

Rahner's Grundkurs revisited

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Can it really be the case, as Hugo Meynell makes out in his meditation on Karl Rahner's *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (*New Blackfriars* February 1980), that "the best living Catholic theologian" (p. 77) neither believes the doctrine of the resurrection in a recognisably traditional sense (p. 87) nor distinguishes the doctrine of purgatory from the belief in reincarnation which characterizes some Eastern religions (p. 88) – to cite but two charges in Dr Meynell's arraignment? Can it really be the case that, in his ripe old age (for he is 76 this year), as he delivers what is plainly conceived as his theological testament, and prepares to die in the serenity of that faith which has never wavered since his proudly old-fashioned Swabian Catholic upbringing, and throughout his life-long grounding in the Spiritual Exercises ("I think that the spirituality of Ignatius himself, which one learned through the practice of prayer and religious formation, was more significant for me than all learned philosophy and theology inside and outside the order"¹), Karl Rahner's Christology is not significantly different from that of a Nestorian or a Liberal Protestant (p. 87), and his idea of eternal life little different from that of (horrendous to relate) Professor D. Z. Phillips?²

Well, in the epidemic of reactionary intransigence that is affecting so many of the best educated and the most formidably intelligent Catholics at the present time, no doubt such suspicions of Rahner's orthodoxy may occasion little surprise and may even pass without notice. But Dr Meynell's published work, for fifteen years and more, bears witness to his great knowledge of, and imaginative sympathy with, modern theological movements, as well as to his unremitting fidelity to Catholic doctrine in its most classical formulations. Coming from *him*, in other words, we know that this is not the nonchalant voice of uncomprehending obscurantism. He stands, on the contrary, for the principle that theological speculation should be able to meet the rigorous standards of argument that the close analysis which Anglo-American philosophy favours ordinarily requires. The difficulties of mutual understanding between the Anglo-American and the Continental schools of philosophy are well known. Theological speculation in the Contin-

ental tradition of transcendental idealism is not very easy to subject to philosophical analysis of an Anglo-American kind. Dismissal of the speculation, either as windy Hegelian cant or else as only the latest structuralist or existentialist nonsense from Paris, on the one hand, and bemused Continental resistance to the sceptical and metaphysically impotent British positivists, on the other hand, would be the most likely responses, if the two sides ever met at all. By his training and by his open-mindedness, no English Catholic theologian is better able than Dr Meynell to show what his own words mean (p. 88): "Here, as sometimes elsewhere, one wishes that Rahner had taken a leaf from those analytical philosophers of religion who, whether they have been concerned to attack or to defend Christian doctrines, have insisted on their being presented in such a way that their meaning is so far as possible unequivocal". On the other side, judging at least by his response to criticism by his junior colleagues at home (and J. B. Metz in particular has struck quite hard at the so-called 'transcendental anthropology'), Karl Rahner would be the first to want to learn from Anglo-American methods of doing philosophy – if they could be demonstrated to him in a way that would cut any theological ice.

In the space of a few pages, of course, neither Dr Meynell nor anyone else could be expected to demonstrate in detail how insensitive Rahner is "to the danger of changing the meaning of a claim in the course of purporting to justify it" – the gravamen of the charge. But a paragraph recapitulating Rahner's pages on the doctrine of purgatory, together with that fatal connection ("One is astonished to be reminded so strongly of D. Z. Phillips"), is barely enough to make a fair assessment that – "once again" – Rahner has been led "to compromise fatally" the "central meaning" of a Christian doctrine. Such a charge would really have to be pressed home with some force, and supported by a good deal of argument. It is a charge that would have to be made, I think, with reluctance, and only after giving the benefit of the doubt to the accused – not simply because of his eminence in this case, but because it would do Christian disputants more credit if they were to expound one another's arguments in the best possible light, rather than put the worst construction immediately upon any ambiguity or hesitation. But has Dr Meynell really established that Karl Rahner's doctrine of purgatory has no more content than the eschatology of Professor D. Z. Phillips?

