

- 21 In an interview printed in *Writers at Work*, Penguin, Hemingway appears to subscribe to the notion of inherited skills, a notion anathema to strict behaviourists. See p 194.
- 22 Ibid. p 193
- 23 *The Old Man and the Sea*, p 46
- 24 Review of *The Old Man and the Sea* by P. Toynbee, reprinted in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, Prentice Hall, p 112
- 25 In an effort to achieve a unitary scheme for measuring the behaviour of men and animals Behaviourism accepts no essential difference but only one of complexity between man and animals.

Rahner Retrospective

II – The Historicity of Theology

Fergus Kerr O P

Karl Rahner, as we saw last time (*New Blackfriars* May 1980), believes that, however much of Barth's work may endure, it has not settled the questions raised by Liberal Protestantism. To that extent, then, Rahner sides with those who think that no amount of massive reaffirmation of classical Christian doctrine can ever dispense us from facing Bultmann's programme of demythologization.

Schleiermacher, who died in 1834, was the first theologian to face up to the problems of making sense of Christian faith in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. No doubt, by the close of the century, the movement he initiated had degenerated into mere accommodation of Christianity to the spirit of the age. Barth's outcry, particularly in the 1921 version of his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, was a necessary protest against critical methods in biblical exegesis which amounted to rationalism, and against an emphasis on religious experience in systematic theology which promoted subjectivism. The counterpart in the Catholic Church to Barth's protest was the encyclical letter *Pascendi* issued by St Pius X in 1907 condemning Catholic Modernism on much the same grounds as Barth rejected Liberal Protestantism. Even allowing for the difference in literary genre,

and ecclesiastical function, Barth's commentary is obviously an incomparably richer human and Christian document, and of altogether greater intellectual distinction. The papal letter, as far as the doctrinal part goes, was apparently composed by Joseph Lemius (1860-1923), an extremely influential Roman theologian otherwise known best as an effective protector of Mercier's reputation and of the kind of neo-Thomism he was promoting at Louvain, which others in the Vatican suspected (rightly, as it turned out) of being disturbingly open to 'modern' philosophy. By the early 1920s, when Mercier was conducting the Malines Conversations, the Jesuit study-house in Louvain had become the focus of the Kantianised neo-Thomism associated with the name of Joseph Maréchal which has been so influential in the development of Karl Rahner's so-called 'transcendental theology'. Maréchal's Thomism, admittedly, differs significantly from the school represented by Mercier's *Institut* at Louvain; but it may well be doubted if the former would ever have developed if the latter had been closed down in the late 1890s as was threatened. The principal author of the anti-Modernist encyclical *Pascendi* was thus, ironically enough a key figure in clearing the way, however unintentionally, for the 'transcendental Thomism' which, again quite indirectly, reopened some of the Modernist questions.

The Catholic Church is often supposed to have left it to Protestants to risk their faith in the hazardous task of rethinking Christian doctrine in response to modern intellectual and social developments. It is true, of course, that the Church often has, silently and without any sign of gratitude, appropriated the results of such adventurous pioneering, usually after a generation or two. But it is a mistake to think that Catholic theologians were not in the field at all in the early days. The difficulties which Bautain encountered in the 1830s, and the posthumous condemnation of Hermes in 1835, show that there were Catholic theologians almost contemporary with Schleiermacher in the forefront of the struggle to reconstruct Christianity intellectually. The only trouble was that Metternich had not restored the Roman Catholic Church at the Congress of Vienna in order for it to make any creative and intelligent response to the intellectual problems raised by the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the papacy was restored, with a string of concordats to guarantee its influence, precisely in order to roll back the nineteenth century and its characteristic new ideas.

