

## THE CHRISTOLOGY OF KARL RAHNER: A REAPPRAISAL BY BRUCE MARSHALL

### FIRST MEETING OF THE KARL RAHNER SOCIETY OF AMERICA

The inaugural "academic" meeting of the Karl Rahner Society of America was devoted to a discussion of Bruce Marshall's *Christology in Conflict: The Identity of a Saviour in Rahner and Barth* (Oxford/New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987). James J. Buckley of Loyola College in Maryland presented his paper "Adjudicating Conflicting Christologies," which offered the participants an overall perspective on and some "further questions" prompted by Marshall's book, while Robert A. Krieg of the University of Notre Dame offered a response to Buckley's paper titled "On the Value of Diverse Christologies." The author himself participated in this meeting, offered a careful commentary on the paper and its response, and helpfully responded, along with the presenters, to questions from participants as appropriate.

Marshall's book was chosen as the focus of the first Rahner academic inaugural for a number of reasons. It is a sympathetic yet strong critique of Rahner's position from a somewhat "Yale School," "postmodern," and "Barthian inspired" perspective. This expressed the Rahner Society's intention to pursue a sympathetic yet critical reception of Rahner in the light of our ongoing contemporary situation. In Rahner's own terms, he is not himself simply an "end," but also a fruitful "beginning" of further inquiry. Marshall's book also nicely combines the concerns of both theology and philosophy, and the Society wishes to keep both of these fields, so central to Rahner, in focus. Finally, there can be little doubt that christology was always central to Rahner's concerns, and in some sense a real "hinge" to an assessment of the adequacy of his theological perspectives.

Buckley delineated four main phases to Marshall's argument. It offers, first, a view of the historical shape of the problem, suggesting that until modernity Jesus was assumed to be that which is "ultimately significant" in Christian cultures. Modernity brought the "orthodox" and somewhat dogmatic reassertion of the earlier view along with an equally extreme anti-orthodox reaction which abandoned the particularity of Jesus in favor of a search for what could be finally meaningful for all. More challenging, thinks Marshall and Buckley along with him, are more subtle strategies between these extremes: either an attempt to mediate Jesus' particularity to universal meaningfulness (e.g., Rahner), or to set matters on a different footing entirely, avoiding all the "modern" options (Marshall's view, within which he places Barth and Aquinas to some extent). Buckley wondered if Romanticism did not illustrate significant interest in the theme of particularity, but otherwise he found Marshall's historical prospectus accurate.

The second phase is that of Marshall's view of Rahner's christology. Here we do not have a total analysis of his christology, nor of his theology as a whole, but only of the theme of Jesus' particularity in Rahner's christology. Briefly, Marshall thinks that Rahner (i.e., his theology) assumes Jesus' particularity as decisive for salvation logically and materially, that he even describes Jesus' "positivity" (or "indeterminate singularity," signified by indefinite pronouns, qualifiers, and other vague expressions), but that his theology does not permit us, despite his intentions, to affirm that Jesus' "particular individuality" (in the technical sense of the definite, concrete, specific, signified by demonstrative pronouns, proper names, definite descriptions) is *heilsbedeutsam*. As Buckley puts it, "Marshall's argument is not that Jesus Christ does not happen to fulfill the criteria for a candidate for saviour. He claims that Rahner's argument cannot fulfill those criteria without sacrificing the very particularity of Jesus Christ which Rahner assumes." Buckley indicates his agreement with Marshall with respect to the materials discussed, but wonders whether Rahner's views on symbolic self-expression, which are rather more primordial and kerygmatic, might not effectively keep to Jesus' particularity.

