

## THE WORLD CHURCH AND THE WORLD HISTORY OF RELIGION: THE THEOLOGICAL ISSUE\*

The invitation to participate in your gathering this year—and indeed, to do so actively, even proffering this small contribution—was a moving one. I have already profited much from the two full days of listening receptively. And I shall listen carefully, you may be sure, to your comments on and criticisms of, your response to, such notions as I shall endeavour this evening to set forth in your presence; and from your reaction I shall, I am sure, again deeply profit. Nonetheless, I have taken up this opportunity with some trepidation. As your President Elect knows, I was hesitant at first to venture in. And I remain somewhat uncertain.

The invitation was strikingly generous, in two ways. First, not only am I not a member of your Society, but am not a member of your Church. It could be argued that your willingness not merely to receive me as a Protestant, but to ask me to speak, is certainly significant. True, we are all very friendly these days. There is nothing unusual, in Catholics' and Protestants' treating each other with cordiality, even generosity. (Northern Ireland is an exception by which all of us on both sides, otherwise, are appalled.) What is more innovating, and more significant, is when we nowadays treat each other with theological seriousness, and recognize that we have something to learn at the theological level from each other. The import could be seen as not minor in this particular case, when the topic of the day is, precisely, the world Church—and a problematic dimension of the issue arises in that I am not fully an explicit member of that Church in its right and proper form, Karl Rahner—for whom I had deep respect, even before I heard Dr. Scanlon's impressive presentation to this conference yesterday! and whose views I wish to consider presently—, and perhaps some of you, would say. By his definition of a full and explicit Christian, I would come under the heading, I suppose, at least partly, of his Anonymous Christian. That is fine: it does not bother me—but it does engage me. By one of his definitions of faith, even, I would be an infidel, quite deliberately and willfully; but that I see as his problem, not mine. Anyway, I find positive significance in your inviting an in that sense outsider to discuss this immensely important issue, and its controversial phrasing.

\*ED. NOTE: References to Karl Rahner's works were given in the German in this article as submitted, and the phrase "World Church" was spelled with two capital initials. However, for the sake of editorial policy of uniformity with the rest of the volume the former are given here only to the English translation except where the German text is quoted; and the latter is spelled with lower-case "w." Canadian spelling and punctuation have been maintained at the author's request. — G.K.. Ed.

My appearing before you as a Protestant has other overtones also, to which I am sensitive. For your Church seems to have been, at the formal and official level, somewhat more open over the centuries, more receptive, in the particular matter to which I personally have devoted my energies and thought for some time now: namely, the theological interpretation of persons of other religious communities, and those communities' forms. In very recent times some in the Protestant Churches have here and there, in our typically individualistic ways, made serious moves to reconsider the question and to revise the traditional rejection. Yet traditionally that rejection has been radical and firm, whereas Catholic teaching has traditionally made in comparison somewhat more room for universal salvation, or at least for instances of it. This point is, indeed, symbolized in this fact: that it is Karl Rahner, the most major mainline thinker in recent Catholic theology, that has developed the Anonymous Christian idea, even though he himself has not been primarily active on or immersed in the mission field or the Third World, and is not primarily—or even not secondarily, one might say without disparagement—an historian of religion. I say this without disparagement because it is precisely in his role as a central theologian that his views on this matter are important. It is to no small degree heartening to those of us who, from the periphery as it were, are attempting to urge a re-assessment and even a sharp modifying of central theological positions, to find his sonorous voice sounding these resonant notes.

The second matter making your invitation striking elaborates on this last point. For secondly, not only have you invited me a Protestant, you have also invited me an historian, to participate in your deliberations. Some might readily feel that the gap between Roman Catholic and Protestant is minor compared to the gap between theologian and historian. Indeed, there was a time when I myself was more than hesitant. I knew and affirmed that I was an historian of religion, and for a while I tended to go on to add “and not a theologian”, having absorbed the usual view that these two are distinct realms. I am still diffident, on the theological side; yet diffidence I now see as an appropriate quality for any theological adventure. I waited until my mid-sixties before publishing a book with the word “theology” in the title; and even then its other word “towards” was equally significant. Yet I have come to feel not merely that we should strive to bridge that gap, between theological thinking and historical awareness, but also that we have both been wrong in acquiescing in the notion that there is a gap. Diffident I still am. Yet my thesis has become that it is a misperception to suppose a dichotomy between the history of religion and theology: between our understanding of God's dealings with humankind over the centuries, in our own and others' cases, and our understanding of God.

Put another way: I would contend that it is impossible adequately to understand the course of human history, except theologically; and it is impossible adequately to theologize, except in awareness of world history.

When I agreed to the invitation to speak, since your topic this year

is "The World Church", I proposed as title what you have heard: "The World Church and the World History of Religion". As I prepared my address, I realized that of course pre-supposed, for such an occasion, was the theological dimension of this issue. Accordingly, it is perhaps not necessary to add the sub-title that I have since incorporated: "The World Church and the World History of Religion: the theological issue". This explains my diffidence; and yet I have decided also that I must be bold. Since your programme planners did ask me to speak, you will perhaps allow me to urge what as an historian of religion I see as the implications for theological formulation of the new situation of which nowadays we are increasingly aware: the spiritual condition of others around the world. Indeed not merely of others: rather, of ourselves and of others, in our mutual diversity and our ever-changing actuality; and reciprocity, our mutual involvements. Our task, one might contend, is to formulate not a view of others seen through Christian eyes, but rather a view, in global perspective, of humankind, once we recognize that some of us are Christians and some of us are various other things—a God's-eye view, one might almost wish to say, of all the human family.