The depressing history of Catholic theology from 1814 until our own day is not some inexplicable mystery. Theologians kept coming back resiliently to the important questions but they could not be allowed to work out radically new solutions to them. This was not mindless perversity on the part of the Roman discasteries

(the Holy Office and the Index were restored in 1814 with the Pope). No doubt much stupidity and personal rivalry came into it; but the theologians of the Holy Office were just as much the creatures of the necessity of maintaining doctrinal homogeneity and stability as those who found their work proscribed were its victims. If the Roman Catholic Church was to fulfil the political role into which it had been manoeuvred by the Holy Alliance (“A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French radicals and German police spies”), revolutionary ideas could not be allowed to disrupt Catholic theology. The long delay in coming to terms with the Enlightenment in Catholic theology has a clear historical explanation. And, notwithstanding all the insistence on the liberty of the Church from State control, which was certainly the principal purpose, at least overtly, of the Vatican decrees of 1870, not to mention Catholic contempt both for Anglican Erastianism and Orthodox Caesaro-Papism, it cannot be denied that, *ideologically*, the Catholic Church since 1814 has been very firmly subordinated to certain secular and political interests.

The problems of Modernism were all evident in the 1830s. Georg Hermes (1775-1831), who had a remarkably successful academic career, aroused much enthusiasm initially for his attempt to establish the rationality of Christian faith in a way consistent with the thought of the Enlightenment and particularly with the principles of Kant. It was only after his death that his works were de-lated to Rome by German bishops and soon placed on the Index because of the rationalism judged to be implicit in them. Louis Eugene Bautain (1796-1867), meanwhile, who started out with a similar belief in the place of reason in theology, recoiled into theories which were condemned as fideism. He survived, becoming respectable enough to be permitted to found a religious order as well as to be appointed vicar-general of the archdiocese of Paris and professor of moral theology at the Sorbonne. But he was made to sign some very strong statements, agreeing (for example) that the existence of God can be demonstrated by reason alone, likewise the immortality of the soul, and that reason can acquire strict and complete certitude about the resurrection of Christ. It is not difficult to see the work of Hermes as an attempt to provide transcendental grounding for Christian faith in the nature of human reason. Some of his ideas, in other words, sound not unlike anticipations of Karl Rahner’s transcendental theology. Bautain, on the other hand, admittedly much less worth reading today, shows all the symptoms of those Christian philosophers who seek to place the rational justification of religion outside the realm

of argument. The dilemma remains, of how to relate reason and faith, nature and grace, without either making Christianity entirely rational and natural or making it totally irrational and supernatural.

The 1850s were the decisive decade. For one thing, Pius IX had got over his liberalism. The doctrine of Our Lady's unique exemption from original sin was, as James Hennesey points out (*The Journal of Religion*, Supplement, 1978), "a political statement of the first order. It highlighted the teaching that all other human beings are born in sin, their intellects darkened, their wills weakened, their passions dominant". Many Catholic commentators at the time, insisting that mankind is so enfeebled by original sin as to be incapable of self-government, drew the conclusion that we need the reins of God-given authority to control us. It was in the pope's mind to add to the proclamation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception the list of errors that stem from our unwillingness to be saved from our fallen state by obeying the authoritative voice of the Church: the list which finally appeared as the Syllabus of Errors in 1864.

The moving spirit behind the Syllabus was Gioacchino Pecci, who suggested it first in 1849. When at last, in 1878, Pius IX died (Newman was writing in 1871: "The present Pope cannot live long – he has lived too long ... It is not good for a Pope to live 20 years. It is an anomaly and bears no good fruit; he becomes a god, has no one to contradict him, does not know facts, and does cruel things without meaning it", see Letters XXV, pages 224 and 230). Pecci became pope as Leo XIII. A week after his election he began to make the changes of legislation, curriculum and personnel which would rapidly wipe out the theological pluralism prevailing throughout the Catholic Church and establish the neo-Thomism which has lasted until our own time.

Recent studies¹ show how deliberately neo-Thomism was created and fostered by the Vatican in order to reduce the existing pluralism in Catholic theology to the homogeneous and monolithic system which we inherited. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, for instance, St Thomas was read only in Spain and there mainly among Dominicans. When Newman went to Rome in 1846 to prepare for ordination he found little respect for St Thomas there. Even the Dominicans at Florence who, so he had been told, were "still Thomists", turned out somewhat differently (Letters XI, page 263): "However, on further inquiry we found that the said Dominicans of Florence were manufacturers of scented water etc, and had very choice wines in their cellar" – not altogether incontrovertible evidence, one might have thought, in favour of Newman's conclusion. But by that time the campaign to ex-

clude every other theological option but that of the neo-scholastic system had found patrons in the Vatican and was beginning to gather force and speed. The history of its triumph may be traced by recalling the papal condemnations with which it is punctuated.

