

# ‘A Spirituality of silence’

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

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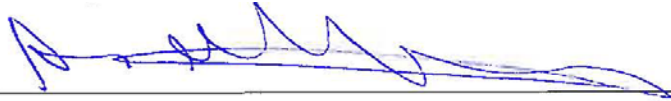
## **Summary of thesis:**

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>.

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<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

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<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

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<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.

## **Chapter 1: The deep silence of the pastoral theologian who listens before speaking**

This exploration of the concept of spirituality of silence in Karl Rahner begins by considering the way in which this concept is reflected in the biographical portrait constructed by his former students, colleagues, friends—and others who have been influenced by his person and his writings. This chapter focuses on developing this portrait in the multidimensional form redolent of the complex reality of human existence in its various expressions of role and identity. The reader is invited simply to enjoy the viewing, and allow this glimpse of a deeply human and spiritual theologian to engage the imagination and the mystical senses. A section of this chapter offers an opportunity for reflection—focusing on the substance of the silent spirituality that is the focus of this thesis.

### **Family setting and influence**

On 5 March 1904, Karl Rahner was born into a lower middle class family who lived in *Freiburg im Breisgau* in Germany. Rahner's father worked as a 'Baden professor' (assistant principal)<sup>5</sup> at a teacher's college. His mother focused on managing the busy household, which included Rahner's six siblings; she sometimes took on extra baby-sitting to supplement the meagre family income. The young Karl Rahner was raised in a family environment that emphasised the Roman Catholic piety of the era; the importance of hard work; civic and moral duty; and loyalty to the state.

Rahner was grateful for his experience of an emotionally uncomplicated and stress-free childhood where each member of the family understood their role and place and simply got on with things<sup>6</sup>. He freely absorbed and proudly owned the no-nonsense, straight-talking work ethic of his family and ethnic origins:

Krauss: People say about the Alemannian [Germans] that they are pensive, taciturn, and work like horses. Do you agree?

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<sup>5</sup> See K. Rahner, *I remember—an autobiographical interview with Meinhold Krauss*, Trans. H.Egan (London: SCM Press, 1984), 24.

<sup>6</sup> See, *ibid*, 24–26.

Rahner: I have nothing against that characterization. I find it quite honourable and lovely...by and large what you say is correct'<sup>7</sup>.

The methodical work ethic of Rahner's upbringing continued to influence him throughout his entire life, as is further illustrated in another interview in his later years:

I do not know what's happened to my life. I did not lead a life; I worked, wrote, taught, tried to do my duty and earn my living, I tried in this ordinary way to serve God—that's it<sup>8</sup>.

Rahner was, in one sense, very much a product of his ethnic disposition and family of origin: hard-working; uncomplaining; fiercely loyal to the Roman Catholic church; not given to personal disclosure in direct conversation; blunt; uncomplicated.

On the other hand, however, Rahner was so much more. The piety of his upbringing became for him not an end in itself but the beginning of a spiritual journey in which he applied his no-nonsense work ethic to the exegesis of a beautiful, sacramental idea: 'The extraordinary God of grace transforms the everyday life into a living prayer without changing the external form of its very ordinariness'<sup>9</sup>. This exegetical project, driven by the methodical and dutiful Rahner, provides glimpses of the creative spiritual and emotional complexity of an original theologian. The piety of Rahner's upbringing blossoms into a personal mystical awareness of God at the centre of his own being—and at work in the world in and through all things.<sup>10</sup>

### **Emerging Spirituality**

One notable factor in Rahner's biography is that he spent his entire adult life within the Jesuit order. In 1922, a mere three weeks after his secondary school leaving examination, Rahner entered the novitiate of the upper German province of the Society of Jesus<sup>11</sup>. Until his death almost 62 years later, he was to remain an active member of the society through which he understood his primary vocational identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in H. Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, Trans. J. Bowden (London: SCD Press, 1986), 44.

<sup>9</sup> See Harvey Egan, *Karl Rahner – Mystic of everyday life*, (New York: Crossroad, 1998), especially pages 80-105.

<sup>10</sup> See Karl-Heinz Weger, *Karl Rahner – An introduction to his theology*, Trans. D. Smith (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), 86-95.

<sup>11</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 50.

His decision to join the Jesuits, however, does not seem to be related to any particular or sensational religious experience. In fact, in his later years, Rahner was unable to recall or articulate his primary motivations for entering the order. When questioned he used the analogy of a long-term marriage to highlight the significance of his journey in the order rather than discuss the original reasons behind his choice to join:

Sometime ask an average man, married some fifty or sixty years, what really prompted him to marry this particular Maria Meier. If he doesn't fib or hasn't lived a life of intense self-reflection, he's likely to say: 'I completely admit the fact that I did that. I was faithful to my decision and was happy throughout the fifty or sixty years of my marriage'. I also accept the fact that normal human motivations prompted my decision. But I cannot give you any more exact psychological information<sup>12</sup>.

The meager data on Rahner's teenage years provide a little more scope for speculation than this direct, somewhat evasive<sup>13</sup>, response.

Vorgrimler notes that, throughout his schooling years, Rahner understood himself as being more inclined towards the religious aspects of his upbringing than most other boys and girls of his age. Ironically, though Rahner's secondary school teacher of religion, Dr. Meinrad Vogelbacher, seems to have been influential, he was not enthusiastic about Rahner's intention to join the Jesuit order: 'No, Karl isn't suited for that. He's too withdrawn and grumpy. He should become something else'<sup>14</sup>.

Rahner's elder brother Hugo preceded him into the Jesuit order by three years; although he did not discuss his decision with him—'Alamannian Germans do not speak much about such things' (being emotionally reserved)—Rahner does recall 'trembling as I shyly informed him—by letter...that I also wanted to be a Jesuit'<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Rahner, *I remember*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Rahner was notoriously reluctant to speak about his personal life or feelings in any great detail, in direct conversation.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

One brief but notable spiritual influence on the adolescent Rahner was Peter Georgio Frascati, a young man who boarded with the Rahner family long enough to leave an impression vividly recalled by Rahner over sixty years later:

In a certain way, he was really a strange fellow—athletic, a mountain climber. Skier, rider, a funny, happy man who mixed with other students in the liveliest, even wildest way. He told me himself that as a Catholic student in Rome he squabbled with the fascist students from the very beginning... On the other hand he was an extraordinarily pious person who prayed, who went to Mass almost every day before the rest of the family got up, and who also displayed extraordinary social concern, as we would call it today, for the poor. It seems he died from this work, eventually contracting polio in this environment. And he thought of the poor until the last hours of his life. Perhaps he will be beatified<sup>16</sup>.

Whilst Rahner does not suggest that Frascati influenced his decision to join the order, the active/contemplative features of the profile seem to point towards the spirituality of St Ignatius. Whilst Frascati's personality is obviously quite different to Rahner's (he was neither athletic nor extroverted) their spirituality is strikingly similar. Rahner, too, was a very human man who integrated a genuine love of life with an intense piety and real social concern. Rahner's description of Frascati's 'thinking of the poor until the last hours' was to play out in his own experience of his final days, as noted by G Kelly:

Although fatally ill, Rahner found the strength to dictate a letter to Cardinal Juan Landazuri Ricketts, archbishop of Lima, and through him to the Peruvian bishops asking them to extend their protection and understanding to Gustavo Gutiérrez, whose life was said to be in danger and whose liberation theology was then under Vatican suspicion and scrutiny<sup>17</sup>.

Characteristically, Rahner's youthful sacrifice (future marriage, family and the pursuit of a secular career in exchange for a lifetime of chastity, material simplicity and obedience) did not result from a 'Damascus road' experience; his decision to join the Jesuits reads as the undramatic natural consequence of an emerging orientation towards a life of prayer and an interest in the mission and liturgical life of the church. 'Ordinariness,' 'non-dramatic' and 'lacking in major events' are descriptors that frequently appear in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>17</sup> From the introduction to his editorial presentation of Rahner in, *Karl Rahner – theologian of the graced search for meaning*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 30.

reflections of both Rahner and his biographers<sup>18</sup> when summarising his life's journey. In this context, these are not deprecating terms, and certainly do not tell the whole story. Rather, they indicate that a spirituality of global significance can also be lived out in the context of everyday routine.

Despite the ordinariness of the circumstances leading to Rahner's decision to enter the Jesuit order, his engagement with the spirituality of Ignatius Loyola could well be interpreted as a life-transforming epiphany. This is vividly represented in Vorgrimler's citation of Rahner's speaking in the name of Ignatius in late-life writing<sup>19</sup>:

I have experienced God directly. I have experienced God, the nameless and unfathomable one, the one who is silent and yet near, in the trinity of his approach to me. I have really encountered God, the true and living one, the one for whom this name that quenches all names is fitting. God himself. I have experienced God himself, not human words about him. This experience is not barred to anyone. I want to communicate it to others as well as I can<sup>20</sup>.

Vorgrimler notes that Rahner's youthful discovery and experience of the Ignatian spiritual exercises represented for him

the specific place where outward help from the church met up with the inner grace of God and thus made possible the most important thing in his life, direct experience of God<sup>21</sup>.

Throughout his early formative Jesuit years (1922–25), Rahner's experience of God was to influence and permeate all of his later theological writings—significantly, the Ignatian idea of 'finding God in all things'<sup>22</sup>.

During his formal academic training, Rahner discovered the concepts and language of both patristic theology and Heidegger's contemporary existentialist philosophy. Rahner's re-interpretive approach to the Roman Catholic dogma of his era, a consequence of the

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<sup>18</sup> See for example K. Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, in Fount Christian Thinkers, Vardy, P. series ed. (London: Fount, 1997), xi – xii, xiv, 73-74; K. Rahner, *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, Imhof, P. & Biallowons, H. eds. Translation edited by H. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 189.

<sup>19</sup> See 'Ignatius speaks to modern Jesuits,' in K. Rahner and P. Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola*, Trans. R. Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), 11-38, for the full context from which the citation is drawn.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Rahner cited in Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>22</sup> P. LaFountain, 'Karl Rahner (1904-1984)'. Retrieved June 7, 2004, from [http://people.bu.edu/wildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt\\_themes](http://people.bu.edu/wildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_themes)

dialectic between these two, has led to his being caricatured as a ‘theological atomic physicist’<sup>23</sup>: hopelessly complicated and obscure. While his theological prose is difficult and complex, a recurring theme within Rahner’s theologising is his simple, personal, immediate experience of God<sup>24</sup>.

The primacy of spiritual experience in Rahner’s theologising is apparent in the content and timing of Rahner’s first published book *Worte ins Schwiegen* (1938; literally, ‘words into silence’; the English title is *Encounters with silence*<sup>25</sup>). The text—initially published as a series of entries in a journal on spirituality for priests—consists of ten meditations whose titles include ‘God of my Life’, ‘God of my Prayer’, ‘God of my daily Routine’. In this text, Rahner’s readers see a reflection of their own spiritual highs and lows and encounter an accessible and trustworthy spiritual companion who invites them to participate in the ministry and experience of prayer<sup>26</sup>. These meditations appeared at the end of Rahner’s lengthy formal studies in philosophy and theology and just before he began his first teaching position at the University of Innsbruck. The significance of this small publication will be discussed more fully in chapter 3.

One significant way of interpreting Rahner’s life and work is to view his immediate experience of God as primary in his theologising. Rahner reflects on this experience at a devotional and pastoral level (in his prayers and homilies) and at a more academic level (in his theological lectures and articles). The latter process involves an intellectual exposition with reference to the concepts and language of both the tradition of the church and the tools of his philosophical approach. Although this interpretation of Rahner is disputed, later chapters (‘Mystery’, ‘Word and Sacrament’) demonstrate that the primacy of immediate experience is at the forefront of Rahner’s own mind as he reflects on his extensive career:

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<sup>23</sup> A phrase we will unpack later in this chapter.

<sup>24</sup> See for example, R. Kress, *A Rahner Handbook* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1982), 4; W Dych, *Karl Rahner* (London: Continuum, 1992), 32-46; H Egan, ‘Theology and spirituality’, in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, Marmion D. & Hines M. eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13-28.

<sup>25</sup> J.P. Galvin, ‘Before the holy mystery: Karl Rahner’s thought on God’, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 9 (2) (1993): 229-231.

<sup>26</sup> W.F. Bell, ‘Rambling with Rahner’, *America* 170 (10) (March, 1994): 14.

But 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<sup>27</sup>.

Throughout his career, Rahner continued to write and speak in the language of everyday spirituality and in terms congruent with his role as a tertiary theological educator and ‘professional’ academic as appropriate. Through his recorded sermons, meditations, interviews, prayers and other devotional writings, Rahner’s theology is accessible to many who may find his more academic theological writings intimidating in their complexity<sup>28</sup>.

### **Theological Context and Approach**

Beyond the primary and pervading influence of his personal mystical experience, Rahner’s approach to theology is particularly influenced by three interconnecting factors:

- the contemporary intellectual/social climate of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Rahner’s particular philosophical and theological education pathway
- his vocational identity as a Jesuit priest and ambassador for Christ.

I will explore these factors separately before drawing them together in dialogue for the purpose of further developing this biographical sketch.

In his seminal introduction to Rahner’s thought, Karl-Heinz Weger outlines Rahner’s perception of the ‘faith crisis’ confronting modern, western humanity<sup>29</sup>. Essentially, Rahner was concerned that ‘a gulf had opened up between Christian faith expressed in firm concepts (doctrine) and everyday reality’. In Rahner’s view this gulf was due primarily to the lack of dialogue between a scientifically influenced and intellectually enlightened culture, and an inflexible dogmatic ecclesia. Rahner wanted the church to recognise its calling to faithful, incarnate presence within the cultural sea of a pluralistic epoch. He wished to highlight the fact that modern humanity has access to increasing

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<sup>27</sup> Karl Rahner, cited in, W. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 6.

<sup>28</sup> R. Masson, ‘Karl Rahner: A Brief Biography’. Retrieved June 7, 2004, from [http://www.krs.stjohnsem.edu/Karl\\_Rahner.htm](http://www.krs.stjohnsem.edu/Karl_Rahner.htm); D. Marmion, ‘Theology, Spirituality, and the Role of Experience in Karl Rahner’, *The invitation to risk everything - a conference celebrating Karl Rahner’s theology on the centenary of his birth* (Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick: February, 2004). Retrieved June 7, 2004, from <http://cctv.mic.ul.ie/confsched.html>

<sup>29</sup> Weger, *Karl Rahner – An introduction to his theology*, 2-7.



bodies of knowledge, history and alternate spiritual experience. Rahner argued that this kind of knowledge raises questions that must be considered in the theological process, and not merely dismissed with appeal to creed, doctrine or biblical statement.

As Rahner perceived it, the problem was that the theology of the church had become 'calcified'. He argued that, for the first fifteen centuries or so of its existence, the Western church worked out its theology in a more or less 'homogenous spiritual and intellectual climate'. Rahner believed that new sociological conditions require theological reflection responsive to different existential questions emerging from the culture. These new questions must be faced and worked through with a spirit of historical faithfulness, intellectual integrity and pastoral sensitivity. This process calls for an honest and radical reappraisal and reinterpretation of the historical content of the faith, not a dismissal of historic doctrine or any aspect of the church's teaching. It must begin with a careful examination of Christian doctrine with a view to discerning its essential 'spirit' or 'core' in its original historic context. The hermeneutic task is to re-express the essential spirit of the doctrine in language and symbols intelligible to a contemporary generation and pertinent to the important existential questions they face.

It is obviously necessary, Rahner believes, but it must also be possible to know what is meant by the earlier statements of faith, and to reformulate this content so that it accords with modern [humans] understanding of [themselves] and the world. The new situation in which faith is, for many different reasons, placed calls for a new language of faith, and this new language cannot under any circumstances be the ghetto language of the initiated<sup>30</sup>.

Under the direction of his Jesuit superiors, Rahner's experience during his educational journey was to influence and empower him to respond to the crisis and opportunity represented by the social climate and the place of the church. Following the completion of his two-year novitiate and the taking of his Jesuit vows, he began a three-year course of philosophical studies, beginning in Feldkirch and finishing in Pullach, near Munich. Robert Kress notes that during 'these years Rahner devoted special effort to the study of Immanuel Kant and the Belgian Jesuit, Joseph Maréchal, who had attempted to reconcile

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 6.

the philosophies of Kant and [Thomas] Aquinas'<sup>31</sup>. Rahner's interest in this reconciliation is indicative of his life-long pastoral motivation to find creative ways to reinterpret Christian truths in order to liberate rather than bind.

Following his philosophical studies and prior to beginning his theological studies in 1929 at the Jesuit school of theology in Valkenburg, Holland, Rahner was assigned to a two-year period of practical work: teaching Latin to novices in Feldkirch. Even during his school years, Rahner understood himself as a person uncommonly interested in the pious aspects of his upbringing; his entrance into formal theological studies seems to have 'fanned into flame' his growing fascination with the mystical nature of humanity, and the unique place of the church in its spiritual union with Christ. Vorgrimler notes that Rahner was

interested in the mystical idea in the church fathers that the church had sprung from the wound in the side of Christ...

In the very first year of his theological education he read almost all the sources of the second Christian century, like the Apostolic Fathers, Justin and Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, and also Crysostom, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine<sup>32</sup>.

This immense reading energy reflects Rahner's passionate spirit of inquiry, often recognised by those who encountered him<sup>33</sup>; in this instance it was directed towards his grasp of the significant sources of the historical Christian faith. This early research and developing intimacy with the writings of the church fathers contributed to Rahner's later persuasive advocacy for the reinterpretation of the tradition.

On 26 July 1932, Cardinal Michael Faulhaber ordained Rahner and sixteen of his Jesuit brothers in the church of St Michael, Munich. Following his ordination as a priest and the completion of a further year of theological study, at St Andrea in Austria, Rahner made his tertianship: the final phase of Jesuit formation traditionally devoted to prayer and pastoral work. Following the completion of his year of tertianship in 1934, Rahner's

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<sup>31</sup> Kress, *A Rahner handbook*, (Atlanta Georgia: John Knox Press, 1982), 2; see also Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 52.

<sup>33</sup> E. Kennedy, 'Quiet Mover of the Catholic Church' *New York Times Magazine* (September 23, 1979): 68.

superiors, having decided that he was to be appointed to teach the history of philosophy at Pullach, directed him to undertake a doctoral program in philosophy at the university of his hometown, Freiburg. William Dych notes that this ‘was to be a time of opportunity and disappointment’<sup>34</sup>.

The opportunity: Rahner’s intellectual formation through a focused engagement with modern philosophy, delving more deeply into Kant and Maréchal—and in particular his participation in Martin Heidegger’s seminars; Heidegger was a profound influence on Rahner’s bent towards the reinterpretation of tradition.

He (Heidegger) taught us how to read texts in a new way, to ask what is behind the text, to see connections between a philosopher’s individual texts and his statements that wouldn’t immediately strike the ordinary person, and so on. In this way he developed an important philosophy of Being. That can and will always have a fascinating significance for a Catholic theologian for whom God is and remains the inexpressible mystery. In my manner of thinking, in the courage to question anew so much considered self-evident, in the struggle to incorporate modern philosophy into today’s Christian theology, here I have certainly learned something from Heidegger and will, therefore, always be thankful to him<sup>35</sup>.

The disappointment: Rahner’s doctoral thesis, *Geist im Welt*, described by La Fountain as

an intriguing interpretation of Aquinas’s epistemology influenced by the transcendental Thomism of Joseph Maréchal and the existentialism of Martin Heidegger (that is, the relationship between Aquinas’s notion of dynamic mind and Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world)<sup>36</sup>,

was rejected by his conservative supervisor, Martin Honecker—apparently because ‘it was influenced too much by Heidegger and did not sufficiently express the Catholic neo-scholastic tradition’<sup>37</sup>. The rejection of Rahner’s thesis reflects of the state of Catholic theology during this period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, vividly described by Eugene Kennedy:

In 1910, the Pope required all priests to take an oath against the heresy of Modernism. Only about 40 priests in the entire world refused to take the oath. A long dark night settled over Catholic theological activity. As the Church historian Michael V. Gannon has described it, ‘the critical mind lay at ruinous discount.’...Before Vatican II, textbooks of theology were compendiums of truths

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<sup>34</sup> *Karl Rahner*, 5-6.