Some of us are Catholic Christians, some Protestant, I suppose that I might rather say, and some of us are Muslims, some of us are Buddhist, some of us are Jews; the "us" here is important. Presently I shall be suggesting that metaphysically, or theologically, or from God's perspective, the difference between being a Catholic and being a Protestant is to be seen as of the same order as between being a Christian and being, say, a Muslim or a Hindu. Of that, however, later. As I have said, there is nothing out of the way these days in Catholics' and Protestants' being friends; what is significant is the new recognition that they can learn theologically from each other. Significant also is the new recognition that we all, Christians and others, can learn theologically from each other—from those whom we used to see as good chaps, perhaps, but theological outsiders. Certainly, despite my rather fundamentalist Protestant upbringing, I discovered long ago, for instance, what an enormously intelligent, profound, and—yes—helpful thinker St. Thomas Aquinas not only was, but is. By that "is" I mean that he is theologically helpful for understanding not merely the thirteenth century, and the history of ideas; I mean how helpful he is for understanding myself, and the world, and God, in the twentieth. This discovery followed by several years a similar discovery on my part regarding a 14th-century Muslim theologian, from whom also I learned much about myself, about the world, about faith, about God, and about the twentieth century.

You may feel that I am overplaying the Catholic-Protestant issue; yet you will discern that I introduce it in correlation with its fellow issue, which ostensibly is more controversial, and for our purposes this evening more significant; namely, that at stake is also the profound question of whether theologians as such can learn theologically from the history of religion. In this case, I mean of course Catholic theologians and Protestant theologians alike; I also mean Muslim theologians, though I shall not

develop that question this evening, germane though it be; thus far, only a significant few among them have felt the force of the question. I mean also Buddhist Buddhologists; in that case, at least for Japan, the present-day answer seems to be "yes" increasingly. The theological (or Buddhological) significance of turning this particular corner is, in my estimate, great; and it is primarily the significance of your inviting me as an historian of religion to which I have given weight, and that enabled me in the end to overcome my hesitation and to accept. For I have come to feel profoundly that Christian theology has much to learn from the history of religion.

(By "the history of religion", by the way, I do not mean, as for instance Chicago does, a certain academic discipline, the historiography of religion: that is an intellectual construct, one that is recent, Western, and falls far short of the reality that it purports to apprehend. By 'history' I mean rather that reality itself, which of course transcends our awareness: the world-wide, centuries-long, more-than-intellectual, on-going process of human life in time lived as human life has always been lived at an intersection between the mundane and the eternal. I mean what Rahner means when he writes: "Today we can recognize" [and he means, I think, we theologians can recognize] "the full length and breadth of non-Christian human history" [*Theol. Inv.* XII, 175] except that I would add to this the full length and breadth of Christian human history also, it being a fundamental postulate of our Harvard view, unlike the practice of many elsewhere, that the history of Christian tradition and faith is to be seen as a sector of the history of religion generally: by no means the least interesting, but also by no means excluded.)

The conclusion to which I have arrived as a student of the history of human religious life across the globe and across the centuries is the same conclusion to which Rahner has come as a Christian theologian: namely, that all human history is *Heilsgeschichte*. And it is no small encouragement to me to find that these conclusions converge.

About the world Church and the world history of religion—in my sense: the world history of human religious life—the first point to make is that the development in modern times of the Church from being a Western to becoming a world phenomenon corroborates and makes more conspicuous the general thesis that the Christian Church is one component, among others, of global religious history. For the same becoming is in evidence with other major religious movements also. For many centuries the Islamic movement was primarily Near and Middle Eastern, then for many more centuries it expanded to much of Africa, India, and Indonesia, whereas in the modern day it is now a world-wide movement. In England, France, and Germany, Muslims now constitute the largest religious minority (or perhaps, in the light of Father Dulles's presentation, I should now modify this to say that Christians are that, with Muslims second). Indeed, probably in all major countries of Europe, Muslims today outnumber Jews. The Western Church has become aware of the Jewish presence, even now theologically; but has not yet fully

recognized the fact that the Muslim presence is now the more substantial one. I am not quite sure, but I believe that this situation may obtain also nowadays in Canada; perhaps not yet in the United States, though it may here also presently. The Association of Buddhist Churches of North America is, also, now a substantial development. Moreover, among the major cities in the world with large Parsi population are now Bombay, London, and Toronto.

Christians have become of late somewhat embarrassedly conscious of their traditional Eurocentrism; have become somewhat aware that their universalizing propensities at the theoretical level are in some tension with sociological and historical facts. A first response to this awareness was the triumphalism of the turn-of-the-century progress-affiliated conception of "the evangelization of the world in this generation". That dream, rather like the first- and second-century expectation of an imminent Second Coming, has slowly had to be indefinitely deferred. Yet there are some who have felt that they could relax now that "Western Christianity has become World Christianity". The theological problem remains, however, untouched. The modern world knows a pluralism of world religions; there are several such. And theology must come to know it too.

