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Karl Rahner in Context

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Abstract

Karl Rahner's theology is essentially spiritual and pastoral. His theology arose from his experience as a Jesuit, living at the heart of the traumas of twentieth-century Europe and, at the same time, interpreting the new academic insights in Church history and the early Fathers, scholasticism and modern philosophy, within the framework of the Church's traditional teaching.

Keywords

Rahner, Pastoral Theology, Universal Salvation, Mystery, Radical

Karl Rahner is usually regarded as a speculative theologian. It is ironic that a majority of his writings are not speculative theology, but rather concerned with Pastoral Theology. Rahner himself understood both Philosophy and Speculative Theology as no more than the *ancillae* to his main concern – mystical theology and prayer, which he saw as manifested in the kerygma of the Church and in pastoral theology.

Because he saw himself primarily as a pastoral priest steeped in Ignatian spirituality, Rahner was invariably a pastor to his students rather than simply a teacher, taking to heart their questions and dilemmas. For the same reason he would answer almost any call to give a talk – whether from bishops, theologians, or from groups of Catholic mothers.

It is indeed important to place Rahner in context. He was born and brought up in Freiburg-im-Breisgau in the southwest corner of Germany – an area which borders France and Switzerland. Freiburg became a Free City in the late Middle Ages, but for most of the 400 years prior to Napoleon it had been under Hapsburg protection and rule, influenced therefore by Josephinism. It is close both to a largely Protestant area of Switzerland and to France.

Freiburg was mainly Catholic but was traditionally a very tolerant and an open-minded region with a strong sense of individual freedom.

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Karl Rahner's school contemporaries and friends included both Jews and Protestants.

This southwest corner of Germany is known as the 'Deutschen Dreieck', an area of Germany that suffered considerably in both world wars. Karl Rahner was a sensitive priest and although he says little of the privations of WWI and of the political and economic instability that followed it, he does stress that his family never went hungry (plenty of other families did). In fact examples of Rahner's personal kindness and his practical care for people in need are legion.

When Karl was young his form teacher described him as 'grumpy'. This did not mean he was given to complaining – far from it. Although intellectually critical, he was never a person who complained. His so-called 'grumpiness' was a mannerism, which he used as a vehicle for his ironic wit and sense of humour. It influenced how he spoke and therefore how he should be read.

Even prior to WWII, the Innsbrucker School, the Kerygmatic movement, the Liturgical movement, and *la nouvelle Théologie* in France were already seeking to bring about change in the Catholic Church, although they all faced considerable opposition. This was the context for Rahner's philosophical and early theological preoccupations.

Rahner not only witnessed the terrible realities of twentieth-century Europe, he could not escape having his thinking influenced by them. Like so many of his contemporaries including John XXIII, de Lubac, Congar, and Häring, he and his thinking were shaped profoundly by the experience of Hitler, Nazism and WWII. In particular this influenced the approaches of these men to ecumenism, to the relationship to Jews, human freedom and dignity, and the issue of 'salvation outside the Church'.

Rahner was also influenced by a sense that the German and Austrian RC Churches had failed in their response to Nazism, with the exception of outstanding individuals like Cardinal von Galen. When, after the *Anschluss*, the Tiroler Nazi Gauleiter closed the theological faculty in Innsbruck in 1939 and expropriated the Jesuit house in the Sillgasse as the Gestapo headquarters, Rahner's Jesuit confères (including his brother Hugo) had to flee Innsbruck at short notice and, in spite of the fact that Jesuits were legally banned from Switzerland, negotiate sanctuary for themselves and the faculty in Sion in Switzerland, escaping with what they could of both the Jesuit and the Faculty libraries.

Rahner himself went eastwards to Vienna to teach under the protection of Cardinal Innitzer (who after the war was blamed by some for compromising too much with the Nazis). When that became too risky Rahner went to work in a parish in southern Germany for a year, a parish which experienced terrible hunger as Nazi Germany collapsed. Indeed the Jesuits were at particular risk under Nazism;

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they had a special stamp in their ID documents, rumoured to denote that after the completion of the final solution they too would be rounded up and exterminated.

Even after the war, Nazism was inescapable. Rahner was by now back in his rooms in what had been Gestapo HQ; his Father Superior was Josef Miller, who during the War had been Provincial, traveling secretly from one hideout to another (often staying in requisitioned Jesuit property) in order to keep in touch with his brethren. One janitor at the Jesuit house in Innsbruck is said to have spent the entire Nazi occupation pretending to be deaf, so that he could over hear and pass on information back to the order.

Fellow Jesuits returning from the Eastern Front or indeed from concentration camps and also the new post-war novices had terrible stories to tell. One shy young man had managed to escape from the German collapse at the siege of Stalingrad, scavenging food and making his way on foot right across Europe with the advancing Russians on his heels.

Alfred Delp, executed for his role in the 1944 plot against Hitler, was a fellow Jesuit and a former student of Rahner's, and there were other Jesuit confreres who were murdered or died in concentration camps. After the war Rahner's students included simultaneously both Martin Bormann's son and a cousin of Klaus von Stauffenberg, who placed the bomb against Hitler on 20 July 1944.

