

Rahner's Grundkurs Revisited Again

Hugo Meynell

I do not think that 'arraignment', the term used by Fr Fergus Kerr, quite hits off my comments on Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith*.¹ I said as clearly as I knew how that I thought the book was in most respects of very high quality indeed. It is true that I devoted most of my comments, partly for reasons of space, partly because panegyric is uninteresting and tiresome, to what I felt were its limitations.

I agree that it is often necessary to qualify the meaning of one's statements carefully, if misunderstanding is to be avoided. But there is a difference between the kind of qualification which makes one's meaning more precise than it would otherwise be, and the kind which seems rather to destroy it. Thus I can say, 'I love that lady, but I don't intend to marry her', and my qualification serves to clarify my feelings and motives. But if I say, 'I love that lady, but I don't mind in the least if I never see her again, or if she falls under a bus tomorrow', then I may cause a certain amount of confusion, and may reasonably be asked what I do imply in saying that I love her. *A propos* of Christian expectations of a future life, Rahner says that we must resist the temptation to think of them as 'anticipatory, eyewitness accounts of a future which is still outstanding' (p 431). Perhaps it is stupid of me not to be able to see what is being denied here, unless it is that Christians have some kind of expectation for the future, after the end of the present life. If Rahner's point had been merely that the expectation was not arbitrary, or that the afterlife to be expected was not unconnected with the moral dispositions and the relation to God which a person was building up in the present life, it would surely have been expressed in some other way.

Certainly I have a use for qualifications, believing as I do that to contrast Christian faith with myth in the way that Rahner does (p 291) is an important strategic error in apologetics, unless one mitigates the contrast with a great many qualifications. There seem to be two very different kinds of things which may be implied about a statement when it is said to be a bit of 'myth'; first, that it is false; second, that it is an aspect of a story which conveys something of deep significance for human life. Thus it is presumably false as a matter of historical fact that someone called Odin went to visit an old crone on an island somewhere in the

north Atlantic, and was granted by her the gift of wisdom at the price of his right eye; but the story will bear a certain amount of reflection as expressing the pain and loss to be incurred in becoming wise. Now it is true as a matter of definition to say that, in the first sense of 'myth', Christians do not usually hold that Christian beliefs are myths. But, whether true or false, these beliefs do have about them many of the qualities associated with what everyone would call myth. It is not just that gods who die and rise from the dead are two a penny in the sort of material which is the professional concern of anthropologists; Jung listed nine salient features of hero-myths from all around the world, all of which are characteristic of the Gospel narratives. It seems to me, as it did to Tolkien and C. S. Lewis among many others, that Christianity is the power in the world which it is largely because it is or at least contains 'myth' in the second sense.

Rahner is most certainly a loyal and sincere Catholic; but he wants, most understandably, to be seen to be abreast with trends in modern New Testament scholarship. The strains show in his Christology. My own view, which I share with the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, is that the reason why the strains show is simply that what many would maintain to be the assured results of modern New Testament scholarship are not compatible with Catholic or indeed any traditional Christian dogma. I do not think that one can say very much useful about the doctrinal disputes at present agitating the Church unless one grasps this point. The issue is one on which, strangely enough, the 'conservative' is at one with the vast majority of unbelievers; holding as he does that *if* the Gospels are not substantially true as a matter of historical fact, *then* Christianity is false. The conservative denies the premiss, and so does not have to accept the conclusion; the unbeliever affirms the premiss, and accepts the conclusion. The 'progressive' Christian is apt to cause surprise to both conservatives and unbelievers, accepting as he does the premiss while denying the conclusion. Is it not curious, they might put it, to accept the truth of a thesis about anything whatever, especially one of such fundamental importance, while repudiating the evidence on which it is based? Certainly Rahner is by no means an extreme example of a progressive in this sense; in his view some conceivable conclusions about Christian origins would be incompatible with Catholic faith (p 236). But one wonders whether he does not underestimate the extent of these.