I was interested that the first question asked from the floor at our first session Wednesday evening had to do with an ambiguity inherent in the term "world Church", which can be heard as triumphalist, as proclaiming a having arrived at global dominance, as well as being heard rather—and at times, certainly, Rahner himself saw it this way—as meaning the giving way of Christendom, a particular area where Christians constituted the establishment—more recently, at least the religious establishment—to a situation of Christians being a minority everywhere—not only so everywhere regionally but everywhere taken as a whole: one among several religious movements in world history, one in which a minority of God's children participate.

I see our being a world Church as meaning that we are now called upon to become genuinely cosmopolitan in the sense of seeing ourselves as increasingly integrated in the onward march (or is it a chaotic stampede?) of increasingly unified world history; not living an isolated life of our own so much as becoming self-consciously participant in the only kind of world that now, conspicuously, exists: namely, the world of pluralism.

In its bluntest terms, the theological problem can be put thus: is religious pluralism something that God sees as an unfortunate deviation from, perhaps a preliminary stage on the way towards, an ideal situation in which all humankind will be or should be explicit, nominal, Christians? Or is, rather, pluralism the way that God has chosen to work among His many and diverse children on this earth: intending that some among us should be genuinely Christian, adjectivally, not merely Christians, nominally; that others of us should be genuinely *muslim* with lower-case "m", not merely capital -M Muslims, nominally; that some should respond to Him and accept His self-giving love and grace and faith in Jewish

forms, others in Buddhist forms, others in Hindu forms, others in Tierra del Fuegan?

Let me return to the matter that I was mentioning earlier about Karl Rahner when I stressed the point that his concept of Anonymous Christianity emerges from his role as a central theologian of the Church. I wish to make two points here. One is strongly positive, the other is more dynamic. The positive point is to emphasize with force the massive importance of his insight that human beings as such—that this is part of what it means to be human—are encountered by the mystery and love of God, and are offered divine grace, which if they existentially accept they are saved. The self offer of God, of love, of grace, of salvation, is in principle universal. Any person, anywhere, at any time, in any culture or civilization or religious community, who accepts that offer, who opens him- or herself to the mystery, the love, the grace, is saved; lives, Rahner sees, in the mystery of human—and divine—self-fulfilment and freedom. I repeat: this recognition, this awareness that the human condition is so, I judge of immense significance. The history of human religiousness both requires and, I would report, verifies the thesis.

My second point has to do with Rahner's formulating this recognition, this awareness, in the phrasing that he coined in 1960, and that has been the focus of so much discussion since: Anonymous Christianity, Anonymous Christian. About this wording he himself is almost casual; and this point I wish, secondly, to stress. "It is not this terminology", he avers, "that is the essential point at all" (*Theol. Inv.* XII, 165; cf. also *Theol. Inv.* IX, 145 and *Theol. Inv.* XIV, 281). "Anyone who recognizes the existence of the reality signified by these terms," he says, and can come up with a better phrase "can readily dispense with the terminology we are considering here" (*Theol. Inv.* XII, 165). As an historian of religion, and as a Protestant, and as someone who has lived much of his life outside of Christendom, in the Islamic world and Asia, and who has Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist and Jewish friends, I wish to agree forcefully with his conviction that the important matter is "[to recognize] the existence of the reality signified by these terms". I also agree with his addendum: that, if we can improve on these terms, we should do well to do so, and I think that this is in fact the next task for theology. It matters what terminology one uses. What matters most, however, is having turned that corner of recognizing the reality signified.

(To his repeated invitation [*loc. cit.*] to others of us to propose an alternative wording for articulating his vision, the Church's new vision as indeed a world Church, a wording that will be "clear and brief" while "epitomizing . . . the outcome of a long consideration" [*Theol. Inv.* IX, 145, *Theol. Inv.* XII, 165] and be of theological import [*Theol. Inv.* XIV, 281], my own response has been with the venerable term "faith", now demonstrably [*Faith and Belief*] available for generic use. The Catholic stress on faith informed by love—which latter is manifestly generic—may be an improvement. Let us, however, consider his proposal, and its implications.)

I have called my second point "dynamic", because it involves moving beyond where we presently are, and developing the next stage in theological formulation of the insights and truth that we are now vouchsafed.

First of all, I deem it apparent that Rahner's phrasing "Anonymous Christian" can be seen as meant for internal consumption primarily; or even, only. It is proffered as a way for Christians to understand themselves in a pluralist world; it is not quite offered to that world for its self-understanding. It is virtually a private self-interpretation of a closed group; not a public understanding for and of others. Yet given the public character of to-day's world, the very pluralism that constitutes our life today—the historical fact that we do indeed now read each other's books—one might almost appeal here to the maxim, one should not call people names behind their backs. We are impelled to accept Rahner's invitation to think out a better way of saying what he has meanwhile phrased in this tentative fashion.