<sup>35</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 59.

<sup>36</sup> LaFountain, ‘Karl Rahner (1904-1984)’, 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

established and errors refuted by the diligent application of St. Thomas's principles. Such a use of his work might well have horrified Aquinas himself, since it left no room for new questions<sup>38</sup>.

Rahner's thesis—and in fact his whole life's work—was directed precisely against this legalistic use of tradition.

The footnote to this initial clash between 'the old and the new wineskins' is that Martin Honecker is described as 'a long forgotten professor at the University of Freiburg'<sup>39</sup> (in an article profiling Rahner, then in his seventies). By contrast, Rahner's rejected thesis was published in 1939 (subsequently translated into several languages including English as *Spirit in the World*). It laid the foundation for Rahner's international writing, teaching and speaking career that has resulted in an estimated 4000 publications under his name and a universal reputation as one of the most significant Catholic—and indeed Christian—theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rahner himself recalled that the outcome of Honecker's decision was hardly debilitating on either a personal or public level:

My dissertation director, Martin Honecker, flunked me...Because I had been reassigned from philosophy to teach theology at Innsbruck, this didn't upset me for long...My rejected thesis was then published without my receiving a doctorate...So this failure did not appreciably affect my self-esteem<sup>40</sup>.

In the final phase of Rahner's formal education, his Jesuit superiors directed him to return to Innsbruck to complete a doctorate in theology as preparation for teaching theology. Building on the foundation of his earlier patristic studies, Rahner produced his thesis, *The Origin of the Church as Second Eve from the Side of Christ the Second Adam – An Investigation of the Typological Significance of John 19.34*, within a relatively short period. His second thesis was accepted (though ironically it remains unpublished); together with some prior published articles on the spiritual theology of Origen, Evagrius, Ponticus and Bonaventure, this work qualified him to begin teaching dogmatics at Innsbruck, the university that had finally granted him his doctorate.

Following a landmark series of lectures on 'The Basis of a Philosophy of Religion' (later published as *Hörer Des Wortes*, 'hearers of the word'), delivered to the Seventh Salzburg

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<sup>38</sup> 'Quiet Mover of the Catholic Church', 66.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *I Remember*, 42-43.

High School Week, Rahner began his teaching career at Innsbruck in the winter semester of 1937.<sup>41</sup>

Rahner's journey in formal education was complex and multifaceted, and equipped him to exercise a pervasive influence within an emerging climate of contemporary theological debate, climaxing in the historical transformation of Catholic understanding and practice resulting from Vatican II. In addition to his profound personal and mystical insights, Rahner had the intellectual tools to begin his lifelong task of articulating the mystery of God in language faithful to the tradition—and at the same time to engage in dialogue with the existential perceptions of modern experience and self-understanding.

The final influential factor in Rahner's approach to theology is his vocational self-understanding. In the forward to his book, Weger refers to Rahner's remarkable statement (or understatement), reflecting on his life's work:

I certainly did not become a theologian with the aim of introducing new ideas or of heralding or inaugurating a new period of theology. I am a Jesuit, a member of a religious order and a priest. As a theologian, I had to give lectures<sup>42</sup>.

Rahner's academic career, the outcome of which certainly was an inauguration of a new theological period, vividly demonstrates this statement. Rahner's biography reveals a dutiful and uncomplaining son of the church and an obedient servant of the order. His career does not emerge from a strong sense of unique and visionary direction; he does not lobby his superiors for permission and resources to follow personalised interests and leadings. Rather, Rahner simply does what he's told and goes where his superiors direct him, trusting in 'the abandonment to divine providence'<sup>43</sup>. In fact, in 'God of law' (1960, 35–44), a chapter from the previously mentioned *Encounters with Silence*, Rahner reflects on his particular spirituality of obedience:

I don't want to be a legalist, nor a mere servant of men...And still I must fulfil the commands of my human superiors. I want to observe their ordinances with all my heart...If I look upon my obedience to these human laws as a demonstration of

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<sup>41</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 62-63, see also Kress, *A Rahner Handbook*, 3-4.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in *Karl Rahner – An introduction to his theology*, viii.

<sup>43</sup> The title and concept of the posthumous classic based on the writings and records of talks given by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French Jesuit, Jean Pierre De Causadde.

homage for Your beloved free Will, which rules over me according to its own good pleasure, than I can truly find You therein...In no command do I belong to men, but to You<sup>44</sup>.

Rahner's quiet acceptance of duty has little to do with any idealistic or legalistic notion of the unfailing wisdom and piety of his superiors, or the perfection of the communal life of the Society of Jesus. For Rahner, the order was the tangible point and structure in which he experienced his 'innermost and most authentic relationship to God, his theology and all his other activity'<sup>45</sup>.

Central to this profound sense of the order as a 'spiritual home' was the person and teaching of St Ignatius of Loyola. The spirituality of the exercises and the model of Ignatius enabled Rahner to transcend the realities of his experience of both the highs and lows of the human, and the political, dynamics of the order. It is somewhat ironic that Rahner developed his renewing theology, with all of its language of freedom and grace, in the context of a disciplined participation within the historic structure of a hierarchical religious community. This may imply a contradiction between the man and his message; however, those who become familiar with his thought and spiritual companionship will recognise that, for Rahner, freedom and grace are experienced not through a particular construct, or social utopia. For Rahner, freedom and grace are experienced through the encounter with the immanent God who infuses life's circumstances, as they are, with the transcendent quality of loving presence and mystery. In the words of Johann Baptist Metz, a former student, colleague and critic,

Rahner's theology is the dogmatics of the ordinary, dare I say average, Christian concerned with the history of his life—the mystical biography of an undramatic life without great changes and conversions<sup>46</sup>.

Rahner understood his vocation as primarily emerging from the context of his identity as a member of a priestly community and its intrinsic pastoral function.

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<sup>44</sup> 42, 43 & 44.

<sup>45</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 34.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in *ibid*, 22.

Earlier in this chapter, Rahner's methodical work ethic was ascribed to his German, middle-class upbringing. His personality has naturally been influenced by the spirit and culture of his social setting. However, as his biography reveals, Rahner's sense of pastoral motivation was the driving force behind his immense labours: Karl Rahner was first and foremost a human being who cared about other human beings. This profound care was expressed holistically: through his academic labours; his personal spirit and way of being with people; and by his practical actions. His particular passion, as a priest, was to support people's accessing, in the context of their everyday lives, the wonder and mystery of God.

Rahner's pastoral spirit abounds in writings dedicated to reflecting on his life and influence. A Jesuit seminarian, who spent a Spring semester working through *Foundations of the Christian Faith* in tutorials led by the Rahner scholar, William Dych, demonstrates how this important aspect of Rahner's personality illuminates his theological approach.

Though he was a distinguished professor, Rahner remained foremost a priest, preaching regularly, counselling students, talking with street people and shopping for food for the needy. Over his lifetime, Rahner directed and preached the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius more than 50 times. His students were devoted to him. Harvey Egan, another Jesuit who studied under Rahner, recounted the measure of his devotion: 'Students who understood very little of his lectures told me that they attended because they "felt better" in his presence. "This is a professor to whom I can confess", one said'<sup>47</sup>.

Reflecting on the influence of Rahner in his own spiritual journey, an American editor and columnist observes:

I think of Rahner as a spiritual guide: a charismatic priest and pastor, speaking to readers as if from the pulpit, and a personal companion in the journey toward God<sup>48</sup>.

The following anecdote from Vorgrimler develops the picture of Rahner as a person of pastoral warmth and influence by providing a first-hand observation and experience of Rahner's relationship to his students.

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<sup>47</sup> K. O'Brien, 'Thursdays With Rahner', *America* 190 (15) (March, 2004): 8.

<sup>48</sup> Bell, 'Rambling with Rahner', 14.

Later, now and then he spoke of his pupils, but when he did so he really meant friends. The relationship of ‘his’ audience to him can best be illustrated by the story of the watch. For his silver jubilee as a priest on 26 July 1957 his closest circle of pupils at that time gave him a watch. I had bought it in Switzerland and had engraved on the back: ‘26 July 1932–1957—1 Cor. 4.15’... ‘Though you had countless schoolmasters in Christ, you did not have many fathers’<sup>49</sup>.

John O’Donnell<sup>50</sup> also comments on Rahner’s personal relationship with students. He notes that Rahner’s Jesuit brothers held him in awe, and tended to keep him at a distance. Rahner, shy and reserved by nature, found it hard to bridge the gap; it is easy to imagine his sense of isolation. He took great delight, however, in a series of contacts with students arranged for him by his secretary, involving drives in the country—Rahner reportedly loved being driven at high speed.

Vorgrimler’s excerpt from a personal letter (11 March 1962) sheds light on Rahner’s broader pastoral disposition:

Again all good wishes. I must go back to the parlour. Early today I needed all my human and Christian eloquence to talk someone out of committing suicide. I wonder whether I have succeeded? And what should have been done this morning, the Hamburg lecture, is still not done<sup>51</sup>.

Harvey Egan reflects on both the humanity and pastoral compassion of Rahner, asserting

who would not be fascinated by a theologian who loved carnivals, ice cream, large shopping malls, and being driven at very high speeds—one whose olfactory curiosity cost him many dollars in New York when a large department store demanded that he purchase all the perfume bottles he had opened?...[he] had an uncanny ability when it came to finding money, food, clothing, and shelter for the needy and down trodden who sought him out. He possessed the knack, too of shanghaiing others into assisting him with his practical works of charity. One of the things I remember most vividly is how we two went grocery shopping in a large supermarket and drove two hours to take the food to a widow and to find her a place to live. One of Rahner’s last public acts after the celebration of his eightieth birthday was to appeal for funds to purchase a motorbike for a missionary in Africa<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> See, *Life in the Spirit* (Rome: Gregorian Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>52</sup> From a text, later adapted as the introduction to the author’s translation of Rahner’s major biographical interview with Meinhold Krauss. Egan’s manuscript, cited here, was accessed directly from him through email correspondence.



These anecdotes testify that Rahner laboured as a priest of God, utilising the resources of his intellect and training—as well as everything else at his disposal—to serve his constituency in the spirit and compassion of Jesus, the good shepherd. He was trained as a philosopher and theologian; he was a professor and lecturer. However, his essential motivation derived from his vocational identity as a Jesuit priest with a common ministry towards all: '[my prayers]...express the concerns and anxieties of the scholar. But it is the sorrow and joy shared by all Christians that impels me to write'<sup>53</sup>.

In a late biographical interview, Rahner sums up his perspective on the influence of his pastoral vocation on his theological work:

ultimately my theological work was really not motivated by scholarship and erudition as such, but by my pastoral concerns. This likewise explains why a large part of my published work is filled with immediately religious, spiritual and pastoral concerns<sup>54</sup>.

We now have arrived at something approaching a holistic grasp of the combination of influences which contributed to Rahner's theological work and his reforming influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic thought. We have before us a portrait of a profoundly mystical person; a lover of God; a loyal son of the church with an intense interest in historical Christian revelation. In dynamic tension with these aspects of his make-up is the Karl Rahner who is a student of modernist philosophy, pastorally motivated by his concern for the spiritual wellbeing of contemporary women and men. As a loyal son, Rahner insisted that his beloved church re-examine its self-understanding and the expression of its ministry in the light of reflections on the interface between church tradition and contemporary existential thinking.

Having established the significant contextual factors to Rahner's theologising, I now move to a brief discussion of some notable aspects of his theological content and style.

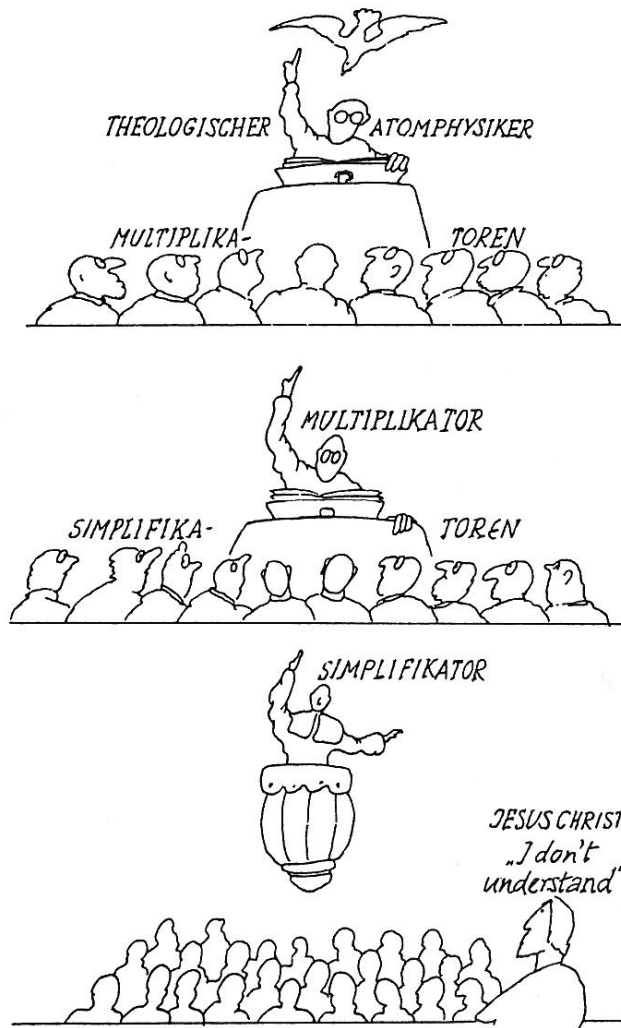
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<sup>53</sup> Karl Rahner cited in R.E. Murphy, 'The theological legacy of Karl Rahner', *Books and Reviews* 10 (Winter 1989): 12.

<sup>54</sup> *I remember*, 22.

### Style: Two Genres, One Theologian

Earlier in this chapter Rahner was caricatured, in response to his ‘hopelessly complicated and obscure’ style, as a ‘theological atomic physicist’. The cartoon (on the page following), consisting of a sequence of three captions, was sent anonymously to Rahner<sup>55</sup>.



Rahner’s own interpretation of—and response to—this cartoon follows.

<sup>55</sup> As represented in Rahner, *I remember*, 18.

As you see, at the top of the cartoon is a theological atomic physicist who's supposed to be me. What it means is that I speak about things that no one understands. Beneath me sit the so-called multipliers. They are the ones who are expected to hand on what I say. Beneath them sit the popularisers who spend their time putting what the multipliers say into simple language. Below them in the pulpit is an individual populariser who preaches to the Christian people what needs to be said there. Nearby sits Jesus Christ who listens to what is being translated from what I've concocted, and he says: 'I don't understand.' That's just the way it is when you're a theology teacher<sup>56</sup>.

Rahner's observation that this is 'just the way it is' hardly does justice to the ultimate pastoral motivation behind the 'atomic physicist' nature of some of his writings. The complex dialectic between Rahner's multiple sources and target audiences contributes to the 'difficulty' of his style. On the one hand, he seeks to explain what Christian truth means within the frameworks of a post-medieval and a rational philosophical worldview. To support this perspective, he utilises a particular way of explaining being and interpreting texts that he drew from Heidegger. The spiritual heart and content of his message, however, he drew from the church fathers and Christian mystics, and his own deep personal experience of God in relation to both. The dialectic tension climaxes in his attempt to express theology that demonstrates Roman Catholic orthodoxy<sup>57</sup> and at the same time appeals to the spiritual instincts of a culture cynical about institutional religion.

As certain aspects of Rahner's corpus can be very difficult to read—primarily because of his commitment to counter the polarisation he observed between expressed orthodoxy and contemporary human experience and worldview—later chapters of this thesis will present the more complex, apologetic Rahner, using a 'multiplier/ populariser' approach. It is a continuing irony, however, that in his quest for theological engagement with modern experience and thinking, at times Rahner becomes virtually incomprehensible to his potential readers.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>57</sup> R. Modras comments on the particular tension that Rahner felt in his younger years to extensively qualify his statements to 'safeguard against any suspicions that he was straying beyond the bounds of orthodoxy', *Ignatian humanism – a dynamic spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 205.

The counter to Rahner's complex, 'scientific'<sup>58</sup> theologising: his far more readable books on prayer, spirituality, and his recorded homilies. Here it seems that Rahner, like Ignatius Loyola (the founder of the order), writes down what has been helpful in his own spiritual life and invites others to use these writings as a starting point and guide to their own spiritual journey. It is often noted that Rahner's first and last books are collections of prayers—one written at the beginning of his career (*Encounters with silence*) and one published at the very end (*Prayers for a lifetime*). Modras comments that these two prayer books are 'no less important or substantiative than his more scholarly essays'<sup>59</sup>, echoing the common sentiment expressed by various Rahner scholars<sup>60</sup> that the essence of Rahner's thinking can be accessed through his devotional works; this genre allows Rahner's underlying intellectual arguments to be expressed more implicitly and his specifically Christian vocabulary to be expressed more explicitly<sup>61</sup>.

As reading Rahner in both genres reveals the echoes of each in the other, this thesis argues that one theologian is present in two genres: there is never a time when Rahner writes with an exclusive bent to intellectual scholarship, or when his intellectual views are not an expression of his devotional experience of God.

### **Content—theological compression and unfolding**

Rahner has a reputation as a theologian of great breadth in the scope of his topical concerns. It is also often said that he is not 'systematic': it is difficult to identify a particular theme or structure for his overall work.

Although this is true in part, there is also a significant view that Rahner's multi-faceted, complex project does indeed reveal a centralising principle and locus. Egan explains his view of this central principle as follows:

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<sup>58</sup> A word that Rahner used in relation to the intellectual demands of Christian theologising.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>60</sup> See for example Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 10; D. Marmion, *A spirituality of everyday faith – a theological investigation of the notion of spirituality in Karl Rahner* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1998), 41-53; J. O'Donnell, *Karl Rahner – Life in the Spirit* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion on Rahner's explicit Christian vocabulary in his 'spiritual' writings see, J. Bacik, 'Is Rahner obsolete? – what his critics get wrong', *Commonweal* 132 (2) (2005): 23.

Central to Rahner's thinking is the notion that what is at the core of every person's deepest experience, what haunts every human heart, is a God whose mystery, light, and love have embraced the total person. God works in every person's life as the One to whom we say our inmost yes or no. We may deny this, ignore it or repress it, but deep down we know that God is in love with us and we are all at least secretly in love with one another<sup>62</sup>.

Egan goes on to define Rahner's central theological view as 'mystical' because it attempts to compress, to simplify, and to concentrate all Christian beliefs and practices by indicating how they evoke the experience of God's loving self-communication to us in the crucified and risen Christ<sup>63</sup>. In a similar vein, Modras proposes that

Rahner's theology of grace—God's universal self-giving addressing us, often anonymously, at the innermost core of our beings—constitutes the unifying thread that pervades and colours virtually all the rest of his thought<sup>64</sup>.

Rahner makes various statements about central aspects of his thinking. He discusses the historical notion in Catholic theology of the incomprehensibility of God as taking a more radical, controlling centre in contemporary theology<sup>65</sup>: Rahner's way of saying that the mystical experience of God is a guiding hermeneutic for the interpretation of statements about God.

Rahner also mentions the approach to thinking that he learned from his philosophical teacher and mentor, Martin Heidegger.