D. Z. Phillips, according to Dr Meynell, thinks that the eternal life which is the concern of Christian religion has nothing to do with future events that are literally to occur. "Then", as St Paul says, "they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished" (I Cor 15:18): the doctrine which is attributed to D. Z. Phillips. It would take us too far afield to see whether this is actually what

D. Z. Phillips holds. It is what other philosophers frequently say that he says, although I dare say that there is the danger always of changing the meaning of a claim in the course of purporting to refute it. D. Z. Phillips, as well as being a professor of philosophy, is also an ordained minister, and, to the best of my knowledge, never stopped preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ while he was publishing the books which have given rise to the idea that his views entail atheism.³ Catholics, I suppose Dr Meynell would say, must argue that it is some "other gospel" than that of St Paul that D. Z. Phillips preaches, although on the face of it, with his persistent desire to expel philosophy from religion, he might not seem so far from St Paul after all: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy" (Col 2:8). But let us assume that, for D. Z. Phillips, there is no other eternal life than the eternal life which Christians enjoy by God's grace here and now. Our question is simply whether this is what Karl Rahner believes, and what necessity there is for Dr Meynell's judgment: "One wonders whether eschatological doctrines on his view have any bearing on what will happen at all, and are not simply expressive of a certain attitude to human life in the present". Whether or not that fairly represents D. Z. Phillips we may allow to pass. It is an intelligible view, clearly defined by Dr Meynell. The question is simply whether this is Karl Rahner's view.

The reason which Dr Meynell gives for finding Rahner's approach to eschatology "disquieting" is "his caveats and qualifications". At an earlier stage he makes the same sort of judgment: "The doctrine of the resurrection as traditionally believed seems to have died the death of a thousand qualifications at Rahner's hands" (p. 87). Now, these caveats and qualifications need detailed examination, but it needs to be insisted first of all (I don't suppose that Dr Meynell would disagree) that caveats and qualifications in the course of presenting Christian doctrine are not in themselves "disquieting" – far from it. The point needs to be emphasised because it is of absolutely fundamental importance in theology. So many people seem to expect far more in the way of positive content from a Christian doctrine than the traditional theological presentation at least can ever deliver. Some of the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, for instance, as Herbert McCabe pointed out (*New Blackfriars*, August 1977, p. 354), seem inclined to think that the doctrine of the Incarnation should tell us what Jesus was like, or what it was like to be Jesus ("the empirical content of what is understood to be involved in the incarnation"). But Christian doctrines, for those at least who have been schooled by Thomas Aquinas and work systematically with the principle that God is the 'subject' of theological knowledge (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 1, 7: "All things are dealt with in Holy Teaching in terms of God, either because they are God himself or because they are rel-

ative to him as their origin and end”), are subject to the rule that, although we can employ an effect of God, whether of nature or of grace, to discuss truths about him, we can never have any ‘empirical content’ because we cannot know what God is (*ibid*: “nos de Deo non possumus scire quid est”).

Heaven is the future in God for those who die in the Lord. Of course we may picture it as a place, or as a continuation of this life but in some new way, and so on. Holy Scripture, as Rahner points out in the *Grundkurs*,⁴ “describes the content of the blessed life of the dead in a thousand images: as rest and peace, as a banquet and as glory, as being at home in the Father’s house, as the kingdom of God’s eternal Lordship, as the community of all who have reached blessed fulfilment, as the inheritance of God’s glory, as a day which will never end, and as satisfaction without boredom”. But, as he goes on to say, “Throughout all these words of Scripture we sense (*ahnen*) one and the same thing: God is absolute mystery”. Eschatology is our future in the absolute mystery which is God, and we must not suppose that, however richly we may imagine it, we can know or say anything more about the life of the dead in God than we can about the mystery of God itself. Thus, just as any traditional metaphysical discussion of God will be shot through with one negation after another, any serious reflection on Christian eschatology cannot proceed otherwise than by “caveats and qualifications”. Christian doctrines die the death of *too few* qualifications at least as often as they die Flew’s death of a thousand qualifications.

Apart from the generally negative cast of mind, then, of the metaphysical theological tradition to which Karl Rahner obviously belongs, it must be admitted that his personal style of writing almost obsessively favours caveats and qualifications. To what extent the clogged and heavily armoured sentences reflect the fact that for many years everything that he wrote was submitted to *seven* censors (some in Rome), or the fact that for most of his teaching career at Innsbruck he lectured in Latin (he can still produce Ciceronian periods without any effort), are not questions we need discuss here. The style of his sermons is so straightforward and graphic that one may suppose the choice of circumspection and scrupulous discernment in his systematic work is deliberate (if style ever is).

But when Karl Rahner spells out his idea of Christian eschatology, and particularly his idea of the doctrine of purgatory, is it the case that, as Dr Meynell feels, “one wonders whether eschatological doctrines on his view have any bearing on what will happen at all, and are not simply expressive of a certain attitude to human life in the present”? Is it true that Rahner has succumbed, for want of instruction in Anglo-American methods of doing philos-

ophy, "to the danger of changing the meaning of a claim in the course of purporting to justify it"? Does one wish, with Dr Meynell, "that Rahner had taken a leaf from those analytical philosophers of religion who, whether they have been concerned to attack or to defend Christian doctrines, have insisted on their being presented in such a way that their meaning is so far as possible unequivocal"?