In his significant article in the most recent volume of his *Investigations*, on the unity of the Church and the unity of humankind, where he develops an interesting thesis about the transcendental nature of the notion of unity, and sets forth unity as existing and unity as task, Rahner speaks of the current movement towards greater human unity across the globe. Here the theologian and the historian indeed meet. "The achievement of a greater unity of mankind" he affirms, "is an urgent task for people today . . . even though this unity itself represents" and I deem this predicate important—"a mysterious and complex task, the precise meaning and content of which become clear only slowly in the historical process itself, and which is repeatedly debased by the sin of human beings and yet remains . . . their religious and moral task. The achievement of this unity of mankind is consequently also a task for Christians" (*Theol. Inv.* XX, 171). Every clause and phrase of these pregnant remarks repays reflection. I find corroborated here my historians's sense: he himself is recognizing that the articulation of the new vision has yet to be hammered out; the involvement of the world Church in our day in the total pluralist situation in which we find ourselves engaged, cannot be conceptually articulated ahead of time—nor in traditional terms. A study of the history of religion argues for the same conclusion: the precise meaning and content of our growing unity cannot be predicted ahead of time, but must be worked out as we go along, will emerge as we move forward. As the Christian Church becomes genuinely a world Church, a full participant, self-conscious and responsible, in the new phase of the world history of religion, it will have to move beyond its limited and private traditional vocabulary in order to conceptualize the insights to which its leaders are calling it.

Karl Rahner, let me re-emphasize, approaches our task of understanding as a central theologian of the Church, while I approach it as a peripheral historian. The first and fundamental point is that we see the realities of the situation in the same way. This is striking, and major. We

differ, on the other hand, in our theoretical interpretation of those realities; both of us recognizing that our theorizing is radically less important than is recognizing the realities themselves, and both of us attempting to articulate ideas in a way that will do justice to the newly perceived situation. Let us consider one or two instances of how the difference works itself out.

Rahner himself argues that anonymous faith is under internal pressure to move toward conceptualized expression, towards articulated form; and he gives this as his reason for holding that an Anonymous Christian has a duty to move towards becoming an explicit ecclesial Christian—in effect, a loyal Roman Catholic. My own study of the history of human religious life on this planet, and of the history of language, my awareness of the relation over the centuries and the continents between spiritual responses and verbalized expression, between grace and institutions, between faith and belief, between implicit and explicit religious life, convinces me that Rahner is right about the inherent drive, at least among intellectuals, of faith towards formal expression, but also that his estimate of the particular direction in which that inner dynamic is pushing, of the particular goal in terms of articulated creeds, requires a good deal of further thought.

There are a number of issues here. One is the relation between spiritual truth and verbal statements. I gather that Roman Catholic thinkers are beginning to be seriously aware of the problem inherent in any notion that envisages major truth, especially divine truth, as reproducible in propositions, cast in the form of the words of any particular language. Those of us historically aware are these days vividly conscious of two matters that impinge here. The first is that languages are historical: words change their meanings, syntax develops, terms and phrases and concepts are culture-specific. Secondly, sentences and clauses and words and verbal constructs are meaningful within a given conceptual outlook, a *Weltanschauung*, and do not have significance apart from that *Weltanschauung*, of which they are always a subordinate part—and *Weltanschauungen* evolve, and pass, are historical. The ramifications of coming to this modern awareness are many, and deep; those of us who spend our lives coming to terms with Arabic and Sanskrit and Greek and the worldviews that they have at various times embedded, and become therefore also somewhat reflective about the worldviews of the modern West and its idiosyncracies, are given pause.

Being an intellectual, I devote my life to attempting to clarify things conceptually; to intellectualizing even spiritual truth. Yet I also realize that such clarifications, such intellectualizations, cannot aspire to embody truth permanently. Truth, for me, transcends verbalisms. The best that we can do is to struggle to forge for ourselves conceptual patterns that will serve us at our particular juncture in human history: will enable our generations to see the truth. Part of our task is to make intelligible and therefore available to modern minds the truth that earlier phases of our own culture and our own religious tradition have seen, have been vouchsafed, have



reported; another part is to make intelligible the truth that other cultures, other religious groups, other children of God, have seen; and to articulate all of this, both our own and others, in ways that will serve us now—all of us—in our strange new world.

I certainly feel the pressure, then, and indeed respond to it, to translate into concepts and even into words (normally, in my case, into English words) the human and spiritual reality that I myself have been given grace to know or that my studies have discerned in our various traditions. Yet evidently I would differ from Rahner in my sense of ontological priority here. He would seem to suggest that explicit Christianity as expressed in creeds and dogmas and institutions is at a higher level than the prior implicit faith and grace and the salvific life of God within human life that he seems to think of as at a lesser level. I on the other hand would hold that that grace, that mystery, that divine self-giving in human lives, however imperfectly apprehended and responded to and lived, is yet closer to the truth, to reality, to God Himself, than are the ideas and statements and doctrines and forms to which it has given rise and by which then too it has been nurtured. My reason for striving, as an intellectual, to intellectualize what one learns is so that those intellectualizations can in turn serve both myself and others to introduce us to the realities of which they are never more than subordinate representations. Explicit Christianity is for me less noble, less divine, less eternal than the implicit personal life in God (which I call faith) that—approximately only—it at times articulates.

