

# ‘A Spirituality of silence’

An interpretation of Karl Rahner and his importance  
as a resource for contemporary initiatives in spiritual  
formation

A thesis by Philip John Daughtry for the award of  
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Student ID: 2029080

School of Theology (Adelaide College of Divinity)

Faculty of Education, Humanities, Law and Theology  
Flinders University

Submitted on: 8 September 2009

## Table of Contents

An Introduction to this Thesis.....	1
Chapter 1: The deep silence of the pastoral theologian who listens before speaking.....	1
Family setting and influence.....	1
Emerging Spirituality.....	2
Theological Context and Approach.....	7
Style: Two Genres, One Theologian.....	17
Content—theological compression and unfolding.....	19
Rahner’s legacy.....	22
Reflection: ‘Spirituality of Silence’ in Karl Rahner’s life and work.....	27
Chapter 2: Ignatian spiritual roots—the silence of direct encounter and the dynamic element in the church.....	29
Ignatius of Loyola.....	29
<i>Spiritual Exercises</i> and Ignatian spirituality.....	33
The centrality and significance of Ignatian spirituality in the spiritual formation and in the writings of Karl Rahner.....	37
Rahner the Ignatian spiritual director.....	38
Rahner the Ignatian commentator.....	39
Rahner the interpreter of Ignatius.....	42
Commentary on Rahner as interpreter of Ignatius.....	44
Karl Rahner’s ‘spirituality of silence’ as an Ignatian practice.....	48
Reflection: The three key Ignatian ideas behind Rahner’s spirituality of silence.....	52
Chapter 3: Spirituality of silence in everyday language: the spiritual classic and sacred heart.....	54
<i>Encounters with silence</i> : chronological and conceptual significance.....	54
<i>Encounters with silence</i> : nature, literary structure and impressions.....	57
<i>Encounters with silence</i> : strictures of finite existence and shadows of impending mortality.....	60
<i>Encounters with silence</i> : the ‘upward glance of the soul’ enables humans to honestly view, accept and positively frame the ‘narrowness of finite existence’.....	62
<i>Encounters with silence</i> : fearful instincts in the face of infinity.....	63
<i>Encounters with silence</i> : experiential knowledge saves, and blossoms into love.....	64
<i>Encounters with silence</i> : transforming everyday experiences and routines.....	67
<i>Encounters with silence</i> : the thematic structure of spiritual pilgrimage.....	68
Spiritualities of silence in <i>Encounters with silence</i> .....	69
The silence of prayerful powerlessness in the dark night.....	69
Dark mystery of incomprehensibility; a language of love beyond words or knowledge.....	71
Silent journey into the sacred chamber of true self—echoes of the interior castle... ..	73
The silent, immediate experience of God in all things.....	74
Conclusion.....	76

Chapter 4: The human experience of mystery—a silence transformed .....	78
Rahner’s theology of mystery: the framework for discussion .....	80
The mystery of the human person’s infinite origins and destiny .....	81
Critical reflection on the mystery of human transcendence: the problem of obscurity .....	87
Further critical reflection: the perception of philosophy trumping biblical source .....	89
Responses to criticisms of Rahner’s philosophy of transcendent human being .....	90
Spiritual reflection on the transcendental concept of being orientated to mystery .....	95
The mystery of infinity in proximity: a near and present deity .....	96
Critical reflection on the mystery of infinity in proximity .....	102
Summary of the anthropological perspectives of Rahner’s theology of mystery .....	104
The concept of mystery in Catholic theology .....	105
Brief excursus: understanding Rahner’s theological reductionism .....	112
Rahner’s theology of mystery: implications for proclamation .....	114
Theology of mystery as dynamic challenge to empirical hegemony .....	118
Conclusion .....	122
Chapter 5: Word and sacrament—explicit formation of inner silence .....	124
The centrality of scripture, and its nature and purpose in spiritual formation .....	126
Rahner’s speculative theological concept of the word .....	129
The word as God’s self-communication with humanity .....	131
The word in history as categorical revelation .....	133
The incarnation of the word .....	135
Acceptance of the Word results in freedom and faith .....	137
Rahner and the ministry of the preached word .....	140
The primacy of scripture in the theological process .....	144
Personal reading of scripture as a discipline of spiritual formation .....	145
Lingering questions around Rahner’s theology of the word .....	147
Rahner’s spirituality of silence as it emerges in light of his theology of the word .....	150
The sacrament of the word .....	154
Rahner’s sacramental vision and the silent anonymous Christian .....	157
Jesus the sacrament and ‘real symbol’ of God .....	157
Excursus: real symbolism as an example of creative tension in Rahner’s theology ..	159
The redemptive meaning of the Incarnation .....	160
The foundational sacrament of the church .....	163
The nature and place of the official sacraments .....	164
Criticisms of the anonymous Christian .....	167
Evaluating the criticisms of Rahner’s universal Christian spirituality of silence .....	172
The anonymous Christian as a non-biblical construct: .....	173
The idea of the anonymous Christian is overly optimistic in its evaluation of the human condition: .....	173
The idea of the anonymous Christian as a diminisher of mission and explicit faith confession .....	174