One may perhaps say that it is not specific doctrines that I have taken from Heidegger, but rather a style of thinking and of investigating which has proved most valuable. This may be described as a method or approach by which one does not examine dogmatic truths as evidence derived from positive sources, but one seeks to construct a synthesis. One takes the various dogmatic propositions and reduces them to certain fundamental principles<sup>66</sup>.

Rahner does not refer to the philosophical Heidegger as a *source* of theological content but as a mentor for a *process of thinking* about theological content. This process contributed to what has become known as Rahner's 'transcendental approach' (discussed

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<sup>62</sup> Translator's introduction to Rahner, *I remember*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Modras, *Ignatian humanism*, 228.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>66</sup> *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 1986, 13.

in later chapters); some of Rahner's critics believe that he has blurred the distinction between process and content. In contrast, some commentators—eg Kress<sup>67</sup>—express what is increasingly a consensus view among contemporary Rahner scholars: the central source of his theologising is the immediate experience of God 'to which Ignatius of Loyola wanted to direct and lead [people] through his Spiritual Exercises'<sup>68</sup>.

Rahner<sup>69</sup> regards 'grace', or 'the immediate experience of God', as a central core of his key ideas; Karen Kilby notes and identifies Rahner's central ideas as Christ, grace, the Church, the sacraments and the trinity<sup>70</sup>. Through these themes Rahner talks philosophically about his interpretation of the universal truth towards which Christianity points: God is mysteriously present in Christ at the depths of human experience (the ideas within this cluster are discussed in more detail in the fourth and fifth chapters of this thesis).

When Rahner's theology is 'compressed' into a central idea and a related cluster of Christian themes, Rahner's theological speculation of a mysticism of everyday life unfolds. Egan describes Rahner writing 'a delightful "theology of everyday things"—a theology of work, of getting about, sitting down, seeing, laughing, eating, sleeping and the like'. He sees this 'unfolding' as inspired by Rahner's 'Ignatian mysticism of joy in the world', and notes that

if his theology of mystical compression often involves anfractuosity dialectics ['theological atomic physics']...his theology of unfolding can be as lovely as advising an unwed mother in her darkest hour to look into the face of the newborn son for light<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> See C. Olsen, Review of 'The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2) (April, 2006): 209-212; also, Modras, *Ignatian humanism*, 205 and H. Egan, *Karl Rahner – mystic of everyday life* (New York: Crossroad), 28-51.

<sup>68</sup> *A Rahner handbook*, 15.

<sup>69</sup> See 'The concept of mystery in Catholic theology' in *Theological investigations*, Vol. IV, Trans. K. Smyth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 37.

<sup>70</sup> *Karl Rahner* (London: Fount, 1997), 51-52.

<sup>71</sup> Translator's introduction, Rahner, *I remember*, 4.

Kilby notes that in regard to this unfolding theology of ‘all things’, Rahner often described himself as a theological dilettante. In other words, he did not necessarily claim to be an expert on all the topics to which he contributed a view.

However, having put in the mystical and intellectual spadework in arguing for a reinterpretation of the central theses of the faith, Rahner was moved by a pastoral conviction to comment broadly on a variety of issues in a speculative way from this centre. It is obvious that many people appreciated his forthrightness and courage: Kress notes that, during his postwar career, Rahner was ‘called upon to lecture almost everywhere to almost everyone about almost everything’<sup>72</sup>.

### **Rahner’s legacy**

Eugene Kennedy provides some helpful initial insights into the nature and scope of Rahner’s broader influence on the Church. In an article written in 1979, on the occasion of Rahner’s visit to America for the purpose of attending a theological symposium at Marquette University honouring his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, Kennedy offers a candid snapshot of Rahner’s broad influence and legacy, beginning with a reference to his pervasive influence amongst the faculties of North American theological institutions.

‘Compared to Karl Rahner, most other contemporary Christian theologians are scrub oak.’ So says Dr. Martin. E. Marty, professor of the history of modern Christianity at the university of Chicago, citing a poll last year in which 554 North American theologians from 71 different denominations named Rahner—after Paul Tillich and St. Thomas Aquinas—as the greatest influence on their work<sup>73</sup>.

Kennedy then goes on to highlight the ‘ripple’ effect, resulting in Rahner’s theology having an influence of universal proportions.

The old Jesuit’s impact has been primarily on professional theologians, but they in turn have multiplied Rahner’s influence by transmitting it in universities and seminaries to a generation of priests and ministers who speak directly to Christian assemblies in pulpits and classrooms throughout the world<sup>74</sup>.

The immense volume of Rahner’s work as well as the essence of his strategic approach and revolutionary impact is captured below:

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<sup>72</sup> *A Rahner handbook*, 6.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Quiet mover of the Catholic church’, 22.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

Slightly stooped and reserved as an old field marshal, Rahner has produced some 3,500 books and articles...providing the most thorough and systematic treatment of theological topics since the famous 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Summae* of Aquinas. His has been a massive and intense effort to express the ancient dogmas of Catholicism in an idiom that can be spoken and understood in contemporary culture...his intellectual influence...resembles that of a double agent in the Roman Catholic Church...On the one hand, he has been a loyal son of the Church...On the other hand, once Rahner has established this continuity between past and present, he is a philosophical Burbank of mutations and permutations, giving birth to blooms of thought that appear radically transformed<sup>75</sup>.

The article goes on to paint the picture of a quiet and physically unremarkable person whose decades of pastoral and intellectual labour have resulted in a subtle yet profound global theological revolution: Catholic educators, students and ecclesial leaders have experienced, through Rahner's writings, the same sense of liberation, fascination and spiritual companionship reported by many who actually attended his classes.

The concept of Rahner as a theologian of global influence is a common theme amongst those who comment on his legacy. Grenz and Olsen describe him as 'the most influential Roman Catholic theologian of the twentieth century...His influence has reached into every Catholic seminary and university theology faculty in the world, as well as into the Vatican itself'<sup>76</sup>. Indeed, it is a commonly thought that Rahner was the theological architect behind the historical outcomes of Vatican II—though Rahner himself disputes this<sup>77</sup>. In fact, as Vorgrimler points out, though the influence of Rahner within the council cannot be traced in detail, 12 of the 16 texts reveal elements of his theology, and Rahner was described as being 'active at the Council to the point of exhaustion'<sup>78</sup>.

The accounts of Rahner's involvement in Vatican II reflect his characteristic quiet, behind the scenes, yet pervasive, influence. In the initial stages of the council, Rahner was merely one of a group of 190 nominated theologians who were granted access to the sessions of the council but did not necessarily have any formal role in the proceedings.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 23

<sup>76</sup> S.J. Grenz and R.E. Olson, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology – God and the world in a transitional age*, (Downers Grove, IL:InterVarsity Press, 1992), 239.

<sup>77</sup> See for example Rahner's vigorous response to the suggestion that he was, as labelled by some Cardinals, the 'Holy Ghost Writer' of the Council, *I Remember*, 81-82.

<sup>78</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 96-100; Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 13.



Introduced by Cardinal König to a working session in the third month of the council, Rahner was appointed (two months later, in February 1963) as ‘peritus’: together with seven other theologians he worked out a new understanding of the church’s way of being in the world that was to radically transform the nature and practice of Roman Catholicism. His invitation to join this select group seems to have resulted from the impression of his outstanding intellectual gifts and natural influence, bolstered by the influence of his published works: a quiet mover and shaker within the Catholic church indeed!<sup>79</sup>

While much is made of Rahner’s influence within the global Catholic community, he is also recognised as being a theologian for all:

Wolfhart Pannenburg notes that Karl Rahner is a Roman Catholic through and through but that: ‘He makes the Christian element become transparent to humanity generally, and people felt that their questions were part of Rahner’s experience’<sup>80</sup>.

While most commentary on the theology of Rahner is located within the literature and discussion circles of the Roman Catholic theological community, many introductory theological courses in Protestant colleges introduce their students to Rahner’s broad theological themes. He also makes the occasional appearance in journals such as the very non-Roman Catholic *Evangelical Quarterly*: an article in 1987 by KR Trembath, ‘Our Knowledge of God According to Karl Rahner’, highlights the positive connections between the legacy of Rahner and Calvin<sup>81</sup>. More recently, Francis Caponi published a discussion on Karl Rahner’s use and non-use of religious language in the ecumenically-orientated *International Journal of Systematic Theology*<sup>82</sup>.

Perhaps most characteristic of Rahner’s legacy is the simple reality that many Protestant/Evangelical Christians are influenced by his mystical theology without any conscious knowledge of his person and work.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>80</sup> Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 23.

<sup>81</sup> 87 (4) (1987): 329-341.

<sup>82</sup> ‘A speechless grace’, 9 (2) (2007): 200-221.

One example of this is found in La Trobe University lecturer and author David Tacey's interview transcript, published in the *The Melbourne Anglican*. Tacey's publications *ReEnchantment*<sup>83</sup> and *The Spirituality Revolution*<sup>84</sup> have been read with lively interest by a broad cross-section of the Australian intellectual public. In both publications, Tacey articulates a similar theme: underneath the secular veneer of Australian (and the broader Western) culture is a bubbling spring of resurgent spiritual interest and vitality; the institutional church doesn't get it; the so-called 'New Age' spiritualities offer little by way of appropriate tradition and ethic; what is needed is a new dialogue between the people of the major faith traditions (in Australia the Christian churches still represent the largest of these) and those outside of these traditions on the experimental edge of the new, deinstitutionalised spirituality.

David Tacey is anything but classic Evangelical Christian; however, his insights have increasingly gained the attention and interest of an increasing number of thinking Evangelical leaders, which leads us back to the Roland Ashby interview with *The Melbourne Anglican*:

**RA:** You quote the theologian Karl Rahner in the book (*Spirituality Revolution*) 'The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all'.

**DT:** Yes, I believe he was right. I get the feeling that God is rather tired of routine Christianity. And the God of Christian revelation is an incarnational God, that is to say a God who enters into life in order to transform it so that life can see the eternal basis on which our temporal lives are grounded.

Karl Rahner also said, in that same lecture, we've got to stop imposing religion on people and start drawing religion out of people...My belief, and I have been very influenced by Rahner in this, is that there is a spiritual dimension in each one of us, and if it can be let out or drawn out then we can be encouraged to have a relationship with God<sup>85</sup>.

This dialogue—and the pervasive, yet virtually hidden (Tacey does not quote Rahner extensively in his books) influence of Rahner's theology that it suggests—highlights the ongoing ripple effect of this quiet, philosophical Jesuit priest. It is likely that Rahner's

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<sup>83</sup> (Sydney: Harper-Collins, 2000).

<sup>84</sup> (Sydney: Harper-Collins, 2003).

<sup>85</sup> *David Tacey: falling in love with the sacred other*, May 2003. Retrieved June 7, 2004, from <http://www.media.anglican.com/au/tma/2003/05/tacey.html>

influence will continue to spread and deepen, rather than diminish—particularly in light of continuing ecumenical trends and, in recent times, the surprising movement amongst sections of the global Evangelical community towards contemplative prayer and engagement with the classic spiritual traditions, including the exercises of Ignatius of Loyola<sup>86</sup>.

One of the factors behind the pervasive influence of Rahner is the sheer longevity of his career. He remained ‘at his desk’<sup>87</sup> for a period of 45 years. Following his pivotal role in Vatican II, Rahner accepted a teaching post at Munich which, while proving to be a personally difficult appointment, resulted in the publication of *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, generally regarded as ‘the closest thing to a unified and systematic view of his thought’<sup>88</sup> (though notoriously difficult to read). In 1971, aged 68, he retired from his final teaching post: professor of dogmatic theology in Münster.

Retirement from university teaching; however, did not signal the cessation of Rahner’s academic and pastoral labours. He continued to write, speak and give interviews until his death. Several significant publications emerged during this period including the very readable *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*; this edited collection of 63 interviews covering the period 1965–82 provides a colourful and accessible window into his theological worldview.

The longevity, pastoral heart and global influence of Rahner are vividly reflected in the events associated with the final weeks of his life. In the lead up to his eightieth birthday celebrations Rahner participated in conferences and gatherings held in his honour at the Catholic Academy of Friburg, the Heythrop College, in the university of London, and the Budapest Academy in Hungary. Soon after this tour, and only three days following the actual celebration of his birthday at Innsbruck on 5 March 1984, Rahner fell ill with what at first was thought to be sheer exhaustion. His condition, however, rapidly deteriorated

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<sup>86</sup> See, R. Webber, *The younger Evangelicals* (Colorado Springs: Baker Book House, 2002) and T. Jones, *Soul shaper: exploring spirituality and contemplative practices in youth ministry* (El Cajon, CA : Zondervan/Youth Specialities, 2003).

<sup>87</sup> Kennedy, ‘Quiet mover of the Catholic church’, 23.

<sup>88</sup> Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 14.

and it soon became obvious that he was dying. Somehow, during this period of confinement and almost complete physical debilitation, Rahner managed to write a letter to the bishops of Peru in support of the liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez: his final correspondence and pastoral action. Karl Rahner died at the University Medical Clinic of Innsbruck on the evening of 30 March 1984<sup>89</sup>.

### **Reflection: ‘Spirituality of Silence’ in Karl Rahner’s life and work**

A contemplative reading of this biographical sketch reveals a predominant theme regarding the substance of Rahner’s spirituality of silence: a practice of deep and penetrating listening. In the first instance, the young Karl Rahner learned, through the Ignatian disciplines, to listen to God and encounter the substance and reality of the divine being apart from words, and through the senses of his grace-empowered spiritual intuition.

You are the last answer, even though incomprehensible, to all the questions of my heart. I know why You are silent: Your silence is the framework of my faith, the boundless space where my love finds the strength to believe in Your Love<sup>90</sup>.

In the same way, Rahner believed that the best possible way to support human beings in their journey towards God was to facilitate space for people to encounter God himself, not merely preach words about God.

What also becomes clear in Rahner’s biography is his deep and penetrating listening to the voice of Christian tradition. Rahner believed that God had spoken in unique and authoritative ways to particular people, in particular times in history, with particular relevance to their existential concerns. The goal of Rahner’s intense scholarly energy; his reading and rereading of the Fathers and various spiritual classics, as well as the Holy Scriptures; his earnest desire to listen, to hear, to sit silently before the voice of tradition: that he might discern the essential meaning and presence of God’s spirit within the teachings of the church.

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<sup>89</sup> Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 14-15.

<sup>90</sup> Rahner, *Encounters with silence*, 56.

We see from Rahner's pastoral concerns, which emerge from his perception of the gulf between the doctrines of the church and the experience of everyday people, that he exercised a deep posture of listening to the voice of contemporary culture. This enabled him to penetrate the 'white noise' of the ecclesial ghetto and to break through into a deep empathy with regard to the spiritual needs of the broadest constituency. His spirituality of silence enabled him to hear things that other church leaders—their ears blocked with the cotton wool of uncritically examined theological 'formulas'—were simply not able to detect. In his attempt to enable his beloved church to exercise a ministry of word and sacrament that connects with the reality of human existence and the potential incarnational spirituality of everyday life, Rahner exercised a deep and profoundly disciplined listening to the contemporary voices of western philosophical traditions.

Karl Rahner has gained a reputation for his complex and prolific use of words. He has—particularly amongst theology students and professors of theology—a reputation for academic prose that borders on the undecipherable in its multi-layered dimensions of expression and meaning. Despite this complexity, his words have penetrated the human understanding and experience of God both deeply and broadly. The eloquence and profundity of Rahner emerges most poignantly from his spirituality of silence, expressed in part through a deep and penetrating posture of listening. It is this posture of listening, in all of its facets, that enables Rahner—when he does speak—to penetrate to the heart of the being of fellow humans, facilitating a space for a journey of spiritual companionship in the deepest places of individuals' experiences of both themselves and God.

## Chapter 2: Ignatian spiritual roots—the silence of direct encounter and the dynamic element in the church

The pastoral and academic career of one of the twentieth century's greatest Christian theologians and spiritual writers began in the Jesuit novitiate with its mandatory 30-day Ignatian spiritual retreat. During this inductive process, the young Karl Rahner experienced a direct encounter with God that was to shape his life and vocation for the following six decades. This chapter provides a basic introduction to the nature of the spirituality through which Rahner embraced his own 'supernatural existential' and its continuing influence in his life and work. A historical sketch of Ignatius Loyola and an introduction to his *Spiritual Exercises* provides the context for the subsequent exploration of the centrality and influence of Ignatian spirituality in Rahner—and, in particular, to an understanding of a dimension of Rahner's spirituality of silence that emerges from his personal experience of a 'primordial, mystical horizon'<sup>1</sup>.

### Ignatius of Loyola

In 1491 during the Spanish rule of Ferdinand and Isabella, Ignatius Loyola was born into a Basque noble family. Iñigo López de Oñaz y Loyola was the last child of a pious family of 13 siblings (five sisters, eight brothers). For reasons of economic and social expedience<sup>2</sup>, Iñigo's father made plans for him to enter the priesthood. The young Iñigo, however, had very different ideas: resisting his father's original intentions, at the age of sixteen he began life as a page in the household of Don Velasquez, a relative attached to the royal court<sup>3</sup>.

Iñigo's attraction to a political/military career seems quite natural, if not predictable—given that he grew up during a period in which Spain was developing into a new

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<sup>1</sup> A phrase from Harvey Egan at the centre of his doctoral work on the spirituality of Ignatius, it implies an 'anthropocentric mystagogy' (terms that Harvey has appropriated from Rahner) – in plain language: an existential awareness of, and engagement with, the constant, present reality of God in the inner life. See, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian mystical horizon* (St.Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1976), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> A younger son of a noble family could not expect to gain an inheritance, therefore, a clerical career became a customary avenue for a sustainable livelihood and position of at least some respect and authority.

<sup>3</sup> K. Rahner and P. Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola*, Trans. R. Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), 49; R.W. Gleason, from the introduction to: *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius*, Trans. A. Mottola (New York: Image Books, 1964), 12.

European power<sup>4</sup>, and that he was born into a family with a proud martial and monarchist tradition. His imagination was also captured by the medieval concept of knightly chivalry with its attendant devotion to king, country and deeds performed in sacrificial dedication to a nominated 'fair lady'<sup>5</sup>. From 1506 to 1521 Iñigo threw himself into the pursuit of his secular career and its attendant earthly pleasures of womanising, drinking and gambling, and its culture of duels and brawls. In his psychoanalytical profile of Ignatius, WW Meissner interprets the youthful activities of the future saint in light of the heady influences of his culture and family of origin.

Young Iñigo was instilled with the pride of the Loyolas, which called them to be leaders, heroes, extraordinary men. It must also be remembered this heritage included a profound, almost instinctive, religious faith. For Beltran (Iñigo's father) was a man of deep faith and Catholicism was ingrained in the family tradition. Yet it was that peculiar brand of faith that could willingly shed blood in defence of religion and celebrate the victory with a night of unbridled lechery<sup>6</sup>.

This lifestyle may have continued unabated had it not been for the battle of Pamplona. Living out the mythology of the masculine Loyolas by heroically defending an indefensible position against overwhelming odds, the young military leader's right leg was shattered below the knee by an enemy cannonball. The victorious French commander, out of admiration for Iñigo's courage in battle, ordered his surgeons to administer their services, then sent him home to Loyola castle to recuperate. The local surgeons' diagnosis: the bones had been inadequately set and another operation was required. The process of re-setting the bones, without the benefits of modern anaesthetic and medical science, proved to be extremely painful and debilitating. The young man who dreamed of covering himself in power and glory found his military career dramatically interrupted—if not brought to an end: he hovered between life and death during the earlier stages of what was to be a very lengthy period of slow recuperation<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Isabella and Ferdinand had driven out the last of the Moors, descendants of the Muslim military campaign of the 700's, and established Spain as a unified Roman Catholic nation. Spain was in the early process of colonising and plundering the resources of the Americas, following the expedition of Columbus.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 49 & 16.

