

KARL RAHNER SOCIETY/MORAL THEOLOGY

- Topic:** Rahner on Fundamental Option:
A Reappraisal after *Veritatis Splendor*
- Convener:** Robert L. Masson, Marquette University
- Moderator:** Joan M. Nuth, John Carroll University
- Presenters:** Benedict M. Ashley, emeritus, Aquinas Institute of Theology
Timothy E. O'Connell, Loyola University Chicago
Jean Porter, University of Notre Dame

John Paul II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* criticized the notion of fundamental option as implying a denial of the Catholic tradition on mortal sin (65-70). Since Rahner was influential in the development of the concept, the Karl Rahner Society and the Moral Theology Seminar considered it appropriate to reexamine Rahner's notion in light of this critique. The papers were read by participants ahead of time. Each presenter made a brief statement abstracting the main points of her/his argument. The papers will be published in a forthcoming edition of *Philosophy and Theology*.

For Ashley, *Veritatis Splendor* does not condemn theories of fundamental option as such, just as it does not condemn all teleological theories of ethics. It does censure certain conclusions, supposedly drawn from such theories, concerning the distinction between mortal and venial sin and the possibility of exceptions to universal moral norms. Ashley does not believe that any of the censured conclusions adequately represent Rahner's thought. The project of his paper was rather to compare the Rahnerian notion of fundamental option with the classical "commitment to an ultimate end." Ashley commented that Rahner's ideas are not helpful to moral theologians, because his ethical "norms" are too vague and formal. Part of the problem for Rahner was his endorsement of what Ashley thinks a misreading of Aquinas, Maréchal's transcendental Thomism, which caused him to distance himself from a rootedness in natural science (this in spite of the fact that Rahner accepted Aquinas' doctrine of the "conversion to the phantasm"). Such rootedness in the concrete is much better represented in Aquinas. Ashley pointed out, however, many points of convergence between Rahner and Aquinas, notably comparing Rahner's reliance upon the Ignatian method of discernment of spirits with Aquinas' sense of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, both of which can culminate in a spiritually grounded form of moral decision making.

After explicating the contributions of both Fuchs and Rahner to the topic, O'Connell concluded that the focus for philosophical/theological conversation is not the notion of fundamental option itself, but the transcendental anthropology which underlies and necessitates it. This he examined under four rubrics: its cogency, adequacy, usefulness and necessity. In assessing the first two, O'Connell used the critique found in *Veritatis Splendor*, finding the pope resistant to the ambiguity of moral acts and to the strong role of the effect of original sin (concupiscence) on the integrity of moral acts, both of which follow from this anthropology. In both cases, the cogency and adequacy of Rahner's anthropology seem ironically to be affirmed by the pope's insistence upon fidelity to tradition, for the ambiguity of one's moral state and the power of original sin are both deeply held teachings of the Catholic tradition. On the other hand, O'Connell's assessment of the usefulness and necessity of Rahner's anthropology and notion of fundamental option was negative, based upon his experience of trying to teach them to ministerial students. He thinks an equally adequate description of the human person can be achieved more clearly through a four-step process: (1) retrieving traditional notions of human acts as limited by ambiguity, (2) explicating the modern "turn to the interior" which appreciates persons as more than their acts, (3) focussing attention upon temporality, change and personal development, and (4) attending to cultural context in its explicitly multicultural setting. However, he admitted that such a process should acknowledge "a great and graceful dependence" upon Rahner's insights.

Porter dismissed *Veritatis Splendor's* critique of fundamental option by showing how the break between it and the traditional notion of mortal sin is "not as sharp as is sometimes assumed." Further, she pointed out that the fundamental option thesis has won widespread acceptance because it addressed serious difficulties with the traditional account of mortal sin. Because *Veritatis Splendor* does not address these difficulties, it will not be persuasive to most theologians. However, Porter also faulted the fundamental option thesis for its lack of connection between the person's self-disposition at the transcendental level and the person's observable actions. As an alternative, she suggested a reappropriation of Aquinas' treatise on charity, which can provide a theological framework with interpretive power for understanding concrete moral decision making, yet is flexible enough to respond to the ambiguities of actual experience. This last is true in spite of the fact that Aquinas taught that charity was lost with each mortal sin. Since the power of Aquinas' thought is not immune to reinterpretation, Porter proposed a revision of his treatise which addresses the difficulties with the doctrine of sin recognized by fundamental option proponents, and which is nonetheless consistent with Aquinas' own thought system.

Themes treated in the lively discussion which followed the presentations included: the relationship between the transcendental and categorical in Rahner's thought, the relationship between fundamental option and specific moral acts, the importance of the transcendental to preserve the universal, the puzzle of how

good people can do bad things and vice versa, the importance of an adequate theology of conscience, the importance of modesty in assessing the overall quality of a person, the "teachability" of the notion of fundamental option, and the helpfulness of the notion of fundamental option for pastoral care and psychology.

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RENAISSANCE/MODERN THEOLOGY

- Topic: The Spirit in Nineteenth-Century Romantic Philosophy
and Theology
Convener: William Madges, Xavier University
Moderator: Bradford Hinze, Marquette University
Presenter: Cyril O'Regan, Yale University

Cyril O'Regan focussed the topic for this session, "The Spirit in Nineteenth Century Romantic Philosophy and Theology" by considering "Hegel as Roman Catholic Opportunity and Challenge." The reception of Hegel's philosophy of Spirit by Catholic theologians has been wide ranging: from invocations of the contributions of this gifted thinker that disregard what is at stake for Catholic theology, to censures that do not take Hegel's thought seriously. Between the extremes of obeisance and repudiation stands the efforts of Franz Staudenmaier (1800-1856) and Anton Günther (1783-1863), who, during the eighteen thirties and forties, initiated a thoughtful engagement with the thought of Hegel which is both critical and a genuine appropriation.

O'Regan identified four avenues in which Hegel's thought provided theological opportunities for Staudenmaier and Günther: (1) *Wissenschaft* and systematicity; (2) organicity and process; (3) the natural process of thought which generated a model for thinking about death, rebirth, and alien forces in tradition; and (4) a pneumatic reading of history afforded by a comprehensive view of revelation that consolidates the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of God. Four corresponding challenges raised by these Catholic thinkers were also distinguished. (1) Are Hegel's views of science and system rendered problematic because they are constructed on the dubious principle of the identity of the content of faith and thought? (2) If a model of organic process is privileged, are other classical and contemporary models rendered useless and the mystery of