

WORKSHOP: WORLD RELIGIONS AND THE WORLD CHURCH

It has become apparent to many Christians of various denominations that extra-Christian religious traditions can no longer be viewed in a negative or condescending way. These religions are being recognized as having their own integrity and impressive achievements. Vatican II, in various documents of which the most important is the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, created a renewed interest among Catholic theologians toward the extra-Christian religions. While the possibility of salvation for extra-Christians has long been accepted in theology, with Vatican II the question shifted from the possibility of salvation for extra-Christians to that of the legitimacy of extra-Christian religions as viable ways for God's salvific revelation. Karl Rahner is the one theologian who influenced the most Vatican II's positive shift toward world religions. Rahner is also the one theologian who saw in Vatican II a new "official" affirmation of the Church as the world Church.¹

Our purpose is to explore the relationship between Rahner's positive evaluation of other religious traditions and his understanding of the Church's mission to the world. Rahner has often affirmed that a positive evaluation of other religious traditions implies the need for ongoing dialogue. My contention is that a real dialogue is ultimately not possible within Rahner's position on world Church.

Religious faith and religions have been defined as the quest for ultimate reality and meaning. As such, there is an inner tendency within religions to claims of uniqueness and universality. It is within the context of such claims that the real problems brought about by contemporary pluralism come to the fore. As Karl Rahner writes: "The real problem of the pluralism of views, however, arises where actually particular views must in principle claim universal validity if they do not wish to destroy their own very existence."² Such a situation demands dialogue. Then, according to Rahner, "arises the one, many-sided question: Is such a dialogue possible; what is its nature; how must it be conducted?"³ Real dialogue must renounce the use of force, the need to convert the other "which is profoundly contrary to the nature of a world view which makes absolute and universal claims."⁴ Yet a world view needs to enter into dialogue with other world-views, "it has to appeal to its own future and to accept its

¹ Cf. Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," in *Theological Investigations XX* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 77-89.

² K. Rahner, "Reflections on Dialogue within a Pluralistic Society," in *Theological Investigations VI* (New York: Crossroad, 1974), p. 32.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33

own eschatological character Where this openness is not present, there is proof that the claims to universality are illegitimate from the very start."⁵ Without the openness to dialogue, a world view becomes un-historical and ideological.⁶

The basic question to be asked relative to Rahner's understanding of Christianity as world Church is that of its openness to dialogue with other religious traditions that also claim universality. This can be done by looking at the various components that make up Rahner's understanding of world Church.

While the Church is now more fully aware of its mission to become a world Church,⁷ that mission is intrinsic to the Church itself. ". . . the Church is the basic sacrament of the salvation of the world: of the world, and not only of those who belong to the Church itself expressly and in a sociologically tangible way."⁸

Rahner's concept of world Church is dependent on two basic principles: the reality of God's universal salvific will, and the definitive expression and revelation of this salvific will in the person of Jesus; and a specific method: the transcendental analysis. Both principles and method come together most formally in Rahner's Christology. A transcendental approach implies that Christian beliefs are explicit symbols that disclose and manifest the most profound dimensions of human experience. On such experience is our search for a definitive beginning and guarantee of God's self-communication. According to Rahner, "the God-Man is the initial beginning and the definitive triumph of the movement of the world's self-transcendence into absolute closeness to the mystery of God."⁹ As such, the God-Man is the absolute savior.¹⁰ In his *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, Rahner clearly states his Christocentrism:

When God utters himself in a merely created reality, then this reality will express him indeed — but, as something merely created, a something finite, something that (because it is finite) leaves room for something alongside it or following it. It will necessarily be something merely provisional. Hence, in my view, the proposition follows: Any reality in the history of the world that, as God's creature, is simply finite, will in no wise be able to make definitive, unsurpassable, irrevocable proclamation. If God wishes to say something that is no longer merely provisional in the world, something definitive and irrevocable, not simply in words, of course, but through reality and deeds, then this reality will have to have such an *association* with God as to be the reality of God himself.¹¹

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7

⁶ Cf. K. Rahner, in *Theological Investigations VI* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 43-58.

⁷ Cf. K. Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," *op. cit.*

⁸ K. Rahner, "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations XX* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 104

⁹ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), p. 181.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193

¹¹ K. Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 29

Only in Jesus Christ has such an "association" taken place. "I should say that, except in Jesus, this has not only never occurred, but has never ever been claimed."¹² All previous encounters with the salvific God were trial runs. In Jesus such an encounter is definitive and irrevocable.

Then the tangible human reality of Jesus must be the reality of God himself. Not that Jesus is no longer finite and human — not that he disappears, as it were, into the incomprehensibility and intangibility of God — but this reality of Jesus as created reality must have another relationship to God than is otherwise given in the world But it was in just this whole human reality that God himself could be genuinely present, and it is thus that God bestows himself upon the world in the history of this human being, including of course his death and resurrection, in irrevocable self-commitment."¹³ A better formulation of a Chalcedonian Christology and its implications and problems would be difficult to find. In light of this Christology, the whole of human history becomes the history of the God-Man. Human transcendentality tends irrevocably towards its climax in Jesus Christ. ". . . It can be said that the whole of 'salvation' and 'revelation history' both as universally present in all men *and* in its explicit and official form is dependent upon Jesus Christ and derives its direction and its forward movement from him."¹⁴

Rahner's ecclesiology and therefore his concept of world Church is intrinsically dependent on his Christology. The Christian Church is the historical and visible expression of the abiding presence of Jesus Christ. "Christianity and the Church can see their own significance as the effective presence of God's salvation in the absolute and of his grace, in history and as apprehensible to man."¹⁵