<sup>6</sup> *To the greater glory - a psychological study of Ignatian spirituality* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette, University Press, 1999), 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 50-51.

During his time of convalescence Iñigo experienced his great conversion through a simple yet profound psycho-spiritual process that became the foundation for his method of spiritual direction and the broader concept of Ignatian spirituality that has continued to influence millions of Christians to this day<sup>8</sup>. According to tradition, Iñigo called for reading material, asking specifically for the popular military/romantic novels that were era's equivalent of pulp fiction. Books were not a huge feature of life in Loyola castle: the only literature on hand was Ludolph von Sachsen's *Life of Christ* and a book on the lives of the saints by Jacobos de Voragine (brought to the castle by Iñigo's sister-in-law Magdalen). Grasping at any escape from the desperate boredom of his convalescence, Iñigo began to read.

In the midst of his reading, Iñigo would daydream and fantasy role play different life scenarios, including his past exploits and future possibilities. He felt excited and enjoyed the immediate experience of this kind of daydreaming. However, he also noticed that in the hours following this kind of meditation he felt despondent and ill at ease. When his meditative daydreaming also involved imagining himself with Jesus in the gospel scenes he was reading<sup>9</sup>, emulating the deeds of the saints in service of Jesus, he often asked himself the question: 'What if I should do what St.Francis did, what St.Dominic did?'<sup>10</sup> Iñigo noticed that following these kinds of thoughts he experienced a profound lifting of mood that endured well beyond the period of the actual reflective process, filling him with a sense of wellbeing and peace.

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<sup>8</sup> That there is a popular resurgence of interest in Ignatian spirituality, reaching far beyond the boundaries of the Jesuit order and the Roman Catholic Church is common knowledge. David Lonsdale notes the 'rebirth' of the exercises during the 1960's through a movement from preached content to meditative content. The author also notes the massive broadening of Ignatian Spiritual practices as part of the general surge of interest in spirituality during the 1990's. See D. Lonsdale, *Eyes to see, ears to hear – an introduction to Ignatian spirituality* (Rev.Ed.) ( London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2000), 17-20. One of the clearest examples of the broad, global appeal of Ignatian spirituality is the popularity of the 'Sacred Space' website, [www.sacredspace.org](http://www.sacredspace.org), hosted by the Irish Jesuit Society, this site draws millions of hits from around the globe and across the Christian traditions.

<sup>9</sup> In fact this method of engaging with the text was a suggestion of the Ludolph, the author: 'to pause and relish and savour (what was being read) ... to make oneself present to the Gospel scene as if one were actually there, listening and seeing what is happening ... (and so) would experience great delight'. See G. Coleman, *Walking with Inigo – a commentary on the autobiography of St.Ignatius* (Gujarat, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2001), 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> From J.C. Olin, ed., *The Autobiography of St.Ignatius Loyola*, Trans. J.F. O'Callaghan (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 23.



Over a period of days and weeks, the young hedonistic, military enthusiast arrived at a pragmatic conclusion based on his inner journey of exploration and analysis: Jesus had come into the world to lead individuals into a more authentic and worthy way of being human<sup>11</sup>.

To say that Iñigo's conversion resulted from a 'pragmatic conclusion' is not to suggest that he was not moved in spirit; the moving of his spirit in very particular ways convinced him that the way of Jesus was *the* way of true life. His movement towards this whole new way of being and living climaxed in a vision of Mary and the Christ child that sealed his conviction and dedication to a life of radical spiritual pilgrimage.

One night while he was awake, he saw clearly an image of Our Lady with the holy child Jesus. From this sight he received for a considerable time very great consolation, and he was left with such loathing for his whole past life and especially for the things of the flesh, that it seemed that all the fantasies he had previously pictured in his mind were driven from it. Thus from that hour until August 1533 when this was written, he never gave the slightest consent to the things of the flesh. For this reason the vision may be considered the work of God, although he did not dare to claim nor to say more than to affirm the above. But his brother and the rest of the household knew from his exterior the change that had been working inwardly in his soul<sup>12</sup>.

Immediately following his convalescence, Iñigo departed from Loyola with the intention of embarking on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. However, events conspired to detain him in the small town of Manresa for a period of 11 months that was to become for him a 'year of silence'<sup>13</sup>—a time of fasting, praying, penance, meditation and contemplation. During this period Iñigo wrestled with both demons and God, at times experiencing a depth of despair that led him to the brink of suicide but eventually emerging into profound mystical experiences and new insights on faith, the Trinity, the Creation and the humanity of Christ<sup>14</sup>, and culminating in an experience of intense illumination.

One time he was going out of his devotion to a church a little more than a mile from Manresa...he sat down for a little while with his face toward the river...While he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be

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<sup>11</sup> Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 50-51.

<sup>12</sup> Olin, ed., *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> R. Gleason, from the introduction to, *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius*, Trans. A. Mottola (New York: Image Books, 1964), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 52.

opened...he understood and knew many things, both spiritual things and matters of faith and of learning, and this was with so great an enlightenment that everything seemed new to him. This was such that in the whole course of his life, through sixty-two years, even if he gathered up all the many things he had had from God and all the many things he knew and added them together, he does not think they would amount to as much as he received at that one time<sup>15</sup>.

During his time at Manresa Iñigo wrote down everything that was helpful to him in his own spiritual journey in the belief that it might be helpful to others also. These notes were carried with him, continually being added to and refined, on his subsequent journeys over the next 15 years—including a successful pilgrimage to the Holy Land and theological studies in Paris<sup>16</sup>. They became the basis for his *Spiritual Exercises*, a method of direction through which Iñigo was to lead others into a similar descent into transcendence leading to a life-changing experience of devotion and calling. In practice, the spirituality of Ignatius, as shaped by his *Exercises*, is a spirituality of deep silence and reflection leading to a lifestyle of active contemplation and a seeking of God in all things in the context of the everyday and ordinary. Through these *Exercises* the pilgrimage of Iñigo (who became Ignatius) opened the door to spiritual encounter and adventure for countless millions—including the German spiritual theologian, Karl Rahner, who became an articulate advocate of the benefit of Ignatian spirituality for modern women and men.

### ***Spiritual Exercises and Ignatian spirituality***

The *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius are a guide to a process through which each Christian pilgrim can become present to God in Christ in a deeply personal way.

The Exercises do not reveal their secrets except to one experiencing the meditations, just as the Scriptures do not disclose their profound meaning except to ... [people] of deep, interior spirituality...If we give them [the Exercises] a merely cursory reading, they appear to be a catalogue of pious, moral instructions and do not make a very strong impression upon us, but when we really *make* them, they exercise a tremendous power and influence upon the internal conversion of our souls and their growth in the spiritual life. Experience abundantly testifies to this fact<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Olin, ed. *The Autobiography St. Ignatius of Loyola*, 39-40.

<sup>16</sup> Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 51-52; Gleason, *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius*, 13-16.

<sup>17</sup> 'An anonymous Jesuit' cited in Hugo Rahner, *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1953), 91.

The outcome of this encounter: the pilgrim is enabled to discern a personal and particular calling and to engage with the whole of life with a renewed and profoundly Christ-orientated vision. Ignatius himself states simply that the purpose of the *Exercises* is ‘to help the exercitant to conquer...[themselves], and to regulate...[their] life so that...[they] will not be influenced in...[their] decisions by any inordinate attachment’<sup>18</sup>. Understood in light of the principles and foundations [should these be plural?] of the *Exercises*, this emphasis reflects Ignatius’ own personal discovery that Jesus is the way to an authentic, joyful and truly meaningful human existence because human beings are

created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save...[their souls]. All other things on the face of the earth are created for...[us] to help...[us] fulfil the end for which...[we are] created’<sup>19</sup>.

Likewise the call to self-regulation and detachment must also be understood in light of the guiding principle, dynamic, and driving force undergirding the *Exercises*: the contemplation of divine love<sup>20</sup>. This contemplation is not merely evident in the appositely titled closing meditation; it is the spiritual substance of the whole, clearly revealed in Ignatius’ thought. His meditations on sin and hell lead the exercitant to give thanks and wonder at the mercy of the God who, with ‘great kindness and mercy’, has withheld judgment and freely offers the gift of repentance and new life<sup>21</sup>.

A striking feature of the *Exercises* is the intensely warm, personal and respectful way they seek to facilitate an intimate and unique loving encounter with God. In his preparatory instructions, Ignatius emphasises that spiritual directors need limit their input to what is strictly necessary: ‘stating the subject matter for the contemplation or meditation’ with no more than a ‘brief, summary statement of its principal points’. In this way,

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<sup>18</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Hugo Rahner (elder brother to Karl) considered to be a leading Ignatian scholar of his era, states emphatically that love is the fundamental motivational force throughout the Exercises and therefore the whole of any spirituality that expresses itself as ‘Ignatian’. This love expresses itself through the incarnate ministry of Jesus, through the loving action of believers in the world, and it is love that guides the believer to make choices in line with God’s intention for his creation. Finally, this love finds its measure in the immensity of the Father’s love. See *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola*, xii.

<sup>21</sup> See the concluding directions for prayer in relation to the second and fifth exercises of the first week.

the one who is making the contemplation, by reviewing the true essentials of the subject, and by personal reflection and reasoning may find something that will make it a little more meaningful for...[them] or touch...[them] more deeply<sup>22</sup>.

In other words, spiritual directors are to introduce the material then back off, leaving room for the Holy Spirit to shape the material in light of the particular personality and needs of each exercitant. In addition to these in-text instructions, it was the practice and intention of Ignatius that ‘the Exercises be *given* by a retreat master who was familiar with them and could guide the retreatant, not simply *read* by the retreatant’<sup>23</sup>. The Ignatian ‘colloquy’, described by David Lonsdale below, emphasises the direct and familial nature of the God-encounters that the Exercises seek to facilitate:

A conversation in which the person praying expresses freely and with confidence the feelings that have been aroused by the contemplation, ‘as one friend speaks to another’ (Exx 54)...Imaginative contemplation of the Gospels moves the heart and in the ‘colloquy’ the heart speaks out of its fullness or emptiness<sup>24</sup>.

The *Exercises* are traditionally ‘given’ and ‘taken’ over a period of four weeks. Roughly speaking, the first week leads the exercitant into an examination of conscience and meditations on sin and hell with a view to a movement towards repentance and reform. In the second week, the exercitant contemplates a variety of aspects of Jesus’ incarnate life and various Ignatian theological ideas such as ‘the two standards’ (Christ and Satan) and the ‘three classes of people’ (referring to three different attitudes of the soul and mind towards God). The third week focuses squarely on the events of the passion of Christ. The fourth week leads to a contemplation of divine love and an engagement with various practical aspects of the spiritual life. The *Exercises* are heavily gospel-focused, and shaped by Ignatius’ methods of reflection and prayer, and his original theological insights.

Though the *Exercises* have been traditionally understood as being primarily for the formation of ‘each new generation of Jesuits...according to the spirit of St Ignatius’<sup>25</sup>, it would be a mistake to interpret the *Exercises* as an exclusive program for Jesuits. Ronald

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<sup>22</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius*, ‘Directions for acquiring an understanding of the spiritual exercises that follow and thus assisting both those who are to give them and those who are to make them’, 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>24</sup> *Eyes to see, ears to hear*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius*, 16.

Modras has pointed out that Ignatius gave the exercises to anybody whom he thought might benefit from them long before he ever envisaged the founding of a religious order.

If God was willing to speak directly to a sinner like him, God would be willing to speak to anyone—anyone, at least, who was willing to take the time to be still, listen, and pray. If people were willing to spend an extended time in solitude and prayer, daydreaming about Jesus the way he had at Loyola and Manresa, then he, Iñigo, could help them experience God and learn God's will for them<sup>26</sup>.

Modras also notes that Ignatius was willing to accommodate the ideal of the extended retreat for those who could not cease their labours and involvement in civic life for the full thirty days. In the recent revival and extension of interest in Ignatian spirituality, the *Exercises*—and various retreats and spiritual practices based on them—have been offered in a range of differing forms, ranging from the traditional thirty-day retreat to an invitation to spend ten minutes in 'sacred space' guided by Irish Jesuits through the medium of the desktop computer and the World Wide Web<sup>27</sup>.

The *Exercises* and 'Ignatian spirituality'<sup>28</sup> provide an inclusive, 'democratic' spirituality, accessible to everyday people living ordinary lives. It is hardly surprising that Karl Rahner recognised Ignatian spirituality as a way to understand and experience human spiritual fulfilment and enlightenment.

A notable feature of Ignatian spirituality is the interaction between kataphatic methods (active, deliberate practices using image, imagination and emotion) and longer-term apophatic outcomes (feeling and knowing God through direct personal encounters). In Ignatian spirituality, kataphatic processes serve as pathways towards deeper and more permanent apophatic experiences rather than as ends in themselves. This dynamic is a feature of Rahner's personal journey in Ignatian spirituality.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ignatian Humanism – a spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 23.

<sup>27</sup> As mentioned earlier: [www.sacredspace.org](http://www.sacredspace.org)

<sup>28</sup> See Modras, *Ignatian Humanism*, xvi – xxi.

## **The centrality and significance of Ignatian spirituality in the spiritual formation and in the writings of Karl Rahner**

Harvey Egan notes Rahner's personal reflection that it was his deep experience of Ignatian spirituality that gave an 'absolutely momentous' meaning to his initial decision to enter the Jesuit order<sup>29</sup>. Karl Rahner was introduced to the *Spiritual Exercises* at the very beginning of his religious vocation as a Jesuit. Jesuit training involves a lengthy and comprehensive journey including significant theological and philosophical study as well as pastoral training and practice—and, first and foremost, novices are introduced to the spirituality of the founding father of their order.

Though modern Jesuit recruitment materials state clearly that '*Spiritual Exercises*, the source of our inspiration, lie at the heart of the noviceship experience'<sup>30</sup>, Rahner's experience of the *Exercises* was probably quite different to that of contemporary Jesuit novices or lay exercitants. In Rahner's time, the usual practice involved preaching the *Exercises* and seeing the true content of formation in the proclamation of the content rather than in the experienced meditation on the content<sup>31</sup>, and the understanding the role of the director as an initial guide to exercitants in the selection of suitable material for contemplation, then allowing the real formation to occur in the direct encounter between God and individual. It is likely that Rahner experienced the *Exercises* in this way, which makes his profound engagement with the original spirit of Ignatius even more remarkable. That Rahner understood his experience of God through Ignatian spirituality to be at the very centre of his sense of personhood and theological work is clear from his own words, and those of his biographers<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> See *Karl Rahner – mystic of everyday life*, (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 28.

<sup>30</sup> Jesuits Australia, 'Vocation'. Retrieved March 21, 2005, <http://www.jesuit.org.au/vocation/jesuits.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Lonsdale, *Eyes to see, ears to hear*, 17-20.

<sup>32</sup> This point has already been established in the first chapter (4) with reference to H. Vorgrimmler's note that in Rahner's own reflection on his life he was captivated while he was young by the 'primal experience' of God, see *Understanding Karl Rahner* (London: SCD Press, 1986), 11. W. Dych also cites Rahner as stating that the spirituality of Ignatius, learned through prayer and religious formation, has been more significant for him than the sum total of all his academic scholarship *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 6.

### **Rahner the Ignatian spiritual director**

The centrality and significance of Ignatian spirituality for Rahner can be explored from three perspectives: his lifelong practice of introducing others to the *Spiritual Exercises*; his statements about the spirituality of Ignatius; his literary technique of speaking as Ignatius in his later writings.

Kevin O'Brien, in a brief pastoral biography of Karl Rahner, makes the following comment: 'Rahner directed and preached the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius more than 50 times'<sup>33</sup>. Egan provides more detail:

Two thirty-day retreats and yearly eight-day retreats based on the Ignatian Exercises were part of Rahner's sixty-two Jesuit years. From the time of his ordination in 1932 until his death in 1984, Rahner gave and preached on these Exercises over fifty times<sup>34</sup>.

These brief comments, when considered against the immense workload that Rahner managed in his multiple roles as lecturer, supervisor, researcher, author, editor and speaker in demand, are illuminating. Somehow this incredibly busy academic carved out the time and space to introduce others to the spiritual method that had been so profound in his own formation. In his own words (Rahner is talking about himself in third person):

He has often given eight-day retreats, based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, to young candidates for the priesthood—especially in the Berchmannskolleg in Pullach near Munich, and also in the Germanicum in Rome<sup>35</sup>.

The publication *Spiritual Exercises*, which cites Karl Rahner as the author, is in fact an edited version<sup>36</sup> of the verbatim notes taken by eager students on two of these retreats. When Rahner speaks in later life of the ultimate significance of Ignatian spirituality<sup>37</sup>, it is not merely a sentimental reminiscence of a youthful mystical experience but an indication that this spiritual practice continued to be central to his vocation.

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<sup>33</sup> 'Thursdays with Rahner', *America* 190 (15) (March 2004): 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Mystic of everyday life*, 28.

<sup>35</sup> K. Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, Trans. K. Baker (London: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Rahner himself had no redactive part in this; the task was undertaken by former students and colleagues whom Rahner trusted to present the essence of his thought on the Exercises. See *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Philip Endean notes that Rahner's explicit focus on Ignatius and declaration of his significance and central importance seems to have been a definitive movement in his post-retirement years, from the 70's until his death in 1984, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian spirituality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

## Rahner the Ignatian commentator

Rahner's personal understanding of the nature and purpose of the *Exercises* and the Spirituality of Ignatius is revealed in his categorisation of the *Exercises* of Ignatius as

a literature of spirituality, a creative, original assimilation of God's revelation *in Christo*...wiser and more experienced than the wisdom of the learned, a literature in which the Church's belief, the Word of God and the action of the Holy Spirit, which never ceases to be operative in the Church, find more authentic expression than in the treatises of theologians<sup>38</sup>.

Rahner notes that many theologians wrongly assume that Ignatius developed his exercises by borrowing from pre-existing theology; this, Rahner asserts, is a false conclusion that is linked to the inability or unwillingness of these theologians to 'make room' in their theology for the 'divine impulse', the direct interaction of the individual with the will of God. Rahner concludes the *Exercises* are the result of direct divine interaction and are, therefore, to be considered a creative and original work<sup>39</sup>.

Rahner emphasises that the *Exercises* of Ignatius are neither a system of theology nor an introductory meditation course<sup>40</sup>. Rahner regards the *Exercises* as a unique and creative method in which an individual is enabled to 'evoke the inner Christ-directedness' of the 'graced person' that leads to personal encounter with the 'historical' and 'cosmic' Jesus<sup>41</sup>. According to Rahner, the *Exercises* enable a person to descend into an existential awareness of their natural/supernatural orientation towards the God who is revealed in Jesus, thus awakening a connection to the spiritual reality of the possibility of relationship with Jesus who also approaches each person 'from the outside' as the 'sacred other'. The *Exercises*, therefore, create a context in which a person can actually meet with God directly, and discern through this meeting the intrinsic nature and relationship between the will of God and the full reality and meaning of human existence. For Rahner, what emerges from this encounter is a whole new way of living and being within the everyday particularities of an individual's personality and setting that continue to

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<sup>38</sup> K. Rahner, *The dynamic element in the church*, Trans. W.J. O'Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), 85.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 86 – 119.

<sup>40</sup> Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 11; K. Rahner, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*,. P. Imhof & H. Biallowons, eds. Translation edited by, H. Egan (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 175.

<sup>41</sup> From Rahner's forward to H. Egan, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian mystical horizon*, xv.



facilitate this joyful and liberating union between true life and Godly service: ‘The Spiritual Exercises are...the choice of the means and the concrete way in which Christianity can become a living reality in us’<sup>42</sup>.