For if Karl Rahner has no more to say about purgatory than D. Z. Phillips the repercussions would be considerable. For one thing, as he says in the Preface, the *Grundkurs* has been in preparation since 1964; in fact I realize now that I must have been present, in the winter of 1964-65 in Munich, during some of the first lectures in the process. But it contains material published even earlier than that. Some of this material, as Rahner says, has been quite extensively reworked; but the pages on Christian eschatology, and in particular on the doctrine of purgatory, in Chapter IX, have been lifted almost word for word from papers published twenty years ago. These texts appeared again in volume four of Rahner's *Schriften*, published in 1962. They have been available in English since 1966, in (I think) a finer version, by Kevin Smyth, in *Theological Investigations*, volume four.

This is worth noting. It is sometimes thought that some of the leading theologians at Vatican II have since become increasingly 'liberal' or 'Protestant' in some of their theories. So far as his idea of eschatology goes, at any rate, Karl Rahner is able to incorporate, almost unchanged, in the *Grundkurs*, material which appeared twenty years ago. But that takes us back to the days when his publications were strictly censored. His present views on eschatology are exactly the same as the views which received the imprimatur when the texts were reprinted in book form in 1962, and again in 1966 for the English version. The imprimatur means (or meant) that a book is considered to be free from doctrinal or moral error; it never meant that those who granted it necessarily agreed with the contents, opinions or statements expressed. But one has some difficulty in believing that the imprimatur of the archdiocese of Westminster in the year 1966 would have been accorded to a work containing views about purgatory, or about eschatology in general, indistinguishable from those attributed to D. Z. Phillips. On the face of it, the judgment that Karl Rahner has been teaching a doctrine of eschatology for the past twenty years which is no different from that of D. Z. Phillips is a judgment that requires a good deal of evidence in its favour to be plausible.

Karl Rahner, in a phrase which Dr Meynell does not quote in his summary, says that in Christian eschatology we speak of "the dead who are alive" (*Foundations*, p. 436; *Investigations 4*, p. 347; but I am using the German text and shall sometimes stick to it

more literally than either of the translators does). There is no doubt that he means the dead, the literally and physically dead, and not (say) those who may be said to be 'dead to the Law' or 'dead with Christ', or whatever, but who may be alive and well amongst us here and now, biologically and in other ways. Even to speak of "the dead who are alive", as Rahner does when he introduces his account of eschatology, seems to commit him pretty unequivocally to talking about something more than "a certain attitude to human life in the present". He is talking about "the reality of man which is not abolished in death": "in death man does not perish but is transformed into a new manner of existence". He explicitly refers to the widespread conviction of "the survival of personal existence in spite of biological death" and claims that this is precisely what Christian revelation illuminates. That Rahner has in mind some idea of eternal life which has nothing to do with what happens when we are dead seems to me a totally gratuitous imposition on his text.

True, Rahner insists very strongly that the manner of existence into which we go in death is not "a linear continuation" of our empirical reality as it is here and now. He concedes that we *imagine* it like that, and goes so far as to say that "of itself this picture is a harmless, useful and almost unavoidable imaginative framework for explaining what is really meant". Kevin Smyth's translation of *Vorstellungsschema* as 'imaginative framework' seems preferable to the *Grundkurs* choice of 'conceptual model', because what Rahner is set on doing throughout this whole discussion (as so often elsewhere) is precisely to free what is really *meant*, conceptually, from the way it is ordinarily *pictured*, imaginatively. To what extent concepts may ever dispense with images, or the mind go beyond the imagination, or how and even whether concepts and images may be distinguished at all, is of course a very large and complex question. Rahner's perhaps somewhat Hegelian-sounding belief that we can free ourselves from images to form concepts has in fact come under attack from some of his younger colleagues in Germany who claim that narrative (and hence imagination) is indispensable in theological discourse. This seems very much like a re-run of the question which Thomas Aquinas raised when he asked whether we can speak literally of God or have to settle for speaking only metaphorically (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 13,3). Rahner, at any rate, is clear: "We have to learn to think without images, *unanschaulich*". This is precisely what he sets out to do, when he seeks to extract the notion of eternal life from that of the unending duration in which we are almost forced to portray it. He comes up with what seems to me one of the finest statements in modern theology, much better (admittedly) in the original German version:

“We have to learn to think without images, and in that sense ‘demythologizingly’, and say: *through* death (not *after* it) there *is* (not: there *begins to occur*) the final validity of a human life which has grown to maturity in freedom.”

A whole cloud of theology condensed into a drop of grammar.