Herein is a different assessment, I suppose—based on historical discernment—of what theology basically is. (Also: we Protestants, of course, do not discriminate between theology and dogma.) Involved, too, is an elaborate question of the role of reason in human life. (Modern Western philosophy, especially anglophone, is on the whole behind the times in this matter; theologians seem to me more likely than are philosophers to give a lead in the rational interpretation of conceptual pluralism.)

Secondly, Rahner's articulated thinking has been in terms that relate to the Christian sector of human religious history, only; whereas I am suggesting that the theological task now is to find or to forge terms that relate to both the Christian and the rest of the world: that are continuous with what these have been in the past yet now go beyond them. He has assumed that Christian formulations are the making explicit of the truth of God's relation to humankind, whereas I have observed that they are *an* explicit formulation, but not *the*. He confesses that the *praeambula fidei* are hardly operative nowadays; the fact is that they were always culture-specific, one can now recognize. This does not mean that the truths articulated in terms of them were not true. On the contrary, I am contending that the articulation of truth in words is always such that several of them can be and I think are true at once—even if at an unsophisticated or anhistorical level they seem mutually contradictory, or at least radically disparate.

Traditional Christian theology, I am suggesting, has been at times historically true, historically cogent; but that no such verbalizations, no such human conceptualizations, can in the nature of the case be more than historically true, historically cogent. The reality that we know in the life of faith is more than historical, since it is divine: the reality that we Christians know, in our Christian forms of faith; the reality that Muslims know, in their Islamic forms, or that Jews know, in their Jewish faith. The truths, on the other hand, that we theologians or historians articulate to express those realities that we have known—the verbal truths—are always historical only, contingent.

Does revelation not outflank this matter, one may ask. My answer is that revelation is always historical, also. It is none the worse for that! A revelation that were not historical would be otiose, at best; a self-contradiction, even. Revelation is an entry of the divine into human life in history. It is not only that the *concept* of revelation is demonstrably historical. A competent historian can trace the emergence and rise of that concept, its spread, its development, its many forms, its recent peregrinations, its contemporary doldrums and re-invigorations—all this both within the Christian Church and elsewhere. The historian can trace, too, the historical interrelations among Christian and other revelation concepts; interrelations rather subtly complex, it turns out. Beyond this, however, is the still more weighty fact, that apart from the concept of revelation, revelation itself, or rather revelations themselves, insofar as we are to use that term to interpret to ourselves what it conceptualizes, has or have occurred either within history or not at all. God has revealed Himself in history or else He has not revealed Himself. If the Qur'an is the Word of God, it is—has been—the Word of God in human history. (Indeed it is not by studying the Qur'an itself, but by studying religious history, that a non-Muslim comes to see then how it has served God as His Word.) In the same way, intelligent modern Hindus can and in fact do see in Church history that and how Christ has been the Word of God for Christians.

I carry this point further than do many, contending that revelation must be recognized as essentially a bilateral concept. There can be no revelation unless it be to somebody; and that means, to somebody at a particular time and place. To say that God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ is at best a short-hand way of saying that He has revealed Himself in Christ to you or me in the twentieth century, and/or to St. Augustine in the fourth or fifth, and/or to a village grandmother in fourteenth-century Sweden, either every Sunday morning in Church or throughout her life or whatever. To say that the Bhagavad Gita is or is not a revelation of God is to say that God did or did not speak through it to M. K. Gandhi in India early this century, or to Ramanuja there in the twelfth. And so on. Moreover, it is by reading and pondering Ramanuja's commentary on that work; or by knowing Gandhi's life; or by reading and pondering Ghazzali's life lived, and his writings set down, in the conviction that God spoke to him through the Qur'an (a conviction that he himself, as an

enormously intelligent and perceptive person, certainly had); that one is in a position to have views on whether or not God has indeed revealed Himself here and there—or anywhere, or everywhere—through human history.

Some religious pluralists have inferred from the diversity that they observe, a disheartening disparagement of each religious form. I, on the other hand, have been persuaded by my study of world religious history that God Himself is a religious pluralist—or at least has been, until now. It becomes evident from the study of that history that God has dealt with humankind, has entered our lives and invited us to enter His, through many different patterns at differing times and places. We Christians knew this all along so far as the history of Israel in what we call Old Testament times was concerned; we are now in a position to recognize that it has continued so for the Jewish community during the twenty centuries this side of A.D. 30 through Jewish patterns, and has been true for Hindus in a plethora of Hindu forms, for Muslims in Islamic, and so on. The life of all the other communities has been, as has that of the Christian Church, a divine-human complex in motion, with all the complexities involved; and in each case with the failings as well as the splendours of the human. As an historian I have in the course of my studies found no reason to dissent from Rahner's caveat, that the carrying out of divinely given tasks "is repeatedly debased by the sin of human beings" (*Theol. Inv.*, XX, 171). It is in this as in other ways the world Church takes its place squarely within the World History of Religion.

Let me close by advancing two further reflections on the Anonymous Christianity idea; and the requirement, as I see it, to move beyond that terminology if we are to do justice to the Church's new world role. The first is a moral, the second a theological, observation.