Rahner’s statement about the principles and foundation of the *Exercises* (cited earlier in this chapter and a late addition to the text<sup>43</sup>) is a framework for the whole, worked out over an extended period, then placed at the beginning as a foundational guide to what is to come. The direct encounter with God that the *Exercises* enable takes time; Rahner states that this ‘is attained only through the whole process of the Weeks’<sup>44</sup>. His comments suggest that his reference to ‘weeks’ may have both a metaphorical and literal meaning:

existentially withdrawing from the reality of my being—this isn’t something about which I can just say the word and it’s done. It’s rather a difficult, slow mystical development. When this at least slowly begins, when there’s death, renunciation, when the taken-for-grantedness of the world crumbles in a night of the senses and of the spirit, it’s then that a person slowly...senses and experiences what human transcendence orientated towards God really is, experiences it as something more than the inevitable condition that makes possible our everyday dealings with the world<sup>45</sup>.

The *Exercises* create space and occasion for an extended, silent descent into the mystery of God. This descent, like baptism, is both an end in itself as well as marking the beginning of a lifelong journey of growth towards an everyday contemplative direct encounter with God in full human freedom, which is at one and the same time, obedient service to Christ:

Ignatius stands in the line of those...who existentially flee into the desert...even though it may be the God-forsaken stony desert of a city, in order to seek God far from the world...Ignatius approaches the world from God. Not the other way about...he is prepared to obey his word even when, out of the silent desert of his daring flight into God, he is...sent back into the world<sup>46</sup>.

The *Exercises* take individuals into silence, the place in which—if they dwell long enough with the material of the *Exercises*—they will experience a God-originated

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<sup>42</sup> Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>44</sup> K. Rahner, *Karl Rahner – Spiritual Writings*, P. Endean, ed. (New York: Orbis, 2004), 63.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 63-64.

<sup>46</sup> K. Rahner, ‘Ignatian mysticism of joy in the world’, *Theological Investigations* Vol. III, 280-281 and 290-293 in G.A. Mc Cool ed., *A Rahner reader* (London: Dartman, Langman & Todd, 1975), 315.

movement in their emotions and thoughts leading them, through the Ignatian concepts of ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’<sup>47</sup>, to an awareness of what is the Holy Spirit and what is not. The Holy Spirit leads towards Jesus, who is life itself in its truest and freest form. In this process the word becomes incarnate: Jesus begins to live his life within the interior of the individual. As they move back out into the world in the Spirit of Jesus, believers share in the divinising process of God’s incarnate ministry to the world<sup>48</sup>:

His eternal Word, eternally descended into the world. In other words, we find God because God, by Himself with His own reality ‘descending,’ has lost himself as love into His creation, never again to leave it...From that it follows that our ‘ascending’ love to God is always a participation in God’s descent to the world...our love is, as Ignatius says, essentially our appropriation of this divine love...the love that means the abiding of the eternal Word in his creature, and that therefore also means a divinised world and Church<sup>49</sup>.

A basic synopsis of Rahner’s thought on the nature and purpose of the *Exercises* and the spirituality of Ignatius presents Ignatian spirituality as a form and means through which human beings encounter God in a concrete way. The *Exercises*—a time-intensive, solitary and silent process of guided meditation—enable a continual participation in the divine life that is particular to the concrete realities of the individual’s personality and life circumstances. Individuals discern the leading and movement of the Holy Spirit in and through all things. Through an extended time of separation from the world and concentration on the life, ministry, passion and resurrection of Jesus, they recognise his presence and activity within the world. Participating in the eternal loving activity of God towards the whole world, they are free to express this love through original, Spirit-led creativity<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> These concepts, given specific definition within the Exercises under the heading ‘Rules for the discernment of spirits’ (see Exx 316 and 317), emerge from Ignatius’ initial experience during his convalescence in which he took particular notice of the variations of his mood in relation to different considerations of his future life possibilities.

<sup>48</sup> Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 89-115.

<sup>49</sup> Rahner, *Spiritual Writings*, 57-58.

<sup>50</sup> Rahner has declared his own sense of theological licence and original thought as deriving from Ignatius prayer of abandonment towards the closing of his Exercises in which ‘Ignatius entrusts himself totally to God without reservation and where the notion of freedom holds pride of place over the Augustinian triad of memory, understanding and will’. See K. Rahner, ‘Experiences of a Catholic theologian’ *Theological Studies* 61 (1) (March, 2000): 13.

Rahner's often-quoted comment that the 'Christian of the future will be a mystic or... will not exist at all'<sup>51</sup>, relates to his belief that, in the face of an increasing secularised and pluralised society, helping individuals engage with the essential spirituality of Jesus would become even more important as other forms of church life decline. For Rahner, the spirituality of Ignatius offers a direct and personal encounter with God<sup>52</sup>.

### **Rahner the interpreter of Ignatius**

In his essay, 'Ignatius speaks to modern Jesuits'<sup>53</sup>, Rahner somewhat playfully imagines what Ignatius would say to contemporary Jesuits, and reveals—in a uniquely personal way—his understanding of the meaning and significance of Ignatius' spirituality of silence for the modern world. This imaginary communication from Ignatius to his institutional spiritual descendents offers opportunities for others to eavesdrop on the conversation and thus draw on the spirit of this great saint for their own spiritual inspiration. As Rahner's self-declared 'spiritual testament', this essay represents the essence of what really mattered to Rahner in terms of his own spiritual journey<sup>54</sup>; one noticeable aspect is the blending of Ignatian themes and Rahner's own concepts and concerns. At times Rahner seems to be interpreting the original spirit of Ignatius; at other times he is using Ignatius as an authoritative mouthpiece for his own original ideas. The result, however, is a captivating exposition, revealing

a man who has let himself be swallowed up unconditionally by a God 'in whose incomprehensible fire we are not, in fact, burnt away but become ourselves and of eternal value' (17). Here is Rahner, and Ignatius, for everyone<sup>55</sup>.

Rahner's Ignatius begins by stating his intention to speak personally and from the context of divine silence. From this silence, he declares that he has experienced God in 'direct encounter': a mystical experience and a profound awareness of 'nearness and grace' that has given him an unshakable certainty in his faith<sup>56</sup>. Such is the power of this silent,

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<sup>51</sup> K. Rahner, 'The spirituality of the church of the future' in *Theological Investigations* Vol.20, Trans. E. Quinn (London: Dartman, Langman & Todd, 1981): 149.

<sup>52</sup> Imhof & Biallowons eds., *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 77.

<sup>53</sup> This piece forms one half of the joint publication by Rahner and Imhof on *Ignatius of Loyola*.

<sup>54</sup> P. Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian spirituality* (, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13-14.

<sup>55</sup> A concluding comment in a review of this text. See W. Burghardt, review of 'Ignatius of Loyola', by K. Rahner and P. Imhof, in *Theological Studies* 40 (4) (December, 1979): 754-756.

<sup>56</sup> Rahner, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 11.

personal encounter that even if other external supports to faith—such as a canon of scripture—were to disappear, or did not exist in the first place, the saint would remain secure and at peace<sup>57</sup>.

Though this bold declaration may shock many Christians who view scripture and the institution of the church as integral to an authentic experience of the Spirit, a later chapter will demonstrate word and sacrament as integral to Rahner's ideas about Christian spirituality and the church. Ignatius, too, was both a man of the church and a student of the gospels with a mystical orientation; Rahner's Ignatian comment, drawn from a statement in Ignatius' biography<sup>58</sup>, simply emphasises the centrality of a mystical encounter with God as the ultimate sustaining power of faith. For both Ignatius and Rahner, the essential component of spirituality and true human existence of any kind is 'solitariness before God, security in his silent, immediate presence'<sup>59</sup>. Rahner, speaking as Ignatius, declares that 'if the Order [representing Ignatius' life work] should collapse, I would not need more than ten minutes to be near to God and at peace again'<sup>60</sup>.

The power and blessing of this experience of silent, gracious nearness is what Ignatius longs to communicate with others<sup>61</sup>; for him, it is the entire purpose of the order and of the church. For Ignatius, the human heart is like a piece of land that has both a 'well within' and requires 'irrigation from without'<sup>62</sup>, and the church is the servant to humanity, helping each person to directly encounter God through the recognition and relational awareness of the existential 'inner promise of God himself'<sup>63</sup>. The *Spiritual Exercises* and the spiritual director facilitate this direct encounter when the person in the guidance role adopts an appropriate posture.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>58</sup> See Ronald Modras' commentary on this in, *Ignatian Humanism – a dynamic spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 16-17.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 16.

The master of the Exercises in no way officially imparts the word of the Church as such...but rather provides...quite cautiously and from a distance, an opportunity for God and...[human] to meet together truly and directly<sup>64</sup>.

The result: a real inner encounter with God, rather than an external process of merely hearing human words describing God<sup>65</sup>.

Rahner, speaking in the name of Ignatius links the life of the Jesuit order and the church as a whole to an understanding of the centrality of this mystical personal encounter with God. A culture of religious noise enables some people to use the church as a way to escape the silence and solitude of direct, divine encounter; this church fills up the 'barns of human consciousness' with academic theology and zeal for the ecclesiastic establishment<sup>66</sup>. It is important, therefore, for loyal members of the church to also reflect critically upon its life and government from the perspective of their personal, divine encounter with the divine, and the church ought always to be open to the ongoing, dynamic spiritual direction of its members<sup>67</sup>. In this way, the charismatic community may coexist fruitfully—albeit in tension—with the hierarchical, ecclesial office and structure<sup>68</sup>, thus facilitating a more authentic expression of the 'poor and humble' spirituality of Jesus<sup>69</sup> which will be expressed in practical compassion:

You have understood the commitment to justice in the world as a profound and essential motive in your mission, far more than a mere optional addition to the proclamation of the gospel<sup>70</sup>.

### **Commentary on Rahner as interpreter of Ignatius**

John O'Donnell expresses a view common among sympathetic Rahner scholars: 'I would say that Rahner gives a creative interpretation of Ignatius which is valid in its own right'<sup>71</sup>. O'Donnell goes on to say that a 'creative' interpretation has validity because people generally read interpreters to discern their contribution to the field<sup>72</sup>. The

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 23-25.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>71</sup> *Life in the Spirit*, (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2004), 32.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

‘creativity’ of Rahner’s Ignatian contribution is exposed in the relatively recent studies by Declan Marmion<sup>73</sup> and Philip Endean<sup>74</sup>.

Endean essentially argues that Rahner interprets the Ignatian concept of ‘indifference’ or detachment from things as a spiritual faculty and, as a consequence, that the natural human structure of the mind is predisposed to transcend the material<sup>75</sup>. Endean discerns that Rahner’s primary spiritual idea, reflected strongly in ‘Ignatius speaks to modern Jesuits’, is the apophatic, immediate experience of God without object or mediation<sup>76</sup>. Endean believes that this radical, immediate human experience of God is difficult to deduce from Ignatian texts, and that Rahner’s earlier patristic studies significantly shape and inform his interpretation of ‘Ignatian’ spirituality<sup>77</sup>. Endean uses the concept of ‘ecstasy’ found in the writings of patristics Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius Ponticus, and the medieval scholar Bonaventure’s concept of the ‘spiritual senses’ to demonstrate that Rahner’s concept—an experience of God that falls short of the ultimate encounter in eternity, the ‘beatific vision’<sup>78</sup>, but goes beyond ‘an inferential knowledge of God based on God’s effects’<sup>79</sup>—is informed by the ideas of these mystical theologians. Endean believes that Rahner has drawn particularly on Evagrius’ idea that individuals in ecstatic states do not ‘move outside’ themselves and their intellect; rather, God ‘moves into’ them<sup>80</sup>. Herbert Vorgrimler’s poignant summary of Rahner’s spirituality has, in light of Endean’s commentary<sup>81</sup>, a distinctly Evagrian flavour.

When a person finds all else removed—when they find themselves in solitude—and discover incomprehensibly that they are deeply and profoundly loved—a discovery that occurs at the deepest level of their existence and is not mediated by circumstances or things but is an experience of the soul, flooded by light<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> *A spirituality of everyday faith – a theological investigation of the notion of spirituality in Karl Rahner*, (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1998).

<sup>74</sup> *Karl Rahner and Ignatian spirituality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 21-29.

<sup>78</sup> The Roman Catholic phrase for the spiritual state of the saints in heaven.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>81</sup> See also Harvey Egan’s commentary on the ‘light spirituality’ of Evagrius, *An anthology of Christian mysticism*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 43-48.

<sup>82</sup> My paraphrase, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, (London: SCD Press, 1986), 11-12.

Endean argues that Rahner is interpreting the Evagrian concept of apophatic immediate encounter with God as a light of Trinitarian love that enters the human subject and is experienced at a level deeper than intellectual; he is proposing, in the name of Ignatius, that this experience is not restricted to those following the way of the desert fathers; it is available to all believers<sup>83</sup>. Endean argues that Rahner integrates an apophatic, elitist patristic spiritual idea with the non-elitist, kataphatic Ignatian *Exercises*, then asserts that Ignatius proposed an immediate experience of God accessible to everyone. Endean therefore reads Rahner's Ignatian spirituality as a 'creative' interpretation.

Declan Marmion's study also demonstrates that Rahner's Ignatian spirituality integrates the ideas of the patristics and Bonaventure. According to Marmion, Rahner emphasises the potential of the *Exercises* to facilitate an 'immediate experience of God' in connection with his interest in retrieving the patristic notion of 'mystagogy'. Marmion explains that 'mystagogy' derives etymologically from the traditional religions of Greece and Rome—*agein*: to lead; *mystés*: a person who has been initiated—and was appropriated by the Christian fathers in the fourth century<sup>84</sup>. Marmion contends that the notion of the 'mystical initiation into faith' is a consistent theme in the patristic approach to catechism and counterbalances an exclusively doctrinal view<sup>85</sup>. Marmion also offers a personal translation of Rahner's own description of the mystagogical process:

the effort to mediate to oneself or, more properly, to another in as clear and as comprehensive way as possible the experience of our pre-given pneumatic existence. Christian mystagogy also refers to the attempt to render comprehensible the fact that a person's mystical experience of the Spirit has been historically and irreversibly confirmed in Jesus Christ<sup>86</sup>.

Marmion argues that Rahner's interpretation of Ignatius links the ideas of Origen and Bonaventure about the 'spiritual senses'<sup>87</sup> to the idea in the *Exercises* of the application

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<sup>83</sup> *Karl Rahner and Ignatian spirituality*, 30-31.

<sup>84</sup> *A spirituality of everyday faith*, 261-262.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> The idea that the 'soul' has senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching that are spiritual senses to guide and nurture and facilitate the inner life the physical senses do for the material, external life. See *An anthology of Christian mysticism*, 29-30, for Origen's description, page 39 for the description of Gregory of Nyssa, and pages 238-246 for Bonaventure.

of the senses<sup>88</sup>. According to Marmion, Rahner sees in Bonaventure's description of the 'spiritual senses of the enlightened soul'<sup>89</sup> an attempt to use imaginative and metaphoric language to say something about the 'inexpressible' experience of the apophatic encounter with God. Rahner then connects this with 'the feeling for the things of God'—a spirituality of the heart, deeper than intellect—expressed in the Ignatian concept of *applicatio sensuum*: application of the senses. Rahner's interpretation of the Ignatian concept of 'consolation without previous cause' uses two ideas of 'senses' found in the writings of Origen and Bonaventure to promote Ignatian spirituality as facilitating a direct and immediate experience of God. Marmion thus views Rahner's interpretation of Ignatius as profoundly influenced by his understanding of Bonaventure's mystical theology: Rahner's exposition of mystagogy incorporates the concepts of 'ecstasy' and 'consolation' as aspects of the tradition that point towards the universal possibility of spiritual actualisation.

Both Endean and Marmion are sympathetic Rahner commentators and neither is aiming to discredit Rahner's interpretation of Ignatius. Both are seeking to inform the reader that Rahner's reading of the patristics and his ultimate concern for contemporary spiritual direction ultimately shape his innovative interpretation of Ignatius. At the end of the day, despite Rahner's broad reading of a range of spiritual influences, it is in the name of Ignatius that Rahner speaks to modern Jesuits and other believers. As Modras explains, 'Rahner's was a mysticism of everyday life. For him as for Ignatius Loyola, God can be experienced by anyone'<sup>90</sup>. Whilst Origen, Evagrius, Gregory and Bonaventure give Rahner the basis in tradition for his apophatic view of the spiritual condition and potentiality of the human race, he finds in Ignatius the concrete kataphatic apparatus and inclusive perspective through which humans experience God directly, without mediation.

Other commentators, like Harvey Egan, discern in the *Exercises* the basis for Rahner's direct encounter with God.

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<sup>88</sup> The use of the senses in imagination when meditating on Gospel stories – seeing the sights, hearing the sounds, smelling the smells, experiencing the touch, and so on.

<sup>89</sup> See Marmion's direct quote of Bonaventure, *A spirituality of everyday faith*, 267-268.

<sup>90</sup> *Ignatian humanism*, 226.



The Ignatian Exercises—especially numbers 15 and 16—imparted to Rahner one of the main pillars of his theological thought: God’s experiential self-communication. Ignatius was convinced that during the *Exercises* the exercitant experiences the *immediacy* of God’s self-communication and that the Creator and the creature work directly with each other. This Ignatian insight is almost a short formula for the entire Rahnerian enterprise. His theological point of departure is nothing less than a genuine, original experience of God, a starting point he himself experienced<sup>91</sup>.

Modras also highlights the directive from number 15—‘allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord’—as a ‘hallmark of Ignatian spirituality’<sup>92</sup>. Modras asserts that Rahner does not appeal to Origin and Bonaventure when making his case for direct experience of God precisely because Rahner believes this experience is found in Ignatius and his *Exercises*<sup>93</sup>, demonstrating that though other spiritual sources can be read in Rahner’s Ignatian interpretation, Rahner himself clearly believes—or at least came to be finally convinced in his later years—that the spirituality of Ignatius Loyola points the way to a contemporary ministry of formation in Christian spirituality.

### **Karl Rahner’s ‘spirituality of silence’ as an Ignatian practice**

In his introduction to a 1997 translation of one of Rahner’s books on prayer, Harvey Egan offers the following synoptic reflection on the essence of what his late friend and mentor believed and taught about human spirituality:

Rahner maintains that our deepest, primordial experience—what haunts the centre of our hearts—is of a God who remains holy mystery, the word that illuminates our spirits, and the love that embraces us. This is not a particular, or ‘categorical’ experience to which we can point. Rather, it is an experience beyond all particulars, a ‘transcendental’ experience. It is the atmosphere in which we live, our basal spiritual metabolism, ‘more intimate to us than we are to ourselves’...Just as we take our breathing, our beating hearts, or our own self-awareness for granted, so too may the ever-present experience of God remain overlooked, repressed, or even denied<sup>94</sup>.

Egan proposes that Karl Rahner arrived at this belief through a personal, direct, Ignatian encounter with God; for Rahner, Ignatian spirituality offers a way for the church to serve

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<sup>91</sup> *Karl Rahner - Mystic of everyday life* (New York: Crossroads, 1998), 32.

<sup>92</sup> *Ignatian humanism*, 25.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

<sup>94</sup> K. Rahner, *The need and blessing of prayer – a new translation*, Trans. B.W. Gillette (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), Xi.

humanity as a spiritual guide, enabling others to experience an ‘awakening’ to the mystical and relational possibilities of their graced existence. In Rahner’s mind, Ignatian spirituality also provides the means and process by which the church itself may receive constant direction and renewal: opening itself in humility to its ‘dynamic element’, the active presence and voice of the Holy Spirit, engaging directly with the lives of all members—not just those who constitute the official teaching office.

Rahner’s spirituality of silence can be expressed in Ignatian terms as follows.