The condemnation of the work of Hermes in 1835, in a vituperative and hysterical letter by Pope Gregory XVI, came as a shock to many people and encountered a great deal of resistance in Germany. Over thirty years later, in fact, "Hermesianism" was among the erroneous doctrines which had to be proscribed again at the Vatican Council. It is astonishing how little effect in the long run the condemnation of ideas by the Holy Office seems to have. In 1849 the works of Rosmini were placed on the Index. A real student of Aquinas as well as an adventurous philosopher, he was of course also a great priest and ecclesiastical reformer. He had the satisfaction, five years later and a year before his death, of seeing his work freed from censure. The condemnation of Augustin Bonnetty in 1855 for what might be described as a version of "Wittgensteinian fideism" *avant la lettre* was certainly provoked by his hostility to "the scholastic method", which he thought led to rationalism. In 1857, when he was seventy four years of age, Anton Günther submitted with much anguish to the Holy Office's decision to place his life's work on the Index. But his worst error, according to Pius IX, was his claim on behalf of the liberty of theological work. Frohschammer, professor of philosophy at Munich, was condemned in 1862 for much the same reason. The famous "Congress" of theologians held in Munich in 1863 provoked the papal letter *Tuas libenter*, violently attacking Ignaz von Döllinger, whose historical studies of Christian origins had aroused much suspicion.

Months later, early in 1864, Newman wrote as follows – under the heading "Most Private" – to his friend T. W. Allies (Letters XXI, page 48): "The more I know of Döllinger's views (I mean in his German works) the more I find I agree with him ... I could not write a book and not *show* this as well might a bird *fly* without wings, as I write a book without the *chance*, the *certainty* of saying something or other (not, God forbid! against the Faith) but against the views of a particular school in the Church, which is dominant. I cannot accept as of faith, what is not of faith; who can? I cannot, as I said before, work without elbow room. I cannot fight under the lash, as the Persian slaves. To be the slave of Christ and of His Vicar, is perfect freedom; to be the slave of man is as bad in the mind as in the body. Never, as I know, was it so with the Church, as it is now, that the acting authorities at Rome (you must not draw conclusions from what I say. It is difficult to say neither too little nor too much) have acted on the individual thinker without

buffers. Mere error in theological opinion should be met with argument, not authority, at least by argument first". Since Newman could not read German (so at least it is generally said), he presumably relied for knowledge of Döllinger's German works upon his Oratorian colleague and dearest friend Ambrose St John. He certainly seems to have kept Newman informed about developments in German theology. Indeed, his death at the early age of fifty-nine in 1875 (he was fourteen years younger than Newman) Newman attributed to the overwork necessitated by having to rush out his translation of Fessler's authoritative commentary on the Vatican decrees in order to bear out Newman's moderate interpretation in his Letter to Norfolk.

Things only worsened after 1864, so that the depressing climate of intellectual frustration and intimidation which Newman so graphically characterizes again and again in his letters continued to inhibit Catholic theology for almost a hundred years – in fact until the 1960s. The recent protests of theologians on behalf of Küng, Schillebeeckx, Pohier and others may have sounded a little shrill; but those who think that they perhaps over-reacted should meditate a little on this past century of inquisition and anathema.

If one idea more than another is to be picked out in the syndrome thus so consistently impugned and proscribed by the official Catholic line throughout that century of inquisition and anathema, it must surely be that of history, or of what the Germans label *Geschichtlichkeit*. What it amounts to, in effect, is more commonly identified in British philosophical terminology as the problem of *relativism*. This is, of course, why the idea has aroused such violent and lasting resistance – and why, for that matter, it deserves to be treated with misgivings and circumspection. What Karl Rahner has delighted in calling "gnosiological concupiscence" we should be more inclined to label "cognitive relativism".