If we think of eternal life as life going on after death, as no doubt many of us do, then, so Rahner says, we are just as much caught in the imaginative framework of empirical temporality as those who, because they cannot face the prospect of “a time which spins on into infinity towards something ever new which constantly annuls what went before”, conclude that death is the end. Relying on the ‘transcendental anthropology’ which Dr Meynell describes as ‘perhaps Rahner’s outstanding achievement’, the latter develops, in no doubt all too compressed and laconic a form (but 400 pages have prepared the reader for it) an account of eternal life which seems to me as consistent with Catholic tradition (St Augustine for example) as it is powerfully rethought in terms of human freedom and history. Through death, so he argues, there *is* what *matured*: the definitive validity of what was once upon a time, *becoming* as ‘spirit’ and as ‘freedom’ in order simply to *be*. That Fichte and Heidegger, among others, have left a mark on Rahner’s language he would no doubt be the first to acknowledge. It is certainly all very remote from Anglo-American philosophy. And the aphorisms (e.g. “A beast dies less of a death than we”), as well as the whole paragraph of rhetorical questions in which Rahner appeals to our ‘experience’ of ‘immortality’, might not make much sense to an analytical philosopher. “Of course”, as he says, “a person must have made such a decision in all its purity and intensity in order to be able in subsequent thematic and theoretical reflection and articulation to grasp what comes to be in these decisions: something of a validity which exists beyond time and is no longer temporal”. And he goes on: “Perhaps there are people who have never done this or have never done it with enough spiritual alertness, and who therefore cannot participate in this discussion. But where such a free act of lonely decision is done, in absolute obedience to the higher law or in radical love of another person, something eternal happens, and man becomes immediately aware of his validity as something born of time but taking place outside its mere temporal duration”.

In the German text at any rate, as one compressed formulation follows upon another, the abstract metaphysical jargon takes on something of the beauty of fined and honed poetry. It seems to me extremely perverse to see nothing in these pages but recommendations about cultivating a certain attitude to human life in the present. If anything, what is questionable philosophically, and (I find) somewhat daunting and disturbing both morally and intellectually,

is the almost terrifying sense that Rahner has of how decisions on our part anticipate our eternal status in the mystery of God: "Freedom is always absolute. It is the affirmation which self-consciously risks all and wills to be for ever valid. The 'now and for ever so' which it utters is spiritual reality, not just a questionable opinion about a hypothesis and a concept, but the very reality by which all others are to be measured but which cannot itself be measured by the passing of empirical time".

There is a difference (not "still another", as the translation says) between what the Catholic faith has to say of the dead and what most Protestants believe, and this is the doctrine of purgatory. I cannot see anything unorthodox or inadequate in Rahner's presentation of this doctrine: "on the one hand, Catholic doctrine maintains firmly that death does indeed make definitive the freely matured basic attitude of man ... but it also maintains that the many dimensions of man do not all attain their perfection simultaneously and hence that there is a full ripening of the whole man 'after' death, as this basic decision penetrates the whole extent of his reality". Once again, while distancing us from the traditional imaginative models of 'purifying fire', and so on, Rahner quite plainly insists on an 'interval' (better: intermediate state, *Zwischenzustand*) during which a certain 'maturation' takes place (so to speak) in the person who had not been able to integrate completely the total reality of his being into the ultimate and basic decision for God upon which his life had nevertheless been set.

At this point, the *Grundkurs* version differs completely from the earlier version. More sensitive, twenty years ago, to the temptations of spiritualism, Rahner's pastoral concern turns him to insist that "there is no place in Catholic Christianity for intercourse with the dead as individuals". He goes on to insist that this is not because the dead do not exist, and the whole tenor of the discussion rules out any suspicion that he might mean that eschatology is wholly realized here and now. He is obviously offering comfort and counsel to the bereaved and grieving people whom any priest must have met, and whom one must turn away from such efforts at making contact with the dead. That this passage has not been taken up into the *Grundkurs* means that we have lost the following extremely beautiful lines (with which Rahner concludes the 1959 text); "No, we meet the living dead, *den Toten, die leben*, even when they are those who are loved by us, in faith, hope and love: that is, when we open our hearts to the silent stillness of God in which they are alive; not by calling them back to where we are, but by descending into the silent eternity of our own hearts, and by allowing the eternity which they have already brought forth for ever to come in time through faith in the Risen One" (*Investigations*, 4, pp. 353-4, modified somewhat).