The idea of the anonymous Christian as a paternalistic expression.....	174
The anonymous Christian as an idea along the way .....	175
The sacramental vision of the anonymous Christian as a spirituality of silence: an aesthetic view .....	178
Chapter 6: Karl Rahner as a resource—the theologian of silence in conversation with contemporary spirituality .....	181
Spirituality of silence in Karl Rahner .....	181
A practice of deep and penetrating listening.....	181
Being in silence as a way of creating sacred space for the direct and immediate experience of God .....	182
A rhythm of connection between proclamation and contemplation .....	182
The mutual nature of spiritual direction.....	182
The perception of a permanently present silent question and its potential transformation .....	183
The experience of the silence of God as a ‘word’ that invites interpretation .....	183
The silence of suspended judgment against spiritualities not explicitly Christian .	184
Spirituality of silence in conversation with the cultural reconceptualising of spirituality as a broad element in human existence and development .....	184
Moral development theory .....	185
Faith development theory .....	189
SQ: spiritual intelligence.....	192
Re-enchantment: perceptions of a spirituality revolution.....	194
Kanyini—an Australian Aboriginal spiritual voice and sacramental way.....	198
Reflections on spirituality of silence in conversation with the cultural reconceptualising of spirituality.....	203
Spirituality of silence and recent findings regarding the spirituality of Australian young people .....	205
Spirituality of silence as emergent trend of ‘ancient–future faith’ and the contemplative way .....	215
The parable of the angry shoemaker and final reflections .....	219
Bibliography .....	225
Primary sources.....	225
Secondary sources.....	226
Other references .....	230

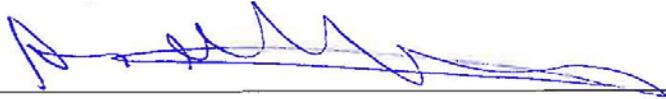
## **Summary of thesis:**

This thesis offers an interpretation of the life and work of Karl Rahner with the specific purpose of introducing and recommending him as an important source for contemporary initiatives in spiritual formation. The guiding notion through which this thesis is developed is that of a perceived 'spirituality of silence'. This notion is explored and developed with reference to Rahner's biography, his Ignatian spiritual roots, his first and most widely read book of prayers and his theologies of mystery, word and sacrament. Finally, the thesis facilitates an extended discussion between the dimensions of 'spirituality of silence in Rahner' and the contemporary spirituality of Western culture and the place and role of the church. An extended version of this summary is offered in the introductory section of the thesis proper.

## **Declaration:**

'I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text'.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_



Date: \_\_\_\_\_

8/9/09

## **An Introduction to this Thesis**

Karl Rahner has often been referred to as ‘the most significant Roman Catholic theologian of the Twentieth Century’ and/or ‘one of the most significant Christian theologians of the Twentieth Century’<sup>1</sup>. However, as with many ‘great influences’ in theology, it is common to find that ‘the Christian on the street’ has never heard of the name, let alone investigated and considered the associated school of thought. Within the non-Roman Catholic faith communities, even amongst the ranks of the clergy and lay-theologically educated, it is common to find only the vaguest awareness of the meaning and influence of the theologian Karl Rahner (‘Rahner ...wasn’t he the guy who had something to say about the immanent/economic trinity?’). Thus the primary purpose of this thesis is to provide a credible foundation from which to say something intelligible and accessible about Karl Rahner to a potential audience far broader than Roman Catholic academic theologians.

There are many angles from which one could seek to profile and interpret the life and thought of Karl Rahner, his theological disposition could reasonably be described with any singular or combination of the following adjectives: ‘philosophical’, ‘transcendental’, ‘academic’, ‘existential’, ‘pastoral’, ‘apologetic’, ‘spiritual’, ‘historical’, ‘Jesuit’, ‘Ignatian’, ‘reformist’, ‘post-modern’. The meaning behind all of these adjectives has something to contribute to our understanding of Rahner’s scholarly and pastoral activity and output as we will see as this thesis unfolds. Which of these adjectives is the best and most authoritative descriptor remains the subject of ongoing debate amongst Rahner interpreters though certainly the cluster, ‘pastoral, spiritual and Ignatian’ feature strongly in current sympathetic literature<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> See chapter 1, ‘The deep silence of the pastoral theologian who listens before speaking’, for specific references reflecting these accolades.