The third phase is a presentation of Barth's treatment (the "first way," over against the "second" just exemplified in Rahner) of this issue, a treatment which Marshall, despite some criticism, finds basically sound. Both logically and materially Jesus' particular, "narrated" individuality is central to Barth's christology. There is a certain loss of general connectedness to humanity in general in Barth's christology, which an indirect use of anthropology might help, Buckley suggests, following Marshall's lead. The latter also thinks that Barth's heavy ontological artillery dwarfs what is really necessary for effective christological description, and turns to Aquinas for some helpful logical and grammatical alternatives. Aquinas's second order reflection on the way in which christological assertions work (Buckley calls this an analysis of the grammar of christological protocol sentences) is the focus of concern here, leading Buckley to suggest that Aquinas's name should appear in the book's title.

Buckley notes a number of fruitful paths to follow in elucidating the nest of issues raised here. The difference between Anselmian and Aquinas-based theologies, or between Hegel and Wittgenstein—the former of these pairs influential over Barth—might throw light upon how to relate the particular to the universal. Buckley thinks that finally trinitarian theology is involved here. And in what he considers the book's fourth phase, he speaks of Marshall's helping us to sort out the distinct but related issues needing further discussion. Besides the issues already mentioned, he emphasizes the need to be clear about the distinctive ways of speaking about Jesus Christ: scriptural discourse and speech ruled by it; doctrinal patterns in this scriptural discourse (the grammar, if you will); and descriptive metaphysics.

Krieg suggests that the issue can be seen as one between identity (Barth) or relevance (Rahner), or between a model of the person as self-agent (Barth) or as subject (Rahner). The strategies of Barth and Rahner are to some extent explained by their respective theological situations; Barth wants to protect Jesus against a liberal evaporation of his identity; Rahner wants to mediate him to a culture viewing his distinctness as sheer oddity. Krieg especially emphasizes the specific theo-

logical situation of the Catholic church as crucial for an understanding of Rahner's stress on relevance (over against neoscholasticism), while offering a similar contextualization for Barth.

Krieg seems to agree that Rahner does not adequately account for Jesus' individuality, but suggests that there are some correctives to this in his spiritual, less systematic writings, where a model of Jesus as self-agent seems to emerge. Krieg makes a distinction between Jesus' humanity and individuality, suggesting that Rahner was more concerned with the former than with the latter. At the same time, he prefers to think of complementarity rather than simple conflict between Rahner and Barth, suggesting that the best theologies respect the inevitable "paradox" of the mysteries of that faith, a paradox caused by a richness demanding multiple and contradictory statements, neither of which cancels the other. Consequently, he would prefer to frame the question in terms of the advantages and limitations of the models of person employed. And he asks Buckley to think, not so much of adjudicating between the principals, but of valuing their differences.

Marshall himself offered some amplifications of his book in the light of Buckley's paper. He reiterated that Rahner's christological goals were Barth's as well, but that his theological execution of those goals, logically and materially, was inadequate, at least as concerns Jesus' individuality. In the end, the particular man Jesus seemed to be reduced to an instance of "any" human person, and thus his unique status as the absolute saviour seemed insufficiently thought through. He offered a fine clarification of Barth's problematic, which was quite helpful to an audience probably more familiar with Rahner than with Barth. He seemed to resist Krieg's view of complementarity between our principals, although there seemed to be sympathy for that view among some of the questioners.

Further questions surfaced a number of concerns. Has Marshall taken an aspect of Rahner's christology, and given it disproportionate emphasis? To what extent are we dealing with a different version of the issue of the relation between the analogy of being and the analogy of faith? Is Jesus the absolute savior only in virtue of how he radically differs from us, or also in virtue of how he expresses and intensifies aspects of humanity he shares in common with us? How is this question related to the one preceding on the issue of analogy? To what extent might Bonaventure's metaphysics, also known to Rahner, mediate between Rahner and Barth (via Anselm and the Augustinian tradition perhaps)?

In the end, it was clear that we all needed to return to these masters of theology for a second look, and further looks again, at issues far from fully resolved.

Readers wishing copies of the papers can purchase them from William M. Thompson, Theology Dept., Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA 15282, for a handling charge of \$2.00.

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