that the Kingdom is already breaking into the world engages our freedom in what must be a whole-hearted commitment.⁷⁷ In terms of the relative judgments appropriate to Christian practice, our faith is meant indeed to change this world and to entail our radical commitment to its people. In terms of the absolute judgment that belongs to God alone, our every engagement is nevertheless relativized—

⁷⁵Cf. *Foundations*, pp. 90ff., 435ff.

⁷⁶For explicit treatment of Ignatian *indiferencia*, which I have paraphrased here as "poised freedom," see *S.*, Vol. 12, 329 ff.

⁷⁷Cf. *GS*, art. 39. For commentary, see the first essay by Rahner cited in n. 33 above; also, Edward Schillebeeckx, "Christian Faith and Man's Expectation for the Future on Earth," in *The Mission of the Church*, translated by N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1973), pp.51-89.

recognized as a moment in the dawning of a new heaven and a new earth, not yet that absolute future itself. This reciprocal relativizing and radicalizing of Christian life seems to me the most immediate and practical expression of the dialectical moments we have earlier discussed in Rahner's method. It requires development as surely as they do. But it sets a most promising course between the extremes of presumption and despair, of fanaticism and fatalism, of revolution and resignation.⁷⁸ The promise, I think, is of living into a mystery that is God's and our own, a mystery of suffering love that renews life at its core.

Another great searcher for God's truth and love expressed their relation memorably when, early in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he presented poor Mrs. Khokhlakov, with all her distracted confusion about the loss of her faith, to the elder Zossima. Zossima tells her, as you recall, that she cannot regain her faith by any proof, but that she may indeed be convinced of it anew. She promptly asks how. "By the experience of active love," he replies:

Strive to love your neighbors actively and indefatigably. And the nearer you come to achieving this love, the more convinced you will become of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. If you reach the point of complete selflessness in your love of your neighbors, you will most certainly regain your faith and no doubt can possibly enter your soul. This has been proved. This is certain.⁷⁹

Moved at the prospect of believing again, the good lady confesses her failed dreams of heroic deeds for the sick. But Zossima warns her that, compared with the sort of romantic love to which she is drawn, the love of which he speaks is "something severe and terrifying. Active love means hard work and tenacity," he says, closing the conversation, "and for some people it is, perhaps, a whole science."⁸⁰

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⁷⁸Cf. William M. Thompson, "The Hope for Humanity: Rahner's Eschatology," in *A World of Grace*, at p. 164: "[Belief in the absolute future] liberates us both for a stance of critique and openness on the one hand and from a hysterical quest for novelty on the other. It stands between the postures of presumption and despair."

⁷⁹Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by David Magarshack (Harmondworth, England: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 61.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 63f.