1. *Christianity in the first instance emerges from a posture of solitude and silent self-contemplation in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus.*

Individuals willing to ‘put up with themselves in loneliness and perhaps in abandonment, therefore in silence’<sup>95</sup> achieve an initial awareness of God and a capacity to participate more fully in God’s life. Silent self-reflection, in light of the revelations of the historical Jesus and essential Christian doctrine, opens the doorway to a mystical participation in the actual life of Jesus through whom individuals find and embrace their true selves and begin to learn the meaning of prayer.

If we consider what we are like in our ordinary lives, in our secret moments, we shall see that we are all desire and longing, ever on the lookout for something new and different, that we are hungry and thirsty for the good things of life, one cry for a fulfilment we do not yet possess...we are practically one vast chaos of appetites...We need someone to straighten out the tangled desires that we are, to infuse them with tranquillity and an inner light and joy...That is why we must ask in Jesus’ name; which does not mean that we invoke him verbally and then desire whatever our turbulent, divided heart or our appetite, our wretched mania for anything and everything happens to hanker for. No, asking in Jesus name means entering into him, living by him, being one with him in love and faith. If he is in us in faith, in love, in grace, in his Spirit, and then our petition [life cry] arises from the centre of our being, which is himself, and if all our petition and desire is gathered up and fused in him and his Spirit, then the Father hears us<sup>96</sup>.

In the silent place—the place of Ignatian meditation, contemplation and colloquy—a person may become present to the God who is already closer to them than they are to themselves. The church, through the creation of a silent, sacred opportunity and the

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<sup>95</sup> Imhof and Biallowons, eds., *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 178.

<sup>96</sup> Rahner, K. *The Great Church Year*, Raffelt, A. ed. Egan, H. trans. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 200-201.

provision of appropriate spiritual material, enables the opening of the well of living water within those who allow themselves to be led into this silent place. In more technical Rahnerian terms, the silence of the *Exercises* leads the individual to an ‘anthropocentric-christocentric-mystagogical’ metamorphosis: an existential movement into ‘loving mystery’ in which a connection is made between the ‘inner Christ-directedness of the person and the...Jesus of history and the cosmos’, which in turn leads to an ‘actualisation of the freedom to live authentically’<sup>97</sup>.

2. *The ministry of pastoral care and the work of extending the influence of Christ’s salvation involves the spiritual leadership of the church in a rhythm of connection between proclamation and contemplation.*

The spirituality of Ignatius and the *Exercises* emphasises the importance of unique, individual responses to the mystical encounter. In recent history, spiritual direction has shifted from a focus on ‘preached’ content to what occurs for the individual in meditative/prayerful silence. This does not lead to a loss of Christian content in spiritual formation: with a focus on the gospels, the *Exercises* are profoundly biblical in content. They are designed to draw the exercitant into a direct engagement with literature based on the words and actions of Jesus. *Spiritual Exercises* emerged from Rahner’s desire to offer exercitants an appropriate theological framework from which to engage more fruitfully in the true experience of the *Exercises*—one only ‘knowable’ existentially through prayer<sup>98</sup>. These emphases highlight the need for a rhythm and balance between proclamation and contemplation.

For Rahner, this balance calls for spiritual leaders who become at least as skilled in the art of refraining from giving advice as they are at giving it. The focus of their verbal contribution is spiritual direction: they avoid ‘a moralistic manipulation of the person’<sup>99</sup>, believing instead that, in silent reflection, God the Holy Spirit will work in the unique anthropological/transcendent connection of human and divine spirit.

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<sup>97</sup> From Rahner’s introduction to Egan, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon*, Xiv – Xv.

<sup>98</sup> Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 8-9.

<sup>99</sup> See Egan, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon*, Xv.

Further, these spiritual leaders understand that the ultimate aim of proclamation is to direct the individual into the silence of God, and that, in these graced moments, the supernatural movement of God's Spirit opens the door for the individual to gaze out upon 'the vast reaches of limitless space...those hazy horizons, where...Your Endless Life is just beginning',<sup>100</sup>.

This rhythmic connection between proclamation and silence, with its emphasis on trusting and allowing for creative movement and expression between God and the individual, calls for spiritual leaders who themselves have found ultimate peace in the nearness of God. This aspect of spirituality of silence has to do with a mutuality of submission, a letting go of absolute control of both organisation and doctrine; in short, an abandonment to divine providence and a willingness to experience a more 'messy' spirituality. The result: a renewed emphasis on the capacity of each human being to be led by the Spirit directly as well as through the offices and doctrines of the church<sup>101</sup>.

3. *An openness to a mutuality of spiritual direction in which the church allows itself to be led both by that which emerges from the silence of its members, and by the holders of ecclesial office.*

The story of Ignatius and the Society of Jesus is the story of a charismatic community, emerging in response to a sense of direct leading by the Spirit of Jesus. Another part of this story has to do with Ignatius and his companions, who, after much prayer, discussion and soul-searching, approach the highest office of the Roman Catholic Church for specific direction and official sanctioning. In the eighteen years between the initial charismatic experience of Ignatius and the eventual ecclesial seal of approval, Ignatius and his companions did not wait for Rome to approve and direct their activities. Rather, in the process of following the Jesus of

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<sup>100</sup> K. Rahner, *Encounters with silence*, Trans. J. Demske (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1966),6.

<sup>101</sup> My reference to 'offices and doctrines of the Church' is intended to include both Protestant and Roman Catholic fellowships. The mere absence of a named episcopal structure of church government and a supposed emphasis on the authority of scripture against tradition has not prevented the emergence of different hierarchies and doctrines that are prescribed by some to become binding on all, in practice if not in confession.

their existential encounter, they arrived at an eventual conversation with Rome. In the process of this journey, Ignatius suffered under the suspicion of heresy from the church hierarchy on more than one occasion. In addition, bitter opposition from certain influential cardinals marked the final stage of the process of the official acceptance of the Jesuit order. Nevertheless, Ignatius lived out his charismatic convictions in response to the personal leading of Jesus within the context of a profound—but not uncritical—loyalty to the institutional church, and provided a model for a way of being in Christian community that allows for constructive tension between ecclesial office and Spirit-led direction.

Hugo Rahner describes this Ignatian model as that of ‘the man of great love in the little Church’<sup>102</sup>; he makes reference to the view of another ‘anonymous Jesuit’: ‘not to be stopped by what is greatest, yet held in check by what is least, that is divine’<sup>103</sup>. Ignatius models a person whose roots go deep into the God to whom he must respond in direct freedom of obedience but, for the sake of the church, he chooses to exercise this obedience within the boundaries of the hierarchical institution. Thus, Ignatius exercises a ministry within the church that accepts ecclesial authority but also seeks to influence such authority through the sacred experience of silence.

### **Reflection: The three key Ignatian ideas behind Rahner’s spirituality of silence**

The first chapter established that Karl Rahner was both a loyal son and a consistent critic and reinterpreter of the institutional Roman Catholic Church. This chapter demonstrates that Rahner has drawn on the model and spirit of Ignatius in the formation of his stance as one who is willing to receive direction from the church and to bring direction to the church from the places of silent, direct encounter with the ‘Jesus of history and the cosmos’. Rahner envisaged this ministry of mutual submission and direction as one in which each person, in the context of a personal awakening to the graced reality of existence, can participate. That the church ought constantly to open itself to the evaluation of the ‘dynamic element’ of its life is captured in the acerbic expression of one of Rahner’s published prayers for the church.

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<sup>102</sup> H. Rahner, *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola*, Xiii.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

How tiresome, feeble-minded, short-sighted, and tyrannical ‘office holders’ in the Church appear to me to be at times, in the worst sense, conservative and clerical. And when they unctuously and irritatingly display their noble intentions and their selflessness, it becomes even more annoying because I only too rarely hear them publicly and audibly confess their errors and mistaken judgements, but instead ask that we today believe in their infallibility and forget what major blunders and transgressions they committed the day before. How often are they morally outraged about a certain incident—their righteous anger about some social arrangement or other, the reason for which I see less clearly. They do a great deal of moralising, yet far less is heard of the ecstatic joy, bursting hearts and minds, prompted by the message of Your grace in which You bestow Your very self. And indeed, would that greater perspective were included in their trite homilies; would that they made so much as a passing reference in praise of Your magnificent grace, the abundance of life, which You impart to us<sup>104</sup>.

The three key Ignatian ideas behind Karl Rahner’s spirituality of silence are a spirituality of direct divine encounter through silence and solitude; a spirituality of leadership that actively seeks to discern the rhythm and balance between proclamation and contemplation; and a way of being within the church that emphasises a mutuality of submission in spiritual direction that involves listening to the content experienced by individuals in graced silence as well as to the pronouncements and conclusions of scholars, exegetes and ecclesial office holders. The Ignatian Rahner points the way to a spirituality of profound reverence for the sovereignty, mystery and creativity of God that validates both individual freedom and the discipline of mutuality in the corporate life shared in Christ.

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<sup>104</sup> K. Rahner, *Prayers for a Lifetime*, Raffelt, A. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 15.

### **Chapter 3: Spirituality of silence in everyday language: the spiritual classic and sacred heart**

An explicit search for the concept of silence in Rahner's prolific body of writings reveals that only one notable publication includes the actual term 'silence' in the title; at the same time silence is present in every other way within Rahner's philosophical, theological and devotional reflections. It is impossible to read for any length, in any part of the Rahner corpus, without coming across the term repeatedly. Whether in reference to the silent mystery of the infinite horizon, the silent expression of the anonymous Christian, or the silent encounter of the prayer that comes before words—the notion of silence is ubiquitous in Rahner's thinking.

This chapter will focus on Rahner's concept of silence, exploring in some detail the themes and elements of its construction in his text, *Encounters with silence*. After highlighting the chronological and conceptual significance of this text as a window into the essence of Rahner's spirit and intellect, this chapter will then

1. focus on the context and nature of the text;
2. identify its nature and structure as a literary piece and the general impression it conveys;
3. offer an interpretation of its major themes, theorising a structure of spiritual pilgrimage from a simple reading and analysis of the text;
4. present an analysis of the text through the lenses of recognisable spiritualities of silence that appear to be Rahner's sources and influences.

#### ***Encounters with silence: chronological and conceptual significance***

*Encounters with silence* is chronologically significant for two reasons. As Rahner's first published book (1938<sup>1</sup>), *Encounters* might be considered a symbolic if not literal foundation for everything else in Rahner's extensive publishing career. Secondly, *Encounters* chronologically aligns with the publication of his philosophical classic

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning its life as a series of ten personalised meditations and written in a conversational prayer genre, the material was initially published within a little-known journal of priestly spirituality; see John Galvin, 'Before the holy mystery: Karl Rahner's thought on God', *Toronto Journal of Theology* 9 (2) (1993): 229.

*Hearers of the word*, further emphasising its foundational<sup>2</sup> theoretical significance. Marmion notes that this pattern of spiritual/philosophical juxtapositioning also occurs in the chronological sequencing of both *Spirit in the world* and *Ascetics and mystics* (Rahner's revision and adaptation of an earlier French work on early Christian spirituality<sup>3</sup>). It could simply be a coincidence that a chronologically significant work uniquely uses the term 'silence'. It could also be that this title signals at the very beginning of Rahner's extensive publishing career what was most significant to him in his understanding of the human/divine relationship?

Reinforcing the significance of *Encounters* on a conceptual level is Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar's comment, in a 1939 review, that *Encounters* 'reiterates the basic insights of Rahner's theoretical works on the level of religious experience and must be considered in order to fully understand his thought'<sup>4</sup>. That *Encounters* is a 'reiteration' of Rahner's early philosophical theology or indeed the primary source of his theory is debatable. Nevertheless, from the start this thin devotional text has been considered an essential expression of Rahner's understanding of God.

Declan Marmion describes *Encounters* as 'undoubtedly' Rahner's 'spiritual classic'<sup>5</sup>. He notes that by 1967 the text was in its tenth edition and had been translated into eight languages. Marmion also offers an interpretive conceptual perspective on the text, arguing that the 'silence' of God in *Encounters* is twofold: it echoes the unreachable silence of the dead—representing the common frustration with prayer: talking to God but hearing no reply; yet paradoxically this same silence represents a 'boundless space' in

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the term 'foundational' here, in view of Karen Kilby's argument (see 'Philosophy, theology and foundationalism in the thought of Karl Rahner'. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2) (2002): 127-140.) is not intended to ascribe a prescriptive or determinant role to Rahner's early publications, whereby everything he writes in later years must be interpreted through the lense of his original works. Rather, that the text reveals major themes that were important to Rahner and continue to be reflected in varying ways in later works.

<sup>3</sup> D. Marmion, *A spirituality of everyday faith – a theological investigation of the notion of spirituality in Karl Rahner*, (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1988), 49-53.

<sup>4</sup> John Galvin's paraphrasing of Balthasar's comments, see: 'Before the holy mystery: Karl Rahner's thought on God', 230-231.

<sup>5</sup> *A spirituality of everyday faith – a theological investigation of the notion of spirituality in Karl Rahner*, 48.



which the spiritual pilgrim finds the love that enables faith<sup>6</sup>. Marmion believes that ‘word’ (from the original title *Worte ins Schweigen*), understood in the context of both *Encounters* and its chronological partner, *Hearers*, is not ‘word as verbal proposition’, but a metaphor for the experience of God’s self-communication with the human person; it is not an actual word but an experience deeper than words that is beyond verbal description—and therefore an encounter with silence<sup>7</sup>.

The growing emphasis of scholars on the importance and centrality of Rahner’s devotional literature also highlights the conceptual importance of *Encounters*. Kilby argues that Rahner’s devotional literature is more helpful and creative when viewed in its own light, and for its own value, rather than as a derivative or ‘dumbed-down’ version of a supposed centrally binding philosophical theory<sup>8</sup>. Herbert Vorgrimler asserts that it is entirely appropriate to approach Rahner through his prayer literature as, essentially, Rahner wrote about himself and his life with God. In Vorgrimler’s opinion, the person and theology of Rahner are most clearly expressed in his devotional writings<sup>9</sup>. Philip Endean’s study of Rahner, using his orientation to Ignatian spirituality as his lens, leads him to assert unequivocally that Rahner’s theology is rooted in his spirituality rather than his philosophy (cf Balthasar).

If Rahner himself is to be believed, then his theology depends less on systematic writers such as Maréchal or Heidegger than on terse text—‘written in an idiom that is downright provocation to theological pride’—we know as the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyolla<sup>10</sup>.

Similar thoughts are echoed by Dych<sup>11</sup>, Marmion<sup>12</sup>, and Harvey Egan who describes Rahner’s theology as one that

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<sup>6</sup> See K. Rahner, *Encounters with silence*, Trans. J.M. Demske (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1960), 6-10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 50-51.

<sup>8</sup> K. Kilby, *Karl Rahner theology and philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 127.

<sup>9</sup> H. Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, Trans. J. Bowden. (London: SCD Press, 1986), 2 & 10.

<sup>10</sup> P. Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian spirituality*, Oxford theological monographs, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Karl Rahner* (London: Continuum, 1992), 32-46.

<sup>12</sup> *A spirituality of everyday faith – a theological investigation of the notion of spirituality in Karl Rahner*, 43.

flows out of and then leads back into encounters with the saving, silent presence of the mystery of God's love for us in the crucified and risen Christ, *and* does so without dissolving theology's necessarily critical and rational function<sup>13</sup> [italics in original text].

Rahner himself regarded his devotional works 'not as a secondary by-product of theology that is sort of art for art's sake, but as least as important as my specifically theological works'<sup>14</sup>.

*Encounters with Silence* is not merely a convenient title plucked from obscurity, a marginal, occasional devotional afterthought. It is a chronological and conceptual classic, a historical treasury of the spiritual and conceptual essence of the person and theology of Karl Rahner.

***Encounters with silence: nature, literary structure and impressions***

Typical of Rahner, when the ten meditations published as *Encounters* made their first appearance as a series within a journal devoted to the spiritual formation of priests, his style is neither directive nor instructive but implicitly—and silently—invitational. Rahner does not address the reader directly; he addresses God, and draws his readers into the unfolding drama of the conversation. The first-person conversational genre of *Encounters* has a quality that brings to mind Pannenburg's summation of Rahner's influence: 'He makes the Christian element become transparent to humanity generally, and people felt that their questions were part of Rahner's experience'<sup>15</sup>. Rahner's style also brings to mind the methodology of Ignatius: the offering of personal spiritual experiences as a starting point for others to enter a similar, yet distinct and uniquely personal, journey.

It is likely that readers are attracted to *Encounters* for the same reason that so many find comfort and hope in the biblical psalms. Indeed, *Encounters* is very psalm-like in its style and structure. In each of the ten meditations, Rahner raises difficult issues of faith and existence honestly without pious pretence.

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<sup>13</sup> H. Egan, *Karl Rahner – mystic of everyday life*, (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 81.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in *ibid*, 93.

<sup>15</sup> As cited in Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 23.

Lord, to pray my whole life long without hearing an answer, isn't that too much to ask? You see how I run away from You time and time again, to speak with... [people] who give me an answer... You see how much I *need* to be answered. And yet, my prayers never receive a word of reply<sup>16</sup>.

Like the majority of the psalms, the questions raised by Rahner in *Encounters* find their resolution in applying theological reasoning to faith .

Why are You so silent? Why do you enjoin me to speak with You, when You don't pay any attention to me? Isn't Your silence a sure sign that You're not listening? Or do You really listen quite attentively, do You perhaps listen my whole life long, until I have told You everything, until I have spoken out my entire self to You?<sup>17</sup>

Characteristic of each of the meditations is the pattern of honest questioning, complaint and wondering that leads ultimately to a resolution emerging from a creative logical reflection on the nature and character of divinity—and not to a pat religious answer.

A significant component of the capacity of *Encounters* to draw in readers/listeners is the vivid, artistic imagery Rahner uses to describe the human condition. The following notable example, using the metaphor of a goods warehouse to describe the unceasing accumulation of the trivial data of everyday life, is found in 'God of my daily routine'.

Many years ago, when I was a schoolboy distinguished by the name 'philosopher,' I learned that the soul is somehow everything. O God, how the meaning of that lofty-sounding phrase has changed! How different it sounds to me now, when my soul has become a huge warehouse where day after day the trucks unload their crates without any plan or discrimination, to be piled helter-skelter in every available corner and cranny, until it is crammed full from top to bottom with the trite, the commonplace, the insignificant, the routine<sup>18</sup>.

Carefully constructed, descriptive phrases permeate the meditations, enabling readers/listeners to discern that their most familiar experiences have been penetrated, mirrored and framed within the author's prayer.

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<sup>16</sup> K. Rahner, *Encounters with silence*, 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

Harvey Egan theorises on the nature and structure of the *Encounters* meditations in an informal and unpublished document<sup>19</sup>.

First, there is an awareness or a naming of the reality of everyday life as Rahner experiences or notes it.

A metaphor is introduced and a comparison (sometimes a paradox) is suggested contrasting...[humanity's] reality and experience with that of God's experience and reality.

Rahner highlights the incongruities between God's action and human action.

Rahner seeks to find God in the experience he presents, usually in the form of a question.

Rahner wrestles with this question and in the process makes a confession, admits a temptation and formulates a desire.

Rahner then suggests a way God might resolve his question which becomes a resolution suggesting surrender to divine love.

On the basis of the above analysis, Egan concludes the following:

On the whole, each prayer wrestles with the way in which human finiteness encounters, experiences, and surrenders to God's infinity, incomprehensibility and limitlessness.

Each prayer provides an assertion of how Rahner sees God drawing on... [humanity's] finitude into God's boundlessness (through a very small but real aperture) .

The encounters with Silence occur at that liminal place where the human and divine connect. *The edge of silence is the beginning of God, and prayer brings Rahner to this very precipice*<sup>20</sup>.