The word "concupiscence", whether in standard English usage or in its neo-scholastic Latin context, ordinarily denotes lustful desire of a self-evidently evil sort. In an early essay (*Investigations I*, chapter 11), however, Rahner attempted to disinfect or extend the sense of the word to include the naturally spontaneous desire which might be at work in the case of a decision in favour of what is right as well as the naturally spontaneous desire at work in the case of a free choice against what is right – and, in either case, beyond the confines of sexual appetite. *Concupiscentia*, so he writes (page 371), "in the theological sense is something absolutely bivalent from the ethical point of view, because it can act as a retarding factor both as regards good and as regards evil". In effect, the gap between what one is by nature and what one is as person can never be closed, and the drag of nature on person is what

Rahner labels *concupiscentia*.

The ideal of the German mystics, so Rahner tells us (page 374), was the person whose entire activity would be the expression without remainder of his deepest centre of life, so that he would remain unified or collected in that centre without being dispersed in anything else: "The fact that one never wholly possesses this innermost unity or unified inwardness of one's whole life in the ultimate deed or act of one's inmost being is what is really meant by *concupiscentia* in the theological sense, the index of one's boundedness and world-dependence". By the early 1960s Rahner had begun to extend this ascetico-moral notion to the order of knowledge (*Investigations 6*, page 26): "The total number of possible and necessarily relevant problems and insights necessary for a world-view to be found in any sphere is so great today in contrast with previous ages, that a single person trying to acquire direct knowledge and come to terms with the matter as a whole can no longer master it all in a single lifetime and integrate it into a world-view". Recognition of the impossibility of ever fully integrating what it is possible today to know is the equivalent, or the analogue, in the epistemological order, of concupiscentia in ethics. The "completely new intellectual situation for the man of today" is "a pluralism that can no longer be overcome by any positive and direct integration of all our knowledge and problems into a unified world picture" (*ibid.*). This insuperable intellectual pluralism is difficult for Catholics to accept (page 23): "In Christian circles and in the affairs of the Church, there is not yet a willingness to face up fairly and squarely to this fact". In the years that have passed since that observation was made (1965) the fact and its implications have been accepted only with reluctance and bewilderment.

In a lecture first delivered in 1967 (*Investigations 9*, chapter 3), Rahner reflected on some of the implications of intellectual or philosophical pluralism. Difficult as this may be to believe, so rapidly and so completely has the judgment become a commonplace, the text of this lecture contains one of the first admissions in print by any Catholic theologian that (page 48) "it is scarcely possible today to speak any longer of a single circumscribable Neo-Scholasticism, able to function as *the* given instrument and *the* given partner-in-dialogue of theology". The Vatican Council had transformed the theological scene, and Rahner is able to dismiss in a footnote the notion of Aristotelian Thomism as the *philosophia perennis* to which Pius XII once again sought to bind theologians in his encyclical *Humani generis* of 1950. The century-long campaign to safeguard the unity and homogeneity of Catholic thought by securing theological reflection to a single philosophical tradition or style had finally failed. Not without much nostalgia as well

as unbalanced reaction (from all sides), to say nothing of various attempts by powerful vested interests either to neutralize the implications or even to deny the fact, Catholic theologians since the 1960s (for the past fifteen years or so then!) have found themselves free, or forced by circumstances, to work in a philosophical vacuum or a metaphysical maelstrom, much in the way that their precursors had to do in the first half of the nineteenth century. But it is foolish to pretend that a theology which has lost its language, or at any rate its criteria of conceptual intelligibility, does not justifiably threaten and alarm people in a generation brought up on Pagan monolithism. Widespread satisfaction at the humiliation of Küng, Schillebeeckx, Pohier and others reveals deep-seated rancour against "modern theologians".