The one, Catholic Church is, of her very nature, a sharer in this absolute quality of Christianity. As such the Catholic Church cannot consider herself as simply one among many historical manifestations of the God-Man. "On the contrary, she must necessarily think of herself as the one and total presence in history of the one God-Man in his truth and grace and as such as having a fundamental relationship to all men."¹⁶

These claims about Christianity and about the Catholic Church do not eliminate the possibility of salvation for those who never encounter Christianity or the Church. While the encounter with Christ is necessarily through the Church,¹⁷ the Church is not essential for the mediation of

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁴ K. Rahner, "Church, Churches and Religions," in *Theological Investigations X* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), p. 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁷ K. Rahner, "Courage for an Ecclesial Christianity," in *Theological Investigations XX* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 9.

grace. So implicit Christianity is possible.¹⁸ "Implicit Christianity — it could be termed anonymous Christianity — is what we call the condition of a man who lives on the one hand in a state of grace and justification, and yet on the other hand has not come into contact with the explicit preaching of the Gospel and is consequently not in a position to call himself a Christian."¹⁹

While affirming the possibility of salvation for extra-Christians, Rahner's Christology does somewhat qualify a "positive" approach to extra-Christian religions. "It can and must be said that these non-Christian religions are in principle and in themselves overtaken and rendered obsolete by the coming Christ Those element of truth and goodness which they possess were only provisional manifestations, destined to be replaced. This means that the historical expansion of Christianity, which even today has not yet simply been concluded, coincides with a progressive abrogation of the legitimacy of these religions."²⁰ I cannot read these statements as positive evaluations of other religious traditions. They also qualify the possibility and nature of the kind of dialogue that Rahner himself sees as essential. There is a fundamental tension between the imperative to dialogue and the affirmation of the historical revelation, presence and sacramental expression of the absolute savior. Other religions are always perceived from within the absoluteness of Christianity and somehow disqualified. Yet the one hermeneutical essential for a world Church is the possibility of real dialogue. Dialogue has rarely meant that individuals genuinely opened themselves to the possible truth of the religion's claims. Dialogue assumes that the partner is worth listening to as well as addressing. According to Samartha: "The basis of inter-religious dialogue is the commitment of all partners to their respective faiths and their openness to the insights of the others. The integrity of particular religions must be recognized."²¹ Authentic dialogue implies the acceptance of what Gadamer proposes as the "hermeneutical priority of the question." Gadamer maintains that one who assumes a better knowledge fails even to ask the right questions. As George Lindbeck writes:

One can admit the unsubstitutable uniqueness of the God-willed missions of non-Christian religions when one thinks of these faiths, not as objectifying poorly what Christianity objectifies well (as Karl Rahner proposes), but as cultural-linguistic systems within which potentialities can be actualized and realities explored that are not within the direct purview of the peoples of Messianic witness, but that are nevertheless God-willed and God-approved anticipations of aspects of the coming Kingdom."²²

¹⁸ Cf. K. Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," in *Theological Investigations* XII (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 161-181; cf. Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," in *Theological Investigations* VI (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), pp. 390-398; *idem.*, "Atheism and Implicit Christianity," in *Theological Investigations* IX (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) p. 145-165.

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, "Atheism and Implicit Christianity," in *Theological Investigations* IX (New York: Herder & Herder, 1974), p. 145.

²⁰ K. Rahner, "Church, Churches and Religions," *op. cit.*, p. 44.

²¹ Stanley Samartha, "The Progress and Promise of Intra-Religious Dialogues," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (1972), p. 473.

²² George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 55

This position implies that one takes seriously the dimension of history. For Rahner, the concept of anonymous or implicit Christianity seems to lessen the importance of history. Rahner is well aware that the Christian Church is not yet the world Church. Yet that fact does not seem to make any difference in his understanding of the world Church. He writes: "The Church is everywhere: in the last resort its nature and its function remain independent of the question of its numerical relationship to the total world population."²³ Yet the fact of the other religious traditions, their vitality, their number, does matter. This fact puts into question some basic assumptions about the nature and the mission of the Church. Theological assertions must answer the question of historical realism. It appears, at least historically, that God did not intend to save all people through historical Christianity. The history of other religious traditions is not accidental nor peripheral to what we as Christians can claim about Jesus Christ and the Church. This discussion on Rahner's concept of world Church leaves us with several questions that need to be answered:

1. How can the "impelling forward moving process of the world toward Christianity" as an explicit history of salvation be simultaneously possible with a true intra-religious dialogue?
2. In a situation where Christianity as a historical tradition would cease to exist, are other religious traditions capable of expressing validly God's self-bestowal? Do these traditions have any eschatological value and therefore also a proleptic dimension?
3. How does the existence of an "official" expression and historical objectivation of the universal salvific will of God affect the possibility of a fruitful intra-religious dialogue?
4. What is the relationship between the project of a world Church and the contextualization of theology and the inculturalization of the tradition?
5. How far can we expand the capacity of the Church so as to include everyone? How does this elasticity relate to the pastoral praxis toward the "official" members of the Church?
6. How can Christians encounter and dialogue with other believers while holding on to a clear affirmation of Christ's universal salvific role, yet without claiming his absolute normativeness and finality?
7. Can we justify a pluralistic situation by affirming that various religious traditions are aspiring towards the same focus of faith? What are the criteria of identity for such an aspiration?
8. Can a religious *tradition* be so detached from a culture that it can offer the path to universal fulfillment?

²³ K. Rahner, "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," *op. cit.*, p. 105.

9. Can we truly understand the meaning of our own Christian tradition unless we interpret it historically within the whole global phenomenon of religion?

LUCIEN RICHARD, O.M.I.
Weston School of Theology