Egan comments that the structure 'makes sense' in light of Rahner's philosophical/theological background; he wonders 'if this book and the structures beneath the prayers indicate the way in which Rahner himself prayed'. Egan's reflections highlight the usefulness of the *Encounters* text as both a prompt and a guide: others can copy Rahner's way of praying into the silence.

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<sup>19</sup> This document was accessed directly from the author by the means of an email attachment as part of an ongoing correspondence, beginning in May 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Emphasis mine.

***Encounters with silence: strictures of finite existence and shadows of impending mortality***

A thematic interpretation of the text also illuminates the nature and dynamic of this silent spirituality.

In 'God of my life', Rahner confesses his secret wish: to escape the angst and confusion of working out a life of faith, and become as untroubled by the mystery of human existence and the incomprehensibility of any concept of God and the eternal as he perceives most people without faith to be. Untroubled by the deeper questions of existence, they immerse themselves in the minutiae of their safe, familiar everyday existences. Rahner rails against the tortured reality of his faith experience: 'Why have You kindled in me the flame of faith, this dark light which lures us out of the bright security of our little huts into Your night?'<sup>21</sup>.

Despite this initial protest, however, or perhaps in response to this protest, there emerges in *Encounters* an acute sense of the dissatisfactory nature of a purely finite existence and the meaninglessness of its inevitable termination; nuances of these negative feelings are dispersed throughout the text. They emerge in response to reflections on various aspects of everyday existence: 'knowledge', 'routine', 'duty', 'death'.

In his reflection on 'knowledge' Rahner notices that he has learned an extraordinary number of things during his life—both through the processes of formal education and through conversations, reading and recreational pursuits—and observes that he has forgotten more than half: 'It slipped away from me because our poor, narrow human minds simply cannot take in and hold one thing without letting another sink into oblivion'<sup>22</sup>. For Rahner, the processing of knowledge is not the ultimate human endeavour:

Knowledge seems more like a kind of pain-killing drug that I have to take repeatedly against the boredom and desolation of my heart. And no matter how faithful I may be to it, it can never really cure me. All it can give me is words and concepts, which perform the middle-man's service of expressing and interpreting

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 27.

reality to me, but can never still my heart's craving for the reality itself, for true life and true possession<sup>23</sup>.

Rahner's discussion of the narrow and bitter experience of 'daily routine' begins with 'I should like to bring the routine of my daily life before You, O Lord, to discuss the long days and tedious hours that are filled with everything else but You'<sup>24</sup>. Rahner laments that finite, mortal existence is, for the most part, routine. He describes the human soul, in light of this existential reality, as

a road crowded by a dense and endless column of bedraggled refugees, a bomb-pocked highway on which countless trivialities, much empty talk and pointless activity, idle curiosity and ludicrous pretensions of importance all roll forward in a never-ending stream<sup>25</sup>.

Rahner concludes that even his sacred activities are tainted by 'the corrosive dust of this spirit of routine'<sup>26</sup>.

Rahner connects the trivial meaningless of 'everyday routine' with law, regulation and duty<sup>27</sup>: life is lived within the narrow confines of the expectations and demands of church and society. Though we yearn for freedom and open spaces, we are confined by what has to be done and the plethora of petty regulations that stream endlessly from both civil and religious leaders.

Rahner describes human existence in its base, natural form as cramped and enclosed: 'the poor prison of my little existence'<sup>28</sup>, 'our little huts'<sup>29</sup>, 'the cramped and confining prison of my own finiteness'<sup>30</sup>, 'the restrictions of our smallness'<sup>31</sup>, 'the tiny dwelling of my finiteness'<sup>32</sup>, 'the poor little wall...[of] my tiny life's-acre'<sup>33</sup>. He describes life as

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 47-48.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 35-44.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 16.

a long highway filled by a column of...[marchers]. Every moment someone breaks out of the line and goes off silently...to be swiftly enwrapped in the darkness of the night stretching out on both sides of the road<sup>34</sup>.

Rahner's lament: the human condition is a series of repetitive activities and events that only ever lead so far, and never into complete satisfaction and fulfillment, ending abruptly and arbitrarily in death.

***Encounters with silence: the 'upward glance of the soul'*<sup>35</sup> enables humans to honestly view, accept and positively frame the 'narrowness of finite existence'**

Rahner strips away religious and secular 'spin' and examines human temporal existence in its stark reality. Human lives are characterised by limited energy and resources and a multitude of competing demands and values. Human days are structured around a repetitive cycle of the mundane 'secular' and 'sacred' habits and duties: the plethora of civic and religious regulations dominates social patterns and relationships. Human bodies eventually collapse in physical exhaustion, and disappear into the unfathomable darkness of eternal silence.

Despite Rahner's bleak outlook, the *Encounters* meditations ultimately resonate with hope rather than despair. What is the catalyst that enables him to face the stark reality of his own experience of temporal life and find ultimate hope and value in human existence? In the opening meditations, Rahner suggests that, if he could accept finite existence as the 'beginning and end of my whole life', he could

begin to recognize my finiteness and accept it as my sole destiny, because I had previously so often stared out into the vast reaches of limitless space, to those hazy horizons where Your Endless Life is just beginning<sup>36</sup>.

Rahner's philosophical concept of the 'infinite horizon' argues that human beings accept the finite nature of their existence only when they realise that, in and through every

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>35</sup> 'Upward glance of the soul,' a phrase I have borrowed from the text of another of Rahner's books, and which I believe is implied in the *Encounters* text. See *Happiness through prayer*, (Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1958).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 6.

aspect of their daily routines and experiences, they have been existentially gazing into an eternal backdrop beyond the temporal elements.

Conscious awareness that the distinctive temporal state of human existence becomes vivid against the backdrop of its infinite horizon brings an element of hope: limited, fragmented, alienated starkness is only *part* of the truth of the human journey. The hope that humans may become part of the limitless other permeates the *Encounter* meditations, ultimately finding its resolution in faith that blossoms in the experiential knowledge of enduring love.

Rahner's meditations imply that the secular fixation on temporal existence as an end in itself, and pious clichés designed to mask feelings of futility and frustration, are useful only for those who have not yet found the faith or courage to gaze into infinite space. Those who have gazed—and have a sense of being found and placed in an eternal context—can reflect and speak honestly into the eternal silence. They gain a new perspective: a real faith based on abandonment rather than fearful, doctrinal dogmatism. The recognition of 'life's little acre' is a positive step along the way to immersion in the eternal substance of a new life without barriers.

### ***Encounters with silence: fearful instincts in the face of infinity***

Rahner is equally honest about the darkness of God's incomprehensibility.

Why do You constrain me to walk along Your paths, if they lead only to the awful darkness of Your night, where only You can see?...I'm constantly tempted to creep away from You in utter discouragement, back to the things that are more comprehensible, to things with which my heart feels so much more at home than it does with Your mysteriousness<sup>37</sup>.

The problem: God the Infinite is incredibly *other*, living in an infinite and eternal realm that is incomprehensible to humans. Because they have no comprehension, humans cannot *see* the way forward, cannot predict what will happen, and do not have the knowledge they think they need to keep themselves as safe as they are accustomed to feel whenever they try something new. Humans balk at the infinite vision and the eternal

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<sup>37</sup> Rahner, *Encounters with silence*, 5-6.



gaze; they prefer to stay safe, risk nothing, and pretend that their temporal life and religious beliefs are all that they need. Though human beings somewhere deep inside recognise that they are stuck in a bleak cyclic and monotonous landscape leading ultimately to a futile death, they find launching out into an infinite unknown too overwhelming.

Whenever I think of Your Infinity, I am racked with anxiety, wondering how You are disposed toward me...When I try to take You into account in the calculations of my life, I can only put You down as an 'unknown'—the riddle of Your Infinity, which Itself contains everything, throws all my calculations off, and so the end result is still an insolvable puzzle...You are thus the eternal threat in my life, frightening me out of all sense of security<sup>38</sup>.

The *Encounters* meditations expose the human dilemma. A sense of infinity helps humans to see and frame their finite existence for what it is: barren, incomplete and ultimately futile. Glimpses of infinity, however, frighten and confuse humans, and cause them to wish that they had never thought outside the familiar frames of the temporal and immediately familiar. Stuck: trapped by temporal reality, frightened and confused by infinite possibility, humans are left wondering 'who or what will save us?'

***Encounters with silence: experiential knowledge saves, and blossoms into love***

If God were to speak to humans in his own language about the fullness of his infinity they would be overwhelmed and swept away; humans do not have the capacity to hear this word.

No, Lord, You must speak to me in a word that does not mean everything all at once...Don't tell me everything that You are; don't tell me of Your Infinity—just say that You love me<sup>39</sup>.

Rahner speaks of Jesus Christ as the divine word that believers have the capacity to hear because he speaks God's love in human language. His heart is a human heart—but it is also God's heart; through him believers can learn to believe that the frightening immensity of the all-in-all chooses to speak ultimately about just one thing: 'love'.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 16.

The knowledge of this saving word comes in two complementary ways. In the first instance, the constructs of the Christian faith create a framework that enables believers to connect with the innermost and deepest reality of their lives. In his meditation ‘God of my life’ (chapter 1) Rahner demonstrates his Christian understanding that the incomprehensible mystery of infinity is calling him personally to a relationship of love: ‘You are ordering something that my own inclinations would never dare to suggest: to love *You*, to come intimately close to You, to love Your very life’<sup>40</sup>. In ‘God of my Lord Jesus Christ’ (chapter 2) Rahner celebrates the idea of God’s disposition towards humanity expressed in a human form:

Jesus has really told me that He loves me, and His word has come from the depths of His human heart. And His heart is Your heart, O God of our Lord Jesus Christ<sup>41</sup>.

In ‘God of my knowledge’ (chapter 4) Rahner celebrates the experiential knowledge of the love of God empowered through the function of Christian sacrament: ‘You have descended upon me in water and the Spirit, in my baptism’<sup>42</sup>. In ‘God of my vocation’ (chapter 9) Rahner recognises the necessity of the ‘visible Church’ with its tangible community: people experience ‘internal worship’ in, around and through signs and audible words. In their search for an experience of ‘Spirit’ in this context, people discern more than a caricature of ‘God’ made in the reflection of their own spirit. Christian faith creates a place of safety, promise, direction and tangible access: a community within which believers dare to explore the experience of love and intimacy with the divine.

In the second movement, knowledge comes through experience. This knowledge—not the knowledge of data but the knowledge that comes through the experience of love—is for life.

Thanks to Your mercy, O Infinite God, I know something about You not only through concepts and words, but through experience. I have actually known You through living contact; I have met You in joy and suffering. For You are the first and last experience of my life<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 30.

This experience is life's true essence: the forms, structures, sacraments and ideas of the Christian faith invite believers to launch into an experience of God and point them towards God rather than their own self-constructed concepts of divinity. The true knowledge of faith is the actual encounter with divine love. Human words are like 'middle-men' saying something about experience but never actually *being* the experience; the abiding presence of God is the true Word that endures eternally. Words of revelation expressed in human language fail to 'still the yearning of my heart'<sup>44</sup>.

Believers are saved not just because they hear that Jesus is God's word of love and invitation; they also participate in the encounter. God is always present to believers in the deepest most personal way: 'You are the inmost centre of my heart, closer to me than I am to myself'<sup>45</sup>. Prayer, the act of conversation with divinity, is

ultimately just a patient waiting for You, a silent standing by until You, who are ever present in the inmost centre of my being, open the gate to me from within'<sup>46</sup>.

The Christian message, expressed as a holistic ministry of the entire body of Christ, helps believers to find the courage, direction and resources to enter deeply into the God who by grace has become already the true centre of their existence. Humans would never have come up with this idea themselves—humans get lost in their own spirit-seeking. The resources and community of the Christian faith guide believers to their true interiority in God.

The historical Jesus and the continuation of his embodiment through his Spirit-empowered church help Christians to overcome their instinctual fear of the infinite realm, and to experience the eternal nature of God in love. In this way, human experience of the finite and temporal is transformed: it finds its place, context and true life within the framework of eternal love as power, destination and meaning.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 24.

***Encounters with silence: transforming everyday experiences and routines***

An encounter with the mystery of God at the centre of human existence opens up a way of love that by its eternal nature transforms and liberates every aspect of mundane and banal human lives. No longer depressed, harassed or overwhelmed by their experience of a data-saturated culture, human believers now understand knowledge as a ‘traveling companion’ along the way to their eternal destiny: they have found, or have been found, by the eternal knowledge of the loving experience of God. The human capacity to forget most of the data that passes through their minds in the everyday process of engaging with culture simply points to their ultimate destination: the realm of eternity—‘the great silence, in which no sound will be heard but You’<sup>47</sup>.

Because God is at the existential heart of human reality, revelation of the absolute inner closeness and loving nature of divinity transforms day-to-day routines, duties and events: ‘every day is “everyday”...every day is *Your* day, and every hour the hour of *Your* grace’<sup>48</sup>. The human encounter with the eternal, silent mystery transforms ‘trivial’ aspects of the day-to-day into acts of spiritual worship and divine intimacy: believers use their interior sense of being loved by God to express each aspect of their exterior existence. Nothing in the total scope of everyday business, bustle, noise, communication, commerce—and even the demands of the religious vocation<sup>49</sup>—can separate humans from the abiding love of God.

In ‘God of law’ (chapter 5) Rahner reaches the conclusion that the interiority of God’s love enables believers to subvert even their experiences of obedience to the petty regulations of church and state<sup>50</sup>. Such laws have no life in themselves and are the product of small-mindedness and bureaucratic self-importance. However, from a deep sense of the interiority of God’s love and in a spirit of humility, believers can regard obedience to human laws as an act of worship and service to the common good;

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>49</sup> ‘God of my vocation’, *ibid*, 69-77.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 35-44.

Christians can experience the full freedom of the Spirit while choosing to live within the constraints and boundaries of multiple regulations.

Ultimately, the vision of eternal destiny transforms human experience. The mystery of the loving interiority of the eternal God transforms the silence of the grave into an eloquent song of eternal promise<sup>51</sup>: the individual's encounter with the inner sanctuary reveals the complete separation of death as a signal confirming the glorious 'otherness' of the life to come. This 'knowing' emerges from experiencing the silence of God as the ultimate loving, transforming reality. Death simply echoes God's silence and demonstrates that the life to come is not a phantom shadow of finite existence but something absolutely different and more wonderful. Thus the inevitable march towards the grave is transformed into a hopeful pilgrimage, climaxing in a joyful, running leap into the arms of divine providence. Jesus' death is his ultimate identification with humanity; his resurrection signals the ultimate promise and meaning of human existence.

***Encounters with silence: the thematic structure of spiritual pilgrimage***

Though Rahner's meditations in *Encounters* are expressed in a highly personalised narrative form, a thematic structure of spiritual pilgrimage can be systematically drawn out and summarised in five statements:

1. a human person becomes existentially aware of the limitations and futility of finite existence; and
2. grows in an existential awareness of an infinite horizon—a backdrop of infinity—against which to clearly interpret the finite and gain a sense of infinite possibility;
3. an initial glance into the face of infinity evokes fearfulness—its darkness is unknown and therefore is experienced as unsafe;
4. an experiential knowledge of God's love transforms this fear into love—God's intervention through the ministry of Jesus and the church is integral to this shift;
5. God's love—an eternal love giving humans a sense of hope and meaning beyond the finite—transforms everyday experiences and routines.

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<sup>51</sup> 'God of the living', *ibid*, 53-58.

In the chapters on ‘mystery’ and ‘word and sacrament’, insights from Rahner’s more complex transcendental theologising contributes additional nuances to these themes.

### **Spiritualities of silence in *Encounters with silence***

Elements of various traditions of Christian spiritualities of silence are apparent within *Encounters with silence*. Although Rahner offers only occasional fleeting references to some of these traditions, the spiritual theology in *Encounters* clearly reflects a variety of influences and sources.

#### *The silence of prayerful powerlessness in the dark night*

Rahner complains bitterly of his experience of emptiness and disconnection:

When I pray, it’s as if my words have disappeared down some deep, dark well, from which no echo ever comes back to reassure me that they have struck the ground of Your heart...Why are you so silent? Why do you enjoin me to speak with You, when You don’t pay any attention to me? Isn’t Your silence a sure sign that You’re not listening?<sup>52</sup>

Rahner resolves this complaint by concluding that an ‘hour’ will come when he will enter ‘the hidden sanctuary of...[his] own being’, and

hold ‘myself’, that nameless something in which all my powers and qualities are united as in their source, and I shall return this nameless thing to You in an offering of love<sup>53</sup>.

Rahner concludes that he is powerless to enact this ‘change’: he may only adopt a posture of ‘patient waiting for You, a silent standing by’<sup>54</sup> in the rhythms of his daily routines; even in periods of true prayer, God remains silent.

Theologians call Your silence in such a decisive hour the ‘dark night of the soul,’ and those who have experienced it are ‘mystics.’ These are the great souls who have not merely ‘lived through’ this hour of decision, as all... [people] must, but have been able to watch themselves in the process, to be somehow witnesses of their own reactions<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 19 & 20.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 25.

Rahner does not claim for himself the mystical awareness of the ‘great souls’; he simply asks God for the grace to continue ‘this awful waiting’: the clearing of the ‘ground of the soul’ in readiness for the anticipated divine hour of grace.

Rahner’s thinking represents a dual spirituality of silence. All his words and activities—including his human attempts to ‘pray’—are expressions of both his powerlessness towards God and his faith that such a moment of divine empowerment will come, or perhaps already has. Rahner recognises that words cannot represent the depth of spiritual expression that is ‘prayer’: the giving of a person’s whole life to God. God’s action enables prayer on a level deeper than verbal expression or human consciousness.

Though the extent to which Rahner is actually using John of the Cross (1542–91) as a source is not clear, the connections are notable; the original ‘dark night’ text stresses a spiritual movement of the soul that ‘has left discursive meditation and entered the state of proficients, it is God who works in it’<sup>56</sup>.

Furthermore, those entering the dark night should recognise their utter powerlessness to make an interior connection to God. The appropriate response to the ‘night of the senses’ is to

liberate themselves from the impediment and fatigue of ideas and thoughts... they must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God... without the effort, and without the desire to taste and feel Him<sup>57</sup>.

The movement of the Spirit in such a dark night is a ‘secret contemplation’ that is experienced at an unconscious and meta-sensory level: ‘[t]hrough this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens’<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Book I, Chapter nine, ‘The Dark Night’ cited in Egan, H, *An anthology of Christian mysticism*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 456.

<sup>57</sup> Book I, Chapter ten, *ibid* in Egan, 457.

<sup>58</sup> Book II, Chapter five, *ibid*.

In this positive re-framing and re-imagining of his sensory-deprived experience of ‘praying’, Rahner has drawn on the theology of the dark night and similar materials to find a basis for his interpretation of the silence of God.

*Dark mystery of incomprehensibility; a language of love beyond words or knowledge*  
Apart from the Rahner’s explicit mention of the dark night, others’ references to the dark mystery of God<sup>59</sup> seem to offer further echoes of the apophatic tradition of silent spirituality. Rowan Williams describes this tradition as ‘an advance into darkness’ and refers to Gregory of Nyssa (one of Rahner’s patristic influences) who combines the ‘cloud’ of Exodus with the ‘night’ of Song of Songs to conceptualise a ‘darkness’ of God’s incomprehensibility where words and knowledge are inadequate and ‘love is [mystically] consummated’<sup>60</sup>. The anonymous author of the fourteenth century text ‘Cloud of Unknowing’ counsels the spiritual pilgrim to ‘learn to be at home in this darkness’, explaining that this darkness is ‘the absence of [intellectual] knowledge’; as pilgrims learn to live in this cloud they ‘take up the contemplative work of love’<sup>61</sup>.

Intrinsic to the concept of the mystical darkness of God is the idea of the *via negativa*<sup>62</sup> which Bradley Holt ascribes to Dionysius’ text<sup>63</sup> *The Mystical Theology*:

leave behind you everything perceived and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything...you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything there is<sup>64</sup>.