In the *Grundkurs*, by contrast, the reference to spiritualism has yielded to the brief suggestion that the Catholic doctrine of purgatory as an intermediate state of purification might offer a possible starting point for coming to terms with the doctrine of reincarnation or transmigration of souls in some of the ancient Eastern religions. Dr Meynell seems to regard this as an unhappy proposal. It certainly shows that Rahner, characteristically, is in the forefront of Christian theologians who see the need for better understanding of the world religions. The more I think of the suggestion the more profound it seems to me to be. After all, on the face of it, some versions of transmigration of souls are not obviously more bizarre or philosophically incoherent than the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, even in a relatively expurgated form. When one considers the kabbalistic speculations of the Zohar, particularly in the school of Luria, as well as the fact that some doctrine of transmigration is the presupposition underlying not only Buddhism and Jainism but also the philosophical systems of the Brahmins and the whole of Hinduism, one cannot easily conclude that it is all silly. For that matter, nearer home, according to the Hornsby-Smith and Lee Report, two out of ten weekly Mass-goers in this country were found to have some belief in some form of reincarnation (in most cases, I imagine, a belief in ghosts). Sociological studies in popular religion, as well as random conversations which one has had, confirm that there certainly are people in England, with a post-Christian outlook, who, since they feel that life has not made them ready for God, can entertain some possibility of further 'maturation'.

In some versions, at any rate, Christian theologians will sooner or later have to come to terms with beliefs in transmigration of souls (none of them having much to do with the doctrine of reincarnation refuted by Professor Geach in *God and the Soul*). The very fact that Rahner sees this possibility, far from indicating that he reduces eternal life to certain human attitudes here and now, would seem rather to confirm that he has something radically different from life here and now in mind. Here, perhaps, Rahner does have something in common with D. Z. Phillips,⁵ and even more so with Wittgenstein, in his comments on Frazer's rationalism, in the way that all three are reluctant to jump to the conclusion that they have understood alien beliefs.

All this, and more, which limits of space forbid spelling out, suggests to me that Karl Rahner sticks by the principle which he enunciated in his 1960 paper on eschatology (drawn on in the *Grundkurs* but not citing the following sentence): "An interpretation of the eschatological assertions of Scripture, which, in the course of de-mythologizing them, would de-eschatologize them in such a way that they would mean only something that takes place

here and now, in the existence of the individual and in the decision he takes here and now, is theologically unacceptable" (*Investigations*, 4, p. 326). I find nothing in the *Grundkurs* which shows that Rahner has ever departed from that principle. As a matter of fact, peppered up with a dash of existentialist jargon, that definition of what Rahner finds theologically unacceptable is remarkably like the sort of eschatology attributed to D. Z. Phillips. It is, of course, possible that Rahner has been betrayed into presenting Christian eschatology precisely in the terms which he set out by regarding as theologically unacceptable, and even possible that his lack of instruction in Anglo-American methods of doing philosophy may have brought him to this pretty pass. It seems to me, however, that, in finding views like those of D. Z. Phillips in Karl Rahner's *Grundkurs*, Dr Meynell travesties the plain sense of the text.

Dr Meynell made other charges, such as, for instance, that Rahner's idea of the resurrection of Jesus differs little from that attributed to Bultmann. Well, we should need another half dozen pages to go into this charge; it seems as groundless as the claim that Rahner's eschatology is no different from that of D. Z. Phillips.

One hopes, in conclusion, that what analytical philosophers say that D. Z. Phillips says bears more relation to what D. Z. Phillips actually says than Dr Meynell's reading of Rahner does to what Rahner has written. At any rate, if we are to persuade Karl Rahner to take a leaf from Anglo-American philosophers, so that he will be better able in his old age to present Christian doctrines in such a way that their meaning is unequivocal, we shall have to find a more convincing example of the advantages of analytical philosophy than a reading of his own doctrines which makes them mean the opposite of what they say. Karl Rahner's approach to eschatology is certainly disquieting, but this is not because it has no bearing on what is going to happen: "Eternity as the fruit of time means to come before *God* either to reach pure immediacy and closeness to him face to face in the absolute decision of love for him, or to be enveloped in the burning darkness of eternal godlessness in the definitive closing of one's heart against him" (*Foundations*, p. 440, substituting Kevin Smyth's version).

- 1 cf 'Living into Mystery: Karl Rahner's Reflections at 75', *America*, 10 March 1979, page 178.
- 2 cf *The Concept of Prayer* (1965), *Death and Immortality* (1970).
- 3 cf *Reason and Religion*, edited by Stuart C. Brown (1977), page 134.
- 4 Karl Rahner's *Grundkurs des Glaubens* has appeared in English as *Foundations of Christian Faith* (1978).
- 5 Think of the respect with which he quoted the Ho dirge from Tylor in *Death and Immortality*, page 70.