One progressive resolution of the dilemma should be attended to here, both because Fr Kerr alludes to it, and because it is of some interest in itself. It amounts to this, As Thomas Aquinas rightly says, we are not in a position to say *quid sit Deus*, what God is; so we cannot say what it would be for a man to be God. It

follows that the conservative insistence that the historical Jesus must have been roughly as the Gospels present him, for the doctrine of the Incarnation to be true, must be groundless. What is wrong with this argument seems to me to be as follows. In saying that we are not in a position to know *quid sit Deus*, Aquinas was either denying that we are in a position to state what is the case about God at all; or he was saying something rather technical. In the former case, the great man was quite blatantly contradicting what he says elsewhere at enormous length; wherever in fact in his works he claims that this or that is so of God, or that the other is not so. And a rather technical interpretation is not far to seek. The nature of the human mind, Aquinas holds, is such that we can grasp in a direct way, by ordinary modes of inquiry, the nature (*quid sit*) of the material thing; but that we can only know about God indirectly, as cause of the world of material things. So if one understands Aquinas in the former sense, he is hardly to be taken seriously; but one has to do so if this particular argument in favour of the progressive position is to go through on his authority.

And in fact it is difficult to see how, if human beings did not have some notion, however inchoate, of what it *would be* for a man to be God, much sense could be made of the belief, which seems pretty central to Christianity, that the New Testament writers implicitly proclaim the divinity of the man Jesus. And in fact there is no great mystery about how they do this. Jews brought up on the Old Testament knew God as *he who* had called Abraham and Moses, rescued their fathers from bondage in Egypt and exile in Babylon, and so on. They had a number of conceptions of and titles for the God so known which were applied to Jesus by the first preachers of the Gospel; the implications of these are drawn out in the fourth Gospel and the Pauline epistles, and the process has continued throughout the subsequent history of the Church.

The crucial question of theology since Schleiermacher, it seems to me, is how theology can be provided with a basis in anthropology without its nature as theology being compromised. The Christian faith must be shown to be available and relevant to people; but it must not appear as a consequence to be something that man could perfectly well have provided for himself without God taking any special action in the matter. Karl Barth is notorious as having stressed the second requirement at the expense of the first, while nearly all other representative modern Protestant theologians have taken the opposite course. I believe that there is just one contemporary theologian who has set out the issue clearly for what it is, and shown once and for all how it is to be resolved. Rahner's attempt to cope with the problem is in many ways remarkably successful, as I tried to bring out in my review; where I believe he

fails to some extent, as in Christology and eschatology, this is due to an admirable concern to make Christian doctrine relevant to human needs and interests, and not to burden it with unnecessary intellectual difficulties. But some difficulties which might from a certain point of view be thought unnecessary must remain so long as the Catholic Christian faith retains its identity. To put the matter very briefly and sharply, so far as it appears to me to concern Rahner, for Christ to be risen is more than for Christians to identify themselves with his cause; and for Christians to expect eternal life is more than for them to have a particular kind of attitude to the present one; it seems to me that Rahner's expositions of these doctrines in particular are in danger of qualifying the 'more', whatever it is, into nothing. One might argue that the 'more' is not implied by Catholic or Christian doctrine; or that Rahner does unequivocally affirm it. The first appears to me quite incredible; admiring Rahner as much as I do, I would like very much to be more convinced than I am of the second. Fr Kerr's arguments and citations do not reassure me very much.

I would like in conclusion to clear up some minor points. A reader would naturally infer from a quotation in Fr Kerr's paper, though not from my review, that I believe Rahner to be the greatest living Catholic theologian. I do not think Rahner's eschatological views are identical with those of Dewi Phillips; but I did express surprise at being so strongly reminded of the one by the other. Rahner, I suspect in common with those who have especially commended this aspect of his work, is concerned to combat crude conceptions of Christian eschatology; I myself, being an admirer of the work of Anthony Flew, am more worried about what appear to me to be excessively etiolated ones. I strongly agree with Fr Kerr that Christians have much to learn from careful and respectful reflection on the eschatological doctrines of other religions; I even think theologians would do well to ponder the claims of spiritualists.

1 See *New Blackfriars*, February 1980 and 'Rahner's Grundkurs Revisited', Fergus Kerr, O.P. *New Blackfriars*, April 1980.