The moral point is simply that even though the intention behind it is innovatingly generous, the proposed phrasing seems in danger of not escaping the superiority (even the superciliousness) of old-fashioned Christian exclusivism; of being heard as one more instance of that cultural imperialism to which those of us who have close Asian friends are inevitably sensitive. As I said of such exclusivism twenty-five years ago, "the traditional doctrinal position of the Church has in fact militated against its traditional moral position, and has in fact encouraged Christians to approach other men immorally. Christ has taught us humility, but we have approached them with arrogance."<sup>1</sup> As an historian of religion, sensitive to the religious sensibilities and the dignity of persons of other communities, I could press hard the moral unacceptability of the Rahnerian formulation on this matter; but I leave that undeveloped here, not because it is not crucially significant, but simply because the point has in fact been several times canvassed, also within your Church, by others. The phrasing simply does not constitute a thesis with which one

<sup>1</sup>Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 130; cf. p. 129.

can go out into the world and build understanding or friendship, can carry out that divinely given duty of "unity as task". It is morally not Christian.

Admittedly, I acknowledged above that Rahner's concept of Anonymous Christian is clearly intended for internal Christian use, not for conversation with the rest of the world—a conversation in which he did not have occasion to be much involved. Yet the historical fact is that that conversation is inevitable; and indeed Rahner found himself thrown into it on at least one occasion, with the Japanese thinker Nishitani. The latter apparently asked him, as of course thousands of Asians, and Jews, *mutatis mutandis*, must ask in principle: "What would you say to my treating you as an anonymous Zen Buddhist?" I replied," Rahner reports: "certainly you may and should do so from your point of view; I feel myself honored by such an interpretation, even if I am obliged to regard you as being in error or if I assume that, correctly understood, to be a genuine Zen Buddhist is identical with being a genuine Christian, in the sense directly and properly intended by such statements" (*Theol. Inv.*, XVI, 219).

Frankly, although I have read and re-read two or three times in English, and three or four times in the original German, this report of his conversation I have found myself unable to apprehend just what he meant. For one thing, I do not see the force of that "you should"; nor do I see the logic of his acceptance of disagreement. Especially, I do not grasp the significance of the two radically different alternatives that he cheerfully propounds. (In German, it is not simply "I am obliged to regard you as being in error or . . .", but is more explicitly an *either/or*, or even "either . . . or else": *entweder . . . oder aber*, — *Schriften* XII, 276). I do not know whether he is saying that there are two clear alternatives, between which it is somehow not possible or not necessary to choose: either that Christians are right, intelligent moral Buddhists and others are wrong, or else ultimately—that is, I suppose: theologically—being Christian and being Buddhist or whatever are identical. These two alternatives seem to me too disparate to be left dangling. And the former is too arrogant, too immoral, to be Christian. Regarding the latter: apart from the rather engaging question of why one specifies that it is a specifically Zen Buddhist that a genuine Christian here anonymously is, there is the further consideration that the task of working out the full theological implications of a view that being a genuine Christian and being, presumably, a genuine Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Confucian, Buddhist, are identical, is a task not yet complete, may we not say, in Rahner's own thought.

This comes close to what I mean by saying that in God's eyes there is genuine pluralism.

My other reflection is more strictly on the theological level. It will appear perhaps too controversial to be set forth just at the end of my presentation, without time to elaborate or to defend it at length. Yet let me venture it. It is my sense that a difficulty with the Anonymous Christian way of conceptualizing the reality that Rahner and others of

us have recognized, has to do with the fact that in the final analysis the noun "Christian" is not, I suggest, a metaphysical concept. Certainly that neologism "Christianity" is not.

On this last I have written a large book showing that concepts like "Hinduism", "Buddhism", "Confucianism", "Christianity", and the like have neither historical nor theological validity; and Henri du Lubac, who has lived in Sri Lanka, argued that while "anonymous Christian" is acceptable, "anonymous Christianity" is not. Rahner's answer makes it clear, however, that in effect "Christianity" is in effect here a mistranslation into English of his term *Christentum*—which fact signifies that even his closest sympathizers, in this case his translators, misunderstood him, which shows the danger. The German word, he pointed out, has two possible meanings; the one that—I would say—"Christianity" conveys in English, and then also "that which constitutes a specific individual as a Christian" (*wenn man unter Christentum dasjenige versteht, was einem bestimmten Menschen zum Christen macht—Theol. Inv. XII, 162*); a little later, "the 'being Christian' of an individual Christian" (*[das] Christsein eines Christen—Schriften X, 532*). For this latter I would suggest in English "Christianness", so that Rahner is suggesting then a concept "anonymous Christianness". I myself find this more agreeable than "anonymous Christianity", by a good deal, its very awkwardness proving somewhat helpful, and certainly its personalist quality. This is finally because the adjective "Christian", unlike the usual noun, has two quite distinct meanings in modern English, one of which is fully mundane ("The Christian quarter of the town" or "Christian arrogance"; the Christian machine-gun that I saw in Beirut some years ago with a picture of the Virgin painted on it); while the other has kept a transcendent reference ("Christian humility"). The former means "pertaining to Christians"; the latter, "pertaining to Christ". The noun "Christian", on the other hand, denotes something mundane. (I would find it less objectionable to speak of someone's being "anonymously Christian" than to say that he or she is "an anonymous Christian"—it would be less open to misunderstanding, though by no means closed to it.)