Concupiscence in the ascetico-moral domain is contrasted with integrity, so that another way of putting Rahner's point would be to say that the impossibility of ever integrating either one philosophical mode or (even less) the multiplicity of valid philosophical modes in any future Catholic theological system (in the way that neo-scholasticism is supposed to have been integrated) indicates the "gnosiologically concupiscent situation", or the insuperable pluralism, with which we now have to cope. But at once he goes on to say that this reading of the situation does not commit him to relativism (*Investigations* 9, page 52): "What we have just said by no means implies the relativistic or agnostic thesis that there might quite legitimately be a pluralism of absolutely contradictory, *per se* fundamentally irreconcilable philosophies, or that one could absolutely abandon at the outset and even in principle any concern to overcome this pluralism of philosophies". What that means, in Anglo-American philosophical terms, is that Rahner would reject the sort of cognitive relativism associated (rightly or wrongly) with such philosophers as Wittgenstein and Quine. For Wittgenstein, "All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system" (*On Certainty*, para 105). For Quine, "Where it makes sense to apply 'true' is to a sentence couched in the terms of a given theory and seen from within this theory, complete with its posited reality" (*Word and Object*, page 24). How far-reaching the implications of such ideas may have been for such philosophers is arguable. But it is widely supposed that such doctrines about the dependence of validation and verification on a *system* make meaning and truth, even rationality itself, and certainly morality, ultimately culture-dependent, *geschichtlich*, relative to particular and irreducibly different systems of experience or "forms of life". This, in turn, easily leads beyond simply accepting the pretty obvious empirical claim that cultures are remarkably diverse, and that systems of meaning and

verification are culturally determined, to the belief that human beings can *never* understand one another, and that certain ways of life, or systems of ideas, or people, are radically unintelligible or absolutely intolerable. Such views are understandable, in such an age of conflict as ours. With apologies for the rhetoric, it may even be said that resistance to cognitive relativism is the last residue or the tap-root of Christian faith.

Karl Rahner's is the first systematically post-Kantian rethinking of Catholic theology which has (at least so far) escaped ecclesiastical censure. Kant's main discovery was that knowledge depends upon the perspective of the knower as well as upon the nature of the object known. This led in time to the realization that knowledge is culturally and historically conditioned. The single most revolutionary idea of the nineteenth century (it certainly bore fruit in Marxism) is that meaning and truth are, to some extent at least, relative to the society, or to the historical perspective, in which they are affirmed or presumed. As we have noted, this is the idea that the Catholic Church has had the utmost difficulty in assimilating or even admitting at all. It is not difficult to see that this is what the Modernist crisis was all about. It suffices to read the propositions condemned by the Holy Office in 1907 in the decree *Lamentabili*. They are mostly derived from the writings of Alfred Loisy, then in his late forties and recognized as the leading Catholic biblical scholar of his generation. In one way or another they nearly all focus on his working hypothesis that both Scripture and Catholicism are historically conditioned, and on the Holy Office's understandable fear that such a view must threaten traditional doctrines both of the transcendence of divine revelation and of the divine authority of the Church. Incredible as it may seem to many observers, this delayed recognition of the history-dependent character of all knowledge, meaning and truth, continues to inhibit and distort the course of Catholic theology. Further resistance to the idea may certainly be expected, and, as a safeguard against wholesale relativism, may even be welcomed, within limits. Some exegetes, for instance, such as perhaps Bultmann, may well be accused of insisting so strongly on the discontinuities in history that, paradoxically, they tend to lose contact with the facts. But in Bultmann's case, at any rate, this is because he does not hold firmly and consistently enough to his belief in the historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of human existence. As becomes evident again and again, in *History and Eschatology* particularly, the Edinburgh Gifford Lectures of 1955, where he deals most explicitly with the question of *Geschichtlichkeit*, Bultmann lapses into a thoroughly individualist and idealist cult of the eternal present ("Always in your present lies the meaning in

history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions", page 155), as contrary as could be to the thrust of philosophical awareness of the socially and historically conditioned character of human existence.

In his Gifford Lectures Bultmann makes a good deal of Collingwood (1889-1943), whose insistence that assertions are always only answers to questions, and sensitivity to the historic specificity of the questions, led him to confront the problems of cognitive relativism. What has been called his "questioning" theory of mind, together with his sense of the historicity of human existence, certainly bring him into the neighbourhood of Rahner's fundamental problems. One way of stating the difficulty of "englishing" Rahner, in fact, is to say that Collingwood's *Metaphysics*, published in 1940, is the last philosophical text written in Oxford, or rather by an Oxford philosopher (for the book was written on a voyage to Java), with which a student of Karl Rahner is really at home.

