

# Rahner's Score

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With the appearance of its eighteenth and nineteenth volumes<sup>1</sup>, the English translation of Karl Rahner's *Schriften zur Theologie* now stands complete in a score of volumes (I reviewed the twentieth, which appeared in 1981, in February last year). Completion was timed for Rahner's eightieth birthday, which was on 5 March<sup>2</sup>.

Some of the essays refer in footnotes to subsequent papers, so a supplementary collection will eventually (even soon) be necessary. The publishers are to be congratulated on staying the course. The translators have sometimes nodded, and some have occasionally been defeated by Rahner's tortuous sentences and idiosyncratic jargon (it has never been kept uniform). It is pleasant to record that the last three in the series (two volumes of the German edition) have been undertaken by Edward Quinn: needless to say, they reach the standard set by Cornelius Ernst in his pioneering version of the first volume (1961).

Twenty five years ago, Rahner was too daring for neophyte theologians; now, of course, he is old hat. Having done more than anyone else to change the system, he is shunted onto a largely unused siding. In France, for example, where his writing has never made headway, the present revival of Catholic theology is coming out of years of work on Scripture and the social sciences in a predominantly structuralist climate. In Britain, if it ever happens, theological reflection would have to spring from a much more literary-critical style of exegesis, in the light of Wittgensteinian considerations. Either way, Rahner's patient deconstruction of the traditional neoscholastic theology that provided the official carapace for Catholic thinking until Vatican II has cleared the way for something else. As he says, Roman documents still usually put forward that theology—the "Observations" of the Holy Office on the ARCIC Final Report shows that, to mention only one important recent example. Pluralism in theological style is already so far advanced in the post-Vatican II generation of Catholic theologians that they have difficulty understanding one another, let alone the arcane language of the Roman theologians. But it is not just that Rahner is still required to discuss the Holy Office theology with the understanding of its motivation that helps to alter it. Many Catholics, much younger than him, are haunted, sometimes nostalgically, by the clear and distinct ideas that we had twenty five years ago. No one is better equipped than Rahner to provide the kind of theological therapy that is required. (You cannot help people to change their ways of thinking

unless you understand them.)

It took the Catholic Church a long time to acknowledge that faith and dogma have had a *history*. The history of Catholic theology from the 1830s to the 1960s might be written as the story of repeated attempts to deny the spread of historical consciousness. The first of the two volumes under review opens with an important paper on the need for us now to acknowledge “the toll exacted by the historicity of human knowledge, even in the dimension of faith” (chapter 1). Even if people no longer suppose that propositions dropped down straight from heaven, the development of Catholic truth seems like the “frictionless explication” of the “deposit”. If the place of error is recognized it would be assumed that the true doctrines had always been clear, as if doubters disputed them only out of malicious impiety. In the first place, then, Rahner insists that no truth, in the realm of faith or anywhere else, has ever been discovered except by way of argument—and that means, inevitably, friction and conflict. It also means that the truth, when finally arrived at, will be articulated in an “amalgam” of ideas, models etc., from which it may, and even must, one day be separated—and then it may look very different. If we have accepted, on the principle of literary genres, that certain scriptural texts may not be as straightforward as they look, do we not also have to allow for the rhetoric in *conciliar* declarations? Above all, however, do we not have to acknowledge that “the Church’s magisterium can err and often has erred in its authentic declarations” (page 10)? Rahner has worked like a mole on this question for years, but it difficult to think of any previous text in which he has insisted so clearly on this obvious and ancient truth, which ultramontane Catholicism has buried.

