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 read-
ings lies in the metaphoric character of Rahner’s thought. The concept of meta-
phoric 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 refor-
mulated 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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