Rahner has worked out some of the implications of recognizing the historicity of theology (e.g. *Investigations* 9, chapter 4). Again and again he returns to the difficult problem of reconciling the claims of truth with the recognition of the dependence of knowledge on context or system or culture (page 66): "That ultimate truth, which constitutes the essence of truth, which itself is an analogous, many-layered reality, truth which is decisive for final salvation, which thus speaks to one's inmost, eternal centre, where one borders on the eternal God – that this truth should have a *history* is a shocking and by no means self-evident thesis". That such a thesis could seriously be said to be shocking as recently as fifteen years ago is an eloquent comment on the state of Catholic theology then – but a warning, if any had been needed, of how much resistance and misunderstanding the idea would continue to arouse.

It is one thing to scoff at the idea that (page 68) "the transcendent God inseminates fixed and final propositions into the consciousness of the bearer of revelation (albeit by using a given human terminology not susceptible to historical change)". But the grip of this mythological account of revelation can be loosened only by brooding on such implications as these (page 67): "There is a particular truth only in a totality of truth, in a wider perspective of understanding. This may not always be clear in every case because this totality of meaning, the perspective of understanding, the intellectual system of co-ordinates and references within which and by means of which alone any particular assertion can become intelligible, may be perceived without reflection and as utterly obvious. But all the same it is so. What is apparently a

quantitative addition to what seemed hitherto a totality of knowledge in fact alters the totality, brings new perspectives to bear on previous knowledge and puts new questions to it, answering which again modifies previous knowledge". If that seems a fair enough account of Karl Rahner's own life-long intervention in the course of Catholic theology, its primary intention is to raise precisely these difficult problems about the relationship between (absolute and transcendent) truth and the particular system of meaning within which it may be discovered and verified which he has put on our agenda. Whatever may be one's judgment on his own more positive contributions – for example, his attempt to deal with the "myth of God incarnate" problem by his "transcendental Christology"² – Karl Rahner's enduring service to Catholic theology has been to get questions at last acknowledged that have been denied for a hundred years.

- 1 Overlapping and both somewhat long-winded the essential books are: Pierre Thibault, *Savoir et pouvoir: philosophie thomiste et politique cléricale au XIXe siècle* (Quebec, 1972), and Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (Chicago, 1977).
- 2 The last place to look for a critique or even an account of "transcendental Christology" is *A New Christology*, by Karl Rahner and Wilhelm Thüsing, translated by David Smith and Verdant Green (Burns & Oates, London, 1980, price £7.95).

To get biblical scholars and systematic theologians to collaborate to such an extent that they would subject their work to each other for real criticism might seem a pipe-dream. Nearly ten years ago now, however, in an attempt at just such an "interdisciplinary lecture course", Rahner gave his usual set of lectures on Christology at Münster but invited his New Testament colleague, Wilhelm Thüsing, to reflect on his "results". This gave rise to an extremely interesting book, published in 1972 and now out of print, in which Rahner's course, reduced to pemmican, provided the theme for much more extensive and elaborate reflections by Thüsing. In a nutshell, while Rahner sought to show that classical Chalcedonian Christology can be secured against monophysite and mythological misunderstandings ("the myth of God incarnate") only by something like his own "transcendental" approach, Thüsing insisted that a retrieval of the diverse New Testament Christologies would ensure an even richer starting point. In the English version, however, Rahner's contribution has been replaced by three essays of a more popular kind, dating from the period 1976-77. The regular and detailed references by Thüsing to Rahner's text are either elided or blurred. There is no clear admission of, or reason given for, this bizarre procedure of publishing an extended commentary by Thüsing on one (important) text by Rahner for which another (much less important) has been substituted. The translation, moreover, is very unsatisfactory, e.g. on page 61 for "Christ" read "Christian", on page 67 for "mortal sin" read "original sin", on page 84 for "succession" read "discipleship" or "following"; and so on. The book, to speak plainly, is a fraud and should be withdrawn by the publishers.