There is *no* dogma that necessitates and authorizes a division of the churches (chapter 2). Rahner rehearses the papal claims and the modern Marian dogmas in a way that (so he thinks) any reasonable Protestant should accept. Bishops and theologians are related like the bones and the muscles of the body (chapter 3): among many other points Rahner insists, against those who want to make a clear distinction between dogma and theology, that there is always some theology in any proclamation of the faith. (Those who think they are preaching Catholic truth without the encumbrance of theology only come out with the theology they remember from thirty years ago.) In an essay originally published in a *festschrift* for Bernhard Haering (chapter 4), Rahner repeats his points about the “dark tragedy” of the history of doctrine and extends it to include the way in which sound moral convictions and practices may have to be defended for years by (what turn out to be) bad arguments. If you cannot immediately produce convincing arguments you need not conclude that your ethical principles are worthless. For that matter (chapter 5), we need to reflect on what human reason must be like if it is capable of

apprehending the incomprehensibility of God. In a lecture apparently to a conference including Islamic theologians Rahner tries to show that “concrete monotheism” is manifestly Trinitarian (chapter 6). A short paper on prayer follows (chapter 7), in which the Ignatian “indifference” is illuminated by far darker obscurity.

Three Christological papers come next. Taking up a theme from the old apologetics course, Rahner argues that revelation closed not with the death of the last apostle but with the death of Jesus (chapter 8). He sketches what it means to believe in Jesus Christ (chapter 9), hardly using the word “transcendental” at all—which will be a relief for readers who cannot get at Rahner’s meaning because of the usual obstacle of that jargon. This essay includes four important pages on the interpretation of the resurrection of Christ. This section concludes with the text of an inspirational address given in Mainz cathedral (chapter 10): it is not altogether in its right place in this collection.

The next four papers deal with personal spirituality: transcendence as an experience (chapter 11), life in the Holy Spirit (chapter 12), faith as a form of courage (chapter 13), and “Christian dying” (chapter 14)—this last a substantial piece running to thirty pages, excerpted from *Mysterium Salutis*. The volume is rounded off by papers on justification by faith in the context of world cultural and economic development (chapter 15); law and righteousness in Catholic theology (chapter 16); and, finally, a very brief exposition of Vatican II on the place of the non-Christian religions in the history of salvation.

The second volume under review opens with Rahner’s reflections on his attempt, in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, to capture the “essence” of Christianity: he allows, self-critically, that, among other things, the ecclesiological chapters are “perhaps too innocuous, even sometimes triumphalist”, but he does not question the very idea of a quest for the essence (chapter 1). His concern with insuperable pluralism in all knowledge resorts to the familiar Rahnerian idea of epistemological concupiscence (chapter 2): “A theory of the sinfulness of our knowledge and of its institutions” is badly needed, and it may have taken Rahner to say so, but he does not offer it here. Those who are still held captive by Bellarmine’s ecclesiology are provided with a way out (chapter 3): the Catholic Church *was* “founded” by Jesus all right, but not in any simple and straightforward way. The same people, no doubt, are encouraged to rethink the notion of the Fall in terms of a culpable exercise of freedom that marked the beginning of mankind’s history (chapter 4).

Local German pastoral considerations dominate the central sections of the book. With a splendid 24-line sentence, broken in two by the translator, Rahner insists on the radical “consecratedness” of any and every human being that is the condition of the possibility of one’s being baptised or ordained: “What really happens in such a sacrament of consecration is the historical manifestation and the sociological

concretizing specification in the dimension of the visible Church of a holiness and consecratedness which has always existed inescapably in that person in the form of an offer in virtue of God's salvific will" (page 67). The chapter culminates with some very plain speaking: the right of a congregation to have a sacramentally ordained leader takes precedence over episcopal determination to have none but celibate leaders (chapter 5). The next four chapters are concerned with the place of the parish priest in a church in which so-called pastoral assistants increasingly run priestless parishes. With jokes about "wealthy professors of theology among the secular clergy" and the number of priests "who rely on traditional popular piety and help to cultivate it, almost like enthusiastic chairmen of local associations for Christian folklore", these chapters obviously began life as talks designed to cheer up diocesan clergy in the present anomalous situation in some parts of Germany (and elsewhere).