The word "Christ" has transcendent reference; the noun "Christian" is essentially of contingent reference. It is in principle the name of some human beings on earth and not of others. This is so inherently, explicitly, by full intention. It began so, deliberately as a designation to discriminate between some historical persons and others; and has continued so since. It is too late now to elevate it to cosmic status. It never was presented as denoting a concept in the mind of God. It does not figure in the Old Testament (*m<sup>e</sup>shiah* of course does: some 75 times, virtually always with transcendent reference; but no adjective or secondary-noun formation derived from it is found). The word "Christian" does not occur in the teachings or the message of Christ Himself; nor in the message about Jesus as Christ: it is not in the *Kerygma*. It does occur three times in the New Testament, almost casually: it was coined by outsiders, and all three New

Testament cases refer to its usage on the lips of outsiders. In later centuries also its usage remains relatively sparse, until modern times when it is used lavishly and throughout the world, but more than ever now with purely mundane reference, and more than ever now on the lips of non-Christians. St. Thomas Aquinas, I have calculated<sup>2</sup>, uses the term "faith" (*fides*) 132 times for every once that he uses "Christian faith" (*fides christiana* or *christiana fides*). Here the adjective means "pertaining to the transcendent Christ"; whereas in modern times even the adjective, become commonplace rather than rare, means "pertaining to the Church", as an historical reality, or to the behaviour of Christians. As a noun, "Christian" is a sociological, fully mundane, category; as are "Hindu", "Zen Buddhist", capital-M "Muslim", "Jew", "Parsi", and the others.

I myself, in my endeavour to forge concepts capable of handling intellectually the new data and the new recognitions that our modern awareness of the history of human religious life has provided us, have as remarked urged the concept "faith" for conceptualizing the human situation in relation to God. Rather than saying that Karl Rahner is an anonymous Zen Buddhist, or that Nishitani is an anonymous Christian, I would say that at the mundane level—what Rahner calls "in terms of objective social awareness" (*Theol. Inv.* XX, 219); or we might say that historically—the one man is a Christian and the other is a Zen Buddhist; but at the theological level we should say that both are persons of genuine faith.

Admittedly, my wording here has been coloured by thirty years of studying Islamics, with considerable attention to the Muslim concept of faith; and similarly, to a less extent, with Jewish and Hindu. I have not discussed these concepts at length with Japanese Buddhists, but look forward to doing so. As I have said, my vocabulary, like Rahner's, is tentative; but it is deliberately aimed at being generic, not particular.

It is, of course, through being Christian that Karl Rahner has known the love of God, the fulfillment of humanness, grace, and salvation. This historical fact fully explains why he has proposed specifically Christian vocabulary to describe the same phenomenon for others. He has not had occasion to wrestle with the equally historical fact that it is through being Muslim or Hindu or Jewish or Buddhist or whatever that others, whom he rightly recognizes as saved the way he has been saved, have found and responded to grace. Therefore he describes the world situation in historically Christian terms, which apply to Christians (his particular terms apply, in fact, fully only to Catholics); and he has not recognized that they are particular rather than cosmic.

Rahner himself would have been taken aback, I dare say, to be told that being a Christian is not of transcendent significance, of cosmic import. He knew from experience that it is—not only for him, but for

<sup>2</sup>Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 299, note 108.

his friends and acquaintances, both those of to-day and those to whom his studies introduced him from the past 2000 years. Therefore I have no wish to dispute his conviction; only to nuance it. For one thing, just as Rahner felt this about being Christian, it is an historical fact that Sikhs feel the same way about being Sikhs, Muslims about being Muslims, Sri Vaiśnavas about being Sri Vaiśnavas. Them too I take seriously. As an historian, it is my business to come up with a theory that will interpret these historical facts and illuminate them. Dr. Scanlon in his address yesterday remarked that Rahner articulated what had to be the case if his own experience was to be authentic. I endeavour to articulate what has to be the case if Rahner's experience and that of my Asian and Jewish friends and my own are authentic.

For the sake of simplicity, however, we may focus just on his. Rahner was of course right in finding that his being a Christian was of transcendent import; but his feeling derived, I suggest, from two matters, one of which is less specific than, the other is more specific than, his being a member of the Christian, and in fact the Roman Catholic, Church; and the same applies to the Sikhs and others.

First, Rahner was human; and as he himself affirmed, to be human is of transcendent import: is to find oneself caught up in divine grace, and in the possibility of responding to it. Secondly, the Christian Church intellectually elucidated this grace and this possibility to him in conceptual terms, nurtured and encouraged him, and as it were enabled him, positively to respond to the divine offer, provided him with community and a complex of symbols and rites and practices and moral guidance and aesthetic richness, and a vocabulary of concepts, all conducive to a positive response—which response once made was dynamically enriching, unfolding itself in self-authenticating and ever enhanced profundity. As he himself noted, however, it is that positive response, and what he found through it, in and through the context, rather than the context alone, that was crucial. He well knew that there are nominal Christians who do not respond, human beings who, though formally members of the Church, are not authentic Christians, who do not, in his words, existentially accept divine grace in faith and love; just as he knew that there are human beings not nominal Christians who do.

