

KARL RAHNER SOCIETY

Topic: Rahner and a New Generation of Readers
Convener: Terrance W. Klein, Fordham University
Presenter: Robert Masson, Marquette University
Respondent: Philip Endean, Campion Hall, Oxford University

A new generation of scholars raises fundamental questions about the balance, coherence, and foundations of Rahner's theology, bringing new questions and theological contexts to his thought and bringing that thought to bear on questions that had not been at the center of his attention—if on his horizon at all. While many of his former students and disciples have been content to explain and interpret Rahner in his own terms, this new generation seeks explanatory schemes that are not dependent, or at least are much less dependent, on his own conceptual framework and technical vocabulary. In critically engaging Rahner's texts, they take apparent discontinuities seriously while eschewing both overly generous harmonizations and unsympathetic caricatures. Their reinterpretations of Rahner illustrate the hermeneutical challenge of retrieving his achievement for a new theological era.

The spectrum of reinterpretations is exemplified by Karen Kilby, Patrick Burke, and Philip Endean. A number of others could be cited, but these three illustrate how broad the range of positions is. Each proposes a new hermeneutical key for reading Rahner, and each argues that reinterpretation is necessary to retrieve Rahner's theological achievement for the future. Kilby proposes to save Rahner's thought by a non-foundationalist reading. Burke, at the other end of the spectrum, defends a thoroughly foundationalist interpretation, arguing that dialectical analogy is the key to the unity of Rahner's thought. In his view, however, this grounding is fundamentally flawed. Balance is saved precariously only by Rahner's genius and personal fidelity to the Church. Kilby admits that her reinterpretation doesn't square with a number of Rahner's texts and explicit positions. She argues that he is inconsistent. Burke defends Rahner's consistency, but maintains that the flawed foundation is also persistent. This leads to reinterpretations that, like Kilby's, challenge standard readings of key positions and texts.

By and large, Endean's interpretation of Rahner coheres more closely with typical lines of Rahner scholarship. He argues that such questions about the balance of his thought stem from misreading it as simply and primarily a liberal corrective to an overemphasis on the authority of tradition and the institutional church. That account misses the fundamental subversiveness of Rahner's achievement. So Endean also argues that the key to interpretation requires a revisionary account with respect to what widely has come to be taken as the conventional understanding Rahner's project.

Masson's intent is to propose an alternative interpretive scheme for reading Rahner. While the hermeneutic he proposes shares Endean's fundamental position on the subversive character of Rahner's thought, it looks for a more precise

and constructive description of how exactly Rahner's conceptual moves reframe the available theological fields of meanings.

He suggested that a complementary explanation of this divergence of readings lies in the metaphoric character of Rahner's thought. The concept of metaphoric analogy to which he appealed is not derived directly from Rahner. And there is some virtue in this. Given the difficulty of Rahner's thought and its specialized vocabulary, it is helpful to offer a way of explaining what he is doing that does not presuppose his framework from the start.

The notion is derived from Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell's conception of metaphoric process. When Rahner—speaking of analogy in the crucial text Burke cites from *Foundations*—claims that transcendental experience is original and primary, he is making just such a metaphoric move. That there is no prime analogate is not, as Burke contends, indication of a weak conceptual basis for the analogy that Rahner is making between created reality and God. Rather it is a clue that Rahner is making a conceptual move that Burke misses.

Philip Endean responded by proposing that Masson's suggestion be reformulated more broadly: in terms of an appeal to how human language is not static and fixed, but always pliable in response to ongoing reality and experience. Our doctrines emerge from subversive events recorded in literary documents. The Gospel of Mark, or the letter to the Hebrews, are not reducible to doctrines of the hidden Messiah or of Christ as priest of the new covenant. The texts embody conflicts and challenges; and we understand them aright only if we make those processes our own. This will involve us in metaphors, in analogy both in the proper Thomist sense and in the looser, ordinary-language sense, in paradoxes (which is how Endean prefers to read Aquinas and Burrell on essence and existence), in the whole range of figurative language that good literary criticism opens up to us. This broader reformulation enables us to be more robust than Masson could be in his paper about the warrants in Rahner's own work for what he is saying. It does not undermine the verbal formulations of our faith. There remain criteria for adjudicating between theologies and for rejecting some as heretical, but ultimately theology needs to be judged by how well it opens us to mystery, not by the answers it offers.

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