<sup>2</sup> See D. Marmion and M. Hines, eds. *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

The particular angle from which *this* thesis chooses to view and interpret Karl Rahner is defined in the title ‘A Spirituality of Silence’ and it is expedient to make some comment following about why this particular interpretive lens has been chosen. Firstly, this thesis proceeds from the view that the writings of Karl Rahner, whether complex academic apologetic or plain prayers of the heart, are motivated and empowered by a deep inner and personal mystical encounter with God. Secondly, that the primary value of a reflective engagement with the writings of Karl Rahner is found in its affective influence. Rahner’s writings have the potential to draw the reader into the very spiritual life from which the writings emerge. To read Karl Rahner may well enlighten and inspire the intellect but ultimately will warm the heart. Thirdly, the term ‘silence’ is one that seems to periodically permeate Rahner’s work and is reflected in many ways in what we know of his life from the biographical literature. Fourthly, it seems that ‘spirituality’ and ‘silence’ are exactly what is needed and what is lacking in our contemporary Western culture and its associated contemporary expressions of faith community. In short, this thesis chooses to interpret Karl Rahner through lenses that seek to bring into conversation the primary essence of his enduring legacy with the great existential need of our time and culture.

The approach of this thesis is not to begin by defining ‘spirituality’ (something of a contemporary obsession and oxymoron) and then interpreting Rahner through a particular, pre-established grid. Rather, this thesis chooses to read Rahner in relation to significant thematic aspects of his life and work and seeks to construct from such a reflective reading notions and concepts of how his ‘spirituality of silence’ may be reasonably described<sup>3</sup>. The first five chapters offer an unfolding exegesis of the notion of silence as a spiritual dimension of Rahner’s life and work, in perpetual conversation with considerations for application to contemporary ministries of spiritual formation, that presume a Christian basis. Chapters one to three focus on the development of the concept of silence and spirituality in Rahner from the perspective of his biography, his roots in the

---

<sup>3</sup> A similar approach has been taken in a far more systematic format by D. Marmion, *A spirituality of everyday faith – a theological investigation of the notion of spirituality in Karl Rahner* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1988). Marmion’s work emphasizes the fact that Rahner himself never sought to define the term ‘spirituality’ though his life and work speak volumes about the concept.

spirituality of St. Ignatius and his first and (arguably) most significant book of prayers, *Encounters with silence*. Chapters four and five focus on the further development of the concept by focusing on his academic theology of mystery and of word and sacrament. The final chapter focuses primarily on the potential conversations between the concepts of Rahner's spirituality of silence and various approaches to and understandings of spirituality within the broader contemporary culture.

It should be noted that contemporary Rahner scholarship increasingly views synergies of meaning between Rahner's devotional spiritual writings and his complex academic theology. Therefore it should not surprise the reader to find that the ongoing development of the concept of spirituality of silence in relation to the later chapters echoes, reinforces and expands on the insights drawn from his biography, spiritual roots and primary text rather than introduces radically new and different ideas. The purpose of including the more laborious exegesis of Rahner's academic theology is the conviction that the theological basis of spiritual effect is important<sup>4</sup> and that a holistic sense of Rahner in all of his dimensions is necessary for a balanced view. In addition it may also be said that an important dimension of Rahner's spirituality is reflected in the great lengths that he went to in assisting the Church in re-framing its understanding of a truly authentic way of being spiritual in a contemporary world. In this sense, his complex theologizing may be understood as an authentic expression of his spiritual zeal as well as a delicate and demanding intellectual exercise.

This thesis offers a positive interpretation of Karl Rahner from the conviction that his life and work offers a most important spiritual legacy that ought to be made broadly accessible. That being said, this thesis does not ignore the various and inevitable theological criticisms associated with his work and seeks to include some where relevant in the conversation. Clearly, not everything that Rahner said and did is immediately relevant and even legible to the contemporary Christian or spiritual seeker. It is no doubt true that many of Rahner's philosophical constructions of the existential spiritual life are

---

<sup>4</sup> Whilst Rahner himself consistently advocated the importance of a spirituality of experience his life and work exemplify his view that developing and understanding a coherent theology of the spiritual life was in itself an important and necessary part of engaging both God and humanity with the whole person.

somewhat superseded by more recent developments of thought and by the sheer reality of the knowledge explosion in our information age. As with any historical leader in Christian thought and practice, even one whose passing is as relatively recent as Rahner's (1985), there can be no simple 'cut and paste' application of their thought. There is, however, something about this Roman Catholic theologian that profoundly speaks to deep longings in our time and culture for meaningful connection to the sacred and transcendent. It is the profound hope of this author that in some small way this text might become the basis of a bridge between a great spiritual director and a contemporary culture so desperately in need of a renewed connection to the sacred element of human existence.