Everyone knew people, often from their own communities, who had suffered in concentration camps, or on the Eastern Front or had been associated with the plots against Hitler and, on the other hand, people or the relatives of people who had been fully fledged Nazis. This was true even of an outsider like me. The memories were inescapable. Rather like soldiers returning from the trenches in WWI, few people who I knew in Austria in the 1950s said much of their experiences of Nazism and the war. The trauma, the uncertainty and the pain were too overwhelming.

Rahner was both an optimist because of his utter conviction about the reality of Grace and about God's Universal Salvific Will, and a pessimist because of his experience of humanity. He believed that the Church had no option but to engage with the world in which it found itself. He believed also that not to engage with the world would be no less dangerous for the Church than to be assimilated by the world. Throughout his life Rahner himself remained in direct contact with leading German-speaking, especially Christian, thinkers, scientists, poets, historians and writers, not just with theologians and philosophers.

Rahner's theology was developed when the modernist crisis was still raging. He had experienced at first hand the failure of the institutional church under Nazism and he felt that he personally was under attack in Pius XII's Encyclical *Humani Generis*. Later, just

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prior to Vatican II, he also had the experience of being placed under direct censorship by the Holy Office. Until after Vatican II therefore, Rahner was careful to work within the bounds of accepted discipline and orthodoxy – take for example his treatment of the principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, together with the whole idea of 'anonymous Christians'.

Anonymous Christians are not so much people who do not "own up to" their faith, still less people who find after they have died that they had been Christians all along! They are rather people who cannot recognize and *name* the power and integrity working in them as being part of God's universal salvific will. The Church's response to them is important, for the Church is the salvific sign which makes it possible for their grace to be named. While they in their turn are a necessary means for helping the Church to mature, their particular grace must come to reality and be incorporated within the life of Church, changing the Church.

As a result of the constraints under which he worked, although he had many theological sources, Rahner remained concerned to work from the base of neo-scholastic philosophy and theology, taking it back, however, to its roots in Thomas himself. Hence his discussion of the theology of grace, starts from a discussion of Thomas' concept of *obedientia potentialis*, and his engagement in the issue over the priority of *essence* over *existence* (where he questions the essentialism of neo-scholasticism) starts, as he believed Thomas did, by understanding *essences* as manifestations of *existence*, rather than the other way round. Aware of the limitations of neo-scholasticism, Rahner was concerned to place it in dialogue with more modern European philosophers, for example: Kant, Hegel, Hüsserl, Bergson, Blondel, Heidegger and Maréchal.

Rahner was not a systematic theologian, even if he was thoroughly comprehensive and coherent in his treatment of theological issues. In fact he always called himself a *dilettante*, and he meant it, because for him a spirituality, which is pastorally committed with and from the Church, is the absolute priority. It takes precedence over any method, system or philosophy. Rahner, therefore, draws deeply from Ignatius and the spiritual exercises, from the Greek Church fathers, especially Origen and the Cappadocians, and from any circumstance, source or image, which, he believed, gave insight.

For Rahner, the imaginative knowing of deeper realities rarely arises from just one image, still less from one linear train of thought. Rather it entails a concatenation of several images or stories which approach *the mystery* from numerous aspects – the deeper the mystery the greater the inadequacy of language and image. Potentially, therefore, the greater is the multiplicity of images and stories needed to highlight the different aspects of and to aid insight into that mystery. Fundamentally, however, anything Rahner had to say has to

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be understood against the background of his *apophatic* convictions and of the *analogia entis*. I think this explains some of Rahner's so-called incomprehensibility. He is often like a juggler, keeping many images in the air simultaneously.

Except for Rahner's spiritual writings, which are often profoundly poetic – as are *Geist im Welt* and *Hörer des Wortes* – much of Rahner's published writings are not writings at all, not even prepared texts for talks, but rather material for talks that he dictated (often without notes) to a stenographer. In them Rahner was in fact thinking, very methodically, but out loud; his voice is sometimes ironic; he continually modifies his concepts, and he argues his *adversarii's* cases as skilfully as he can. As they read these texts, those who actually heard him can still hear his tone of voice and pick up his nuances. All this explains why Rahner often seems so pedantic, even trivial and tedious. In many ways he was his own worst enemy. Yet his students were used to him speaking like that. Each Friday evening he would speak at his *Freies Colloquium* to a voluntary audience of some 200 or more for two hours, unscripted, walking backwards and forwards, always on the move, always modifying, covering every possible angle, as he dealt at length with one or two questions from the floor.

In his old age Rahner used to say how, for all his studying, he was now 40 times more ignorant than he used to be, as a result of the exponential explosion in knowledge, even theological knowledge, over the years.

Rahner himself would have expected at least some of his work to become passé. He would not have seen his dialogue with the modern world as definitive, if only because no such philosophical or theological dialogue can be definitive. Yet if Rahner seems passé, it is also to a great extent because he has rendered himself redundant.

Rahner was regarded by many as a liberal; but many liberals regarded him as a conservative; Rahner was first and foremost a radical – always going back to theological first principles. One needs, I think, to study Rahner today as one might study Newman, placing Rahner and his writings in historical context, philosophically, theologically and politically.

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