Rahner has not written much about liturgy but a marvellous little text follows (chapter 10): the sacraments are not incursions from on high that punctuate life in a normally godless world, they are rather expressions of the radical gracedness with which the world is possessed all the time. Liturgy is not the creation for a brief moment of a sacred space within a profane world; it is the presentation, in signs, of the saving process that is going on throughout history. The text is quite reminiscent of Orthodox writers, such as the late and much lamented Alexander Schmemmann. The next two chapters hardly warrant their place: Rahner pussy-foots with elephantine caution around one's Sunday Mass obligation (chapter 11), and then delivers a fervorino about "basic communities", to a conference of members of basic communities (chapter 12).

We then return to theological therapy. As far as eternal life goes, we should try to break the habit of conceiving it as time prolonged into infinity and seek it in terms of the *definitive* (chapter 13). The difficulty that many of us have of bringing our lives to any kind of *definition*—even at the moment of our death, perhaps then above all—leads Rahner to the necessity of rethinking the doctrine of purgatory (chapter 14). This takes the unusual form of a dialogue between two fictitious theologians. The one who has the last word seeks to employ the eastern belief in transmigration of souls to illuminate what a Catholic might think about the destiny of those whose lives seem not to have attained final definition at their death. It seems improbable that any Catholic theologian has anything more instructive than this essay on this subject.

Next Rahner turns to the problem of reconciling faith in the goodness of God with recognition of the facts of human suffering (chapter 15). The realities of human suffering are generally supposed to be the great objection to the reality of God. Rahner goes through the usual moves in theodicy, finding them as wanting as ever. His

suggestion is that, far from being an argument against the existence of God, human suffering is the form in which the mystery of God becomes manifest. The acceptance of suffering without any answer to it but the incomprehensibility of God is precisely how we let God be God. The acceptance of the unjustifiability of human suffering, and the acceptance of the intractable mystery of God, are one and the same process. It is unlikely that many Catholic thinkers have anything deeper to say on this subject either.

Three papers remain. The two on Mary are disappointing. We are told that the question of the virgin birth needs to be thought out afresh (chapter 16). Despite its title, the following essay makes no such attempt (chapter 17). It is the text of a report that Rahner prepared for the German bishops in 1976, warning them off any attempt to rebuke Rudolf Pesch, the distinguished Catholic exegete, whose monumental commentary on St. Mark's Gospel includes the judgment (on Mark 6: 3) that Jesus had four brothers and some sisters. As Rahner says, Pesch doubts only that Mary remained a virgin *after* Jesus was born, and he suggests that the bishops had best keep out of it unless they have answers to inevitable questions about Mary's virginity *ante partum* and *in partu*. He hazards nothing on *those* questions.

The final essay, a substantial piece of some forty pages, deals with angels. If they exist at all, and the text is peppered with that conditional clause, they cannot be the Leibnizian monads of traditional angelology (page 254). The upshot of this chapter is hard to determine. Rahner wants to steer a way between "biblicistic fundamentalism" about angels (and devils—more importantly) and that "primitive rationalism" which rules out any intelligent beings in the cosmos apart from ourselves. Rahner argues that there could easily be such beings located in space and time in some way that would be totally different from our bodiliness. What would be so odd about that, he asks. After all, it is no more improbable than that there should be beings like us, with a subjectivity open to the whole of reality but which is also the organizing principle of a peristalsis of the digestive organs (page 264).

The translation is sound, although "primitive" in that phrase quoted above should surely be "crude" or "simple-minded". The "divine maturity" (page 213) must be the divine maternity. And "theological wariness" (page 44) must—surely—be theological weariness.

1 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London. Vol. XVIII, 1984; pp.304; £18.50. Vol XIX, 1984; p. 282; £18.50. Complete set of 20 vols. (special offer) £195.00.

2 This article went to press before Karl Rahner's death on 30 March. (*Editor*)