What he was saying, therefore, is that being a Christian was for him the form in which the substance of his salvation was cast. What he did not recognize is that other forms have played the same role in the case of those other persons the substance of whose faith and love he did recognize as the same as his. He proposed that without their knowing it, the form in their case is the same, too.

It is in this sense that I am suggesting that being a Sikh is an historical category in relation to which the theological truth of Sikh faith and love has often—not always—occurred. Sikhs are related to transcendence by being human, and some of them are more positively related because of the way that they respond to the divine that being human makes possible,

and that being Sikh makes articulate and formal, and appealing.

Yet being Sikh is not itself a theological category, I am suggesting; and Rahner agreed. Similarly for Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, I suggest; and Rahner agrees. What he did not recognize is that the same applies to being a Christian.

When I say that he and Nishitani are at the mundane level in one case Christian and the other Buddhist, but at the theological level both are persons of faith and love, am I saying that it does not matter whether a person be a Christian or a Buddhist?

Being a Christian and being a Buddhist are, I aver, historical matters; yet of course historical matters matter. "The very hairs on our head are numbered." It matters whether one be a man or a woman, a child or a senior citizen; it matters whether one be stupid or brilliant, landlord or peasant, sickly or strong; it matters whether one be Canadian or American, and if American whether New Englander or Southerner; it matters whether one speak and therefore think English, or French—or Chinese, or any particular two or three of these; it matters whether one be black or white, or yellow or brown; it matters whether one be shy or self-confident. Certainly it matters whether one be Jew or Muslim, Buddhist or Christian, Quaker or Russian Orthodox, layman or archbishop.

Yet ultimately and theologically, these characterizations of our humanity do not matter cosmically, theologically; in the sense that all such questions pale into radically secondary significance beside the one crucial question which itself can be, and has historically been, formulated in more than one way. For this transcending question, Rahner has proffered one formulation with which I personally am quite happy, when he affirms that God's grace is freely offered to every human being, but there is a "radical distinction" between grace freely offered and grace "existentially accepted in faith and love" (*Theol. Inv.*, IX, 146). That is the distinction that ultimately matters to God as well as among us; and to-day many Muslims, Jews, Hindus, certain Buddhists, many Chinese, insofar as they were sufficiently cosmopolitan and sophisticatedly educated to the point of being able to understand the vocabulary, would be ready to agree. Another particular formulation of this transcending distinction is in terms of being saved. That is more parochially Christian, yet it too could perhaps be used. Certainly Christians should recognize that being Christian or being Muslim is radically secondary to being or not being saved. The Day of Judgement is another metaphor that has been constructed and was for many centuries widely used in many parts of the world (not all parts), to formulate the kind of issue in comparison with which the issue of being Christian or Buddhist or atheist is secondary.

We cannot express our esteem for Martin Luther King, Jr., by saying that he was anonymously a white man; nor even by saying that black people are ultimately as good, potentially, as white people; or that women are after all virtually as good as men. Why not vice versa, à la Nishitani?



God is profoundly interested, I feel sure, in the fact that Martin Luther King was black and that my wife is a woman, and that all three of us are Christians. Nonetheless I make bold to suggest that being black, or being a woman, or being a Christian, is an historical category, not a theological one. The adjective *muslim* is a cosmic category (meaning "committed to God"), but not the noun. The world Church has yet to hammer out a cosmopolitan vocabulary for the modern world.

Lest you think that I am being altogether too obstreperous in suggesting that the noun "Christian" names an historical rather than a theological category, let me point out that Rahner has said exactly the same thing, though in other words. His version is: the noun "Christian" should henceforth mean not what it meant originally and has meant for the past 1900 years: namely, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ or someone or something historically related to its Founder; rather, henceforth let it designate not that historical matter but something of more genuine theological and human significance, of truly cosmic import: namely, all human beings from any time or clime who respond positively to the mystery and grace of our universe.

I have told you from the start that I as an historian agree with Rahner theologically but differ from him linguistically.

His proposal is noble; yet the new usage that he proposes is far too liable to misunderstanding both by ourselves and by the rest of the world—and to the chaotic damage that that kind of misunderstanding has repeatedly wrought in human history and continues to wreak.

St. Paul in launching the new community said—obstreperously!—to Church members, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). He was speaking to Christians, we might say; but that is not a Pauline concept. We to-day, to launch the Church's new phase as a truly world Church in the world history of religion, must agree with St. Paul and go on to add: "There are neither Christians nor Muslims; for we are all one in God". God is aware of the abolitionist movement of last century, of the feminist movement of this, and of the civil war now in Lebanon; and it would be hypocritical of us to make either the statements in Galatians, or my proposed new one, *unaware*, or imagining that historical differences do not matter. Yet, as theological statements I suggest that both may stand, though for discourse with non-theists the second's vocabulary would require translation, for example into Rahner's phrasing about accepting grace, or mine about transcendence and faith. Let us close with a proposed Rahnerian-style wording: "There is neither Christian nor Muslim nor other; for we are all one in being offered grace, and potentially one by accepting it."

WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH  
*Harvard University*