Holt explains that

Dionysus argued that since any human concept is inadequate for God, only denials of the likeness of God to human categories could properly apply. For

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 11–12.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Dark Night, Darkness,’ in Wakefield, S. ed., *A dictionary of Christian spirituality*, (London: SCM Press, 1983), 103. See also Egan, *An anthology of Christian mysticism*, 33.

<sup>61</sup> In Egan, *An anthology of Christian mysticism*, 369.

<sup>62</sup> The negative way

<sup>63</sup> A late fifth-century to early sixth-century Syrian monk writing under a pseudonym. .

<sup>64</sup> In *Thirsty for God – a brief history of Christian spirituality* (second edition), (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 74.



example, it would limit God to say, ‘God is just’ (the positive way). It would be better to say, ‘God is not unjust’ (the negative way)<sup>65</sup>.

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza notes that, in Rahner’s speculative philosophical theology, he uses the term *philosophia negativa* to emphasise his conviction that all philosophical perspectives fall short of adequately expressing the mystery of human experience and reality<sup>66</sup>. In light of the implicit *theologia negativa* in *Encounters*, Rahner’s *philosophia negativa* implies a natural extension of his thinking: he ascribes his essential theological understanding of the creator—an ‘unknowing’—to the creature.

In *Encounters*, Rahner focuses on experiencing God as a direct personal encounter—not simply engaging with an image of God that is the mere reflection of his own human spirit<sup>67</sup>. Whilst he is tempted to shrink from ‘the darkness of Your unboundedness...harsher than all my earthly nights’<sup>68</sup> and embrace ‘things that are more comprehensible’<sup>69</sup>, he is driven by a greater, more powerful reward than banal intellectual security. Rahner’s vivid description seems to resonate with an apophatic spirituality of immediate experience and detachment from ‘things’.

Love seizes me and carries me up to Your level, into You...when I love You, when I manage to break out of the narrow circle of self and leave behind the restless agony of unanswered questions, when my blinded eyes no longer look merely from afar and from the outside upon Your unapproachable brightness, and much more when You Yourself, O Incomprehensible One, have become through love the inmost centre of my life, then I can bury myself entirely in You, O Mysterious God, and with myself all my questions<sup>70</sup>.

The metaphoric ‘word’ of God’s love pierces the darkness of intellectual incomprehensibility; the new ‘knowledge’—an experience of wordless transcendence—transforms the encounter with silence into a luminosity of divine communion, true life, and spirit.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Method in theology,’ in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, Marmion, D. & Hines, M. eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 72-73.

<sup>67</sup> *Encounters*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 17

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 9.

*Silent journey into the sacred chamber of true self—echoes of the interior castle*

Rahner's spiritual theologians are resigned, patiently waiting for God to enable them to enter their inner sanctuary and offer their lives as a prayer of love. Rahner, in his meditation on pastoral work and the 'care of souls', demonstrates that entering deeply into the heart of the psyche is synonymous with drawing closer to the heart of God. He laments the resistance he experiences when he attempts to offer spiritual direction.

When I knock on the door of their interior life and they let me in, they usually lead me only into the rooms in which they live their ordinary daily lives...they try to make themselves and me forget why I have actually come, to bring You like the Blessed Sacrament into the inmost chamber of their hearts, where the eternal spark within them is sick unto death, where an altar to You should be erected, on which the candles of faith, hope, and love should be burning<sup>71</sup>.

He speculates whether his task is to 'be...an errand boy who leaves Your gift and Your message at the delivery entrance, with no thought of being invited inside', and suggests that maybe it's 'just not my business to enter the interior castle of another's soul'<sup>72</sup>.

Rahner's mention of an 'interior castle' in the construction of his understanding of spirituality and spiritual direction evokes the influence of Teresa of Avila (1515–82). In her imaginative framing of spiritual growth as 'contemplative prayer in silence and love', Teresa marks the stages of the journey moving from a conventional ritual Christianity towards a consummation of the love between self and God in a 'united [active/contemplative]...apostolic life'<sup>73</sup>.

Teresa describes the human person as like a castle or a great house with a moat around it and many rooms inside, like the 'many mansions' in heaven. The castle is made of diamond or crystal, and its rooms are arranged in concentric circles. God dwells in the central (seventh) rooms, so the light of God's presence should fill the castle and shine out through it but the castle is darkened by sin. The spiritual life is a journey that begins outside the castle and leads inwards, towards the innermost rooms where God dwells. God calls us on this journey, and it is accomplished through prayer. Its goal is the union of our love and will with the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 65-66.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 207.

will and love of God: then the diamond that is our self can shine out in its full beauty<sup>74</sup>.

Her vision of the interior castle seems to be a primary influence in Rahner's resolution of the pastoral dilemma. He concludes that the way into the inner sanctuary of those he works with as a spiritual director is mystically connected to the progress that he is currently making in praying his way, contemplatively, into the interior castle of his own soul.

No matter how hard...[people] try to break off relations with You, You are always present to them... You are there at the very core of these futile efforts ...thus it is that the one who is entrusted with the help and care of souls can draw near to them only by drawing near to You, O King of all hearts...If I had prayed more then I would be closer to souls. For prayer, when it is not just a begging for Your favours, enables me to grow in intimate, loving union with You. Thus it is not merely a useful aid in my work for souls but the very first and last act of my apostolate<sup>75</sup>.

Rahner's words echo the Ignatian practice of 'making' spiritual exercises a means of enabling others to embark on their own spiritual pilgrimage. The spiritual director's silent descent into the loving mystery of God at the centre of his psyche becomes the axis for his ministry as spiritual director.

*The silent, immediate experience of God in all things*

Rahner's writings clearly echo aspects of the apophatic, wordless, contemplative tradition: the cloud of unknowing; the dark mystery of infinity silencing all human concepts and knowledge; the contemplative descent into the inner chamber of the interior castle. The fascinating, and unexpected feature of Rahner's *Encounters*, is that the immediate experience of God occurs in, through and around a very real engagement with, and an immersion in, the minutiae of the everyday.

Rahner's struggles with the tedium of ordinary existence and his processing of the endless streams of data result from a life of scholarship and routine human social transactions. He finds his priestly duties difficult and challenging, and his relationships

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<sup>74</sup> L. Carmichael, 'Catholic saints and reformers,' in Mursell, G. gen.ed. *The story of Christian spirituality*, (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2001), 206.

<sup>75</sup> *Encounters*, 67.

with authority—both sacred and secular—testing. He experiences formal liturgy and worship as empty and ritualistic and is hurt and disillusioned by the inevitable and arbitrary loss of loved ones through death. Yet, in this context—the business, wordiness, tedium and emotional complexity of an ordinary life—Rahner proclaims his existential encounter with interior silence, a silence he experiences as abandonment into the loving arms of the eternal God. Rahner’s life in prayer echoes life as an active contemplative in the Ignatian tradition.

In his summary of Ignatius’ understanding of the relationship between the world and God, David Lonsdale observes that Ignatius ‘sees all good gifts of creation and salvation “descending from above...as the rays of light descend from the sun, and as the waters flow from their fountains” (Exx 237),<sup>76</sup> and that God is

present and active at all levels of created reality... ‘in the elements giving them existence, in the plants giving them life, in the animals conferring upon them sensation, in humanity bestowing understanding’ (Exx 235)...If the world and history and all that is contained within them are gifts from the hand of God, then God is continuously present and engaged in created reality in every dimension of life and in a variety of different ways.

Lonsdale also notes that the images of God’s active presence in the world as giver and ongoing creator ‘form the foundation of the Contemplation to Attain Love in the *Spiritual Exercises*’. Retreatants are constantly invited to consider God’s ongoing activity and blessing in their personal history—as well as their broader world—as a basis for thanksgiving and affection towards God. Lonsdale explains that it is in the context of meditating on the personal experience of God’s active love in creation that the Ignatian prayer of absolute surrender and commitment finds its true context. ‘Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all that I have and possess...(Exx 234),<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>76</sup> *Eyes to see, ears to hear – an introduction to Ignatian spirituality*, (London: Dartman, Longman& Todd, 1990), 55-57.

<sup>77</sup> In *ibid.*

Echoes of Ignatius' *Exercises* are apparent in the *Encounters* prayers.

I now see clearly that, if there is any path at all on which I can approach You, it must lead through the very middle of my ordinary daily life. If I should try to flee to You by any other way I would actually be leaving myself behind...If You have given me no single place to which I can flee and be sure of finding You, if anything I do [including formal prayer and worship] can mean the loss of You, then I must be able to find You in every place, in each and every thing I do. Otherwise I couldn't find You at all, and this cannot be, since I can't possibly exist without You. Thus I must seek You in all things...Your love can save me the love of You, who are the goal and attraction of all things...It is only the love of You, my Infinite God, which pierces the very heart of all things, at the same time transcending them all and leaping upward into the endless reaches of Your Being, catching up all the lost things of this earth and transforming them into a hymn of praise to Your infinity<sup>78</sup>.

The mystery of the *Encounters* text is how it combines experiencing an apophatic, interior immediate experience of God and a full engagement with the spectrum of human routines, social transactions and psychological responses to the events and circumstances of life. Perhaps the point of Rahner's *Encounters* meditations is not to resolve this paradox but to entice the reader to make this mystery their personal experience.

### **Conclusion**

The overall impression of the *Encounters* meditations: a beautiful dance with an invisible partner. The internal logic of the resolved dilemmas and questions reflects creativity and depth, and has an intrinsic beauty that is fetching and engaging—in an aesthetic, rather than pragmatic, sense.

To experience *Encounters* as a guide to what it means to be fully human, readers must have the capacity to discern God's Spirit in the imagination of the author. If readers can sense only the aesthetic nature of the internal theological logic, if they cannot perceive that this logic has emerged from a deeper, more primordial experience, then *Encounters* is merely interesting in a poetic way. If readers are able to sense a liturgical movement in response to a rhythm of divine grace, then the logic of the text has profound relevance for all aspects of faith and life. Though Rahner never explicitly says 'thus says the Lord', it becomes obvious as readers progress through the meditations that the words of the author

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<sup>78</sup> *Encounters*, 48, 50-52.

are shaped, formed and structured against the silent yet profound substance of a living encounter with God. This is the true genius of the text: it is an audible response to an encounter with silence. In a real sense this simple statement encapsulates the meaning of Rahner's life and work.

## Chapter 4: The human experience of mystery—a silence transformed

*Our existence is embraced by an ineffable mystery whom we call God. We can exclude him from our day-to-day awareness by the concerns and activities of our daily lives; we can drown the all-pervading silence of this mystery. But he is there: as the one comprehensive question that remains when all individual answers have been given; as the goal to which we reach beyond all individual goals and all individual good things of life; as the future which lies beyond all individual goals and keeps our ceaseless restless striving in motion; as the absolute guarantee that there is really a responsibility for our freedom that cannot be shifted on to someone else, which we cannot elude by leaping into nothingness; as the one truth in which all individual knowledge has its ultimate home and order; as the promise that selfless love will not be disappointed<sup>1</sup>.*

This paragraph presents the essence of Rahner's theology of mystery and its meaning for the human journey. It also contains the essence of his spirituality of silence—the all-embracing mystery of absolute consequence and significance—yet it does not shout aloud its presence. It is simply there, pointing to the deeper realities of who we are, and to the eternal thread that runs through each aspect of everyday human experience.

Mystery and silence; silence and mystery: these two concepts are never far apart in Rahner's writings. This chapter explores the connection and relationship between the two.

By necessity a discussion of Rahner's theology of mystery leads to an engagement with his speculative philosophical approach—an encounter with a complex system of thought that, to say the least, is not easy to grasp. One of the most persistent criticisms of Rahner is that his theology (and by inference his spirituality also) is grounded in speculative philosophy at the expense of a more primary reliance on biblical and historical sources. These criticisms will be duly noted and considered in this and the following chapter. However, the complexity of Rahner's philosophical expression does not necessarily or automatically suggest a departure from the simplicity and centrality of his spiritual and

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<sup>1</sup> K. Rahner, *Karl Rahner – Prayers and meditations – an anthology of the spiritual writings*, Griffiths, J. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 32-33.

theological position. William Dych, Harvey Egan and Herbert Vorgrimler—commentators who both knew Rahner personally and who are long-term students and teachers of his ideas [‘thought’ seemed a bit stilted, but is possible]—advocate a view that even at his most speculative and complex Rahner is always seeking to articulate a living spiritual tradition with its roots in scripture, tradition, mystical experience and reason<sup>2</sup>; others have argued specifically against the view of Rahner as a philosophical ‘foundationalist’. Though some of the material in this chapter is difficult, this does not necessarily detract from the essential theme of this thesis: Rahner’s theology of mystery expresses something simple, beautiful and profoundly attractive; its glory is not in the brilliance and complexity of philosophical argument<sup>3</sup>. Rather, its meaning and profundity is in the beauty and sheer attractiveness of its proclamation of a God who is silently ever present as love.

The God represented in Rahner’s ‘Holy Mystery’ is the ground and substance of the meaning and dignity of the human person—the God who enables believers to find the courage to enter into the depths of their own being in a safe and liberating way, discovering in the process the joy of participation in the life of the Spirit. He is the God of ‘amazing grace’ whose mystery both teaches believers to fear the incomprehensible vastness of infinity and relieves those same fears through the proximity and safety of his eternal presence and beauty.

I invite readers to engage with this chapter reflectively, to consider the personal significance of what Rahner has to say about the meaning of God as mystery in

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<sup>2</sup> W. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (London: Continuum, 1992), 32-46; H. Egan, ‘Theology and spirituality’, in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, Marmion, D. & Hines, M. eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13-28; H. Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, Trans. J. Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1986), 1-18.

<sup>3</sup> There are very specific reasons behind the lengths to which Rahner went to argue for an acceptance of the simple concepts of his theology of mystery in the language of philosophical tradition and some of these will be discussed as the chapter unfolds. The essence of Rahner’s value and influence in theology and spirituality, however, has to do with the content rather than the method of his rationale. See N. Adams, ‘Rahner’s reception in twentieth century Protestant theology’, in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 211-224.



proximity, the silence that leads each human person to true rest, actualisation<sup>4</sup> and fulfilment<sup>5</sup>.

### **Rahner's theology of mystery: the framework for discussion**

Rahner introduces his series of three lectures on 'The concept of mystery in Catholic theology' with an opening salvo against what he labels the 'traditional Catholic view'.

People of the modern world, says Rahner,

find the mystery of God so all-embracing that they cannot easily bring themselves to accept a multitude of mysteries which look very much like the complications of human reasoning which has tied itself up in knots<sup>6</sup>.

This short statement reveals the pastoral bias in Rahner's theology, his deep concern for the posture of the Church in its role as spiritual guide to everyday women and men, and implies the essence of his theological view: humans live and have their being in the context of anthropological transcendence and the supernatural existential. Consequently, it provides the basic framework for exploring the meaning of his theology of mystery.

This exploration begins with Rahner's anthropological theology and its relevance to his concept of mystery, and uses the exploratory framework drawn from the lectures to trace his argument for a reconstruction or redemption of mystery as a pastoral theological concept. This analysis reveals that Rahner tilts his rhetorical lance towards the slaying of two ideological dragons:

- a) the rigid, hierarchical propositional posture of a Church that demands an uncritical adherence to ill-informed expressions of dogma;
- b) the secular rationalism of modern thought that fails to recognise the origin, goal and limitations of its intellectual capacity.

That Rahner's theology of mystery begins and ends in a spirituality of silence is demonstrated and crystallised through a consideration of the implications arising from

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<sup>4</sup> 'Actualisation' a word used by Rahner to express the idea that Jesus Christ is the natural completion and fulfilment of what it means to be fully human and that, through Jesus, it is possible for each of us to experience the fullness of human life through participation in the divine life.

<sup>5</sup> This idea is reflected in the following reading: K. Rahner, 'God is no scientific formula', in *The content of the faith – the best of Karl Rahner's theological writings*, Lehmann, K. & Raffelt, A. eds. (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 228.

<sup>6</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological investigations*, Vol. IV, Trans. K. Smyth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 37.

Rahner's theology of mystery for the kerygmatic<sup>7</sup> function of the church and the disruption of the cultural hegemony of a secular, rational worldview.

### **The mystery of the human person's infinite origins and destiny**

It is important to appreciate that Rahner's theological starting point in human experience rather than external, text-based statements (in Kantian philosophical terms: 'the turn to the subject') is profoundly influenced by his pastoral concern. Rahner argues against a concept of revelation and faith that presents the individual as the passive/submissive recipient of rigid and hierarchical external propositions<sup>8</sup>. Rahner does not dismiss the church's propositional statements, or its right to speak authoritatively<sup>9</sup>. He does, however, recapture an understanding of the dynamic and subjective elements of revelation and faith formation. Rahner's 'theologising from below' emerges from his personal experience of Spirit, priestly vocation, and passionate concern for the dynamic process of faith formation. Because Rahner is theologising from a pastoral perspective, and from the context of his place within the Roman Catholic system (and in particular German Roman Catholicism), he utilises the philosophical processes and sources recognised by the tradition. Rahner's unique and creative perspectives<sup>10</sup>—notably his argument for the primacy of personal experience as the locus of theological formation—create spaces for theological and intellectual freedom for everyday people within the ecclesial structures and culture.

For Rahner, theology is the science of inquiring into and systemising human thoughts about God that have their source in the unfolding self-revelation of the divine experienced, recorded and reflected upon throughout history<sup>11</sup>. He argues that theological concepts do not facilitate revelation but derive from the experience of revelation as

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<sup>7</sup> From *kerygma* the New Testament word commonly translated as 'proclamation'.

<sup>8</sup> See S.J. Grenz & R. E. Olson, *20<sup>th</sup> Century theology – God & the world in a transitional age* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1992), 239 and G.B. Kelly, ed. *Karl Rahner – theologian of the graced search for meaning* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 31.

<sup>9</sup> In this regard Rahner has been criticized by his contemporaries (e.g. Hans Kung) for his insistence that all church dogma reflects an essential, redeemable 'nucleus' of truth. Such critics believe Rahner to be overly bound to the concept of the infallibility of the church and do not see why in some instances Rahner simply cannot admit that the church 'got it wrong' in their dogmatic formulations (see H. Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner – an introduction to his thought* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 122-123.

<sup>10</sup> Though as an original and provocative thinker, Rahner is noted for his creative modifications.

<sup>11</sup> K Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, Trans. Donceel, J. Tallon, A. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 5.

'listening to the freely proffered self-revelation of God'<sup>12</sup>. According to Rahner, if theology's source is the experiences of those who have learned how to listen to God's self-revelation throughout human history, then the study of God must also involve a study of the human person:

As soon as...[the human person] is understood as the being who is absolutely transcendent in respect of God, 'anthropocentricity' and 'theocentricity' in theology are not opposites but strictly one and the same thing, seen from two sides. Neither of the two aspects can be comprehended at all without the other<sup>13</sup>.

Though Rahner's argument for understanding the human person as a being of 'absolute transcendence' derives from his theological conviction and spiritual experience, it is expressed apologetically and pastorally in the form of philosophical reflection<sup>14</sup>; a foundational element of Rahner's theology of mystery<sup>15</sup> is his philosophical argument that human transcendence is an integral and 'natural'<sup>16</sup> component of being human.

According to Rahner, a human being is something of a contradiction in terms: though humans live a finite existence, reflection on their existence points humans towards an awareness of the infinite nature of their origin and destiny. He asserts that humans can only recognise objects and experiences as finite because they have an idea of infinity<sup>17</sup>. He uses the simile of white chalk marks on a blackboard to demonstrate that the concept of something being finite is recognisable only against the background of an idea of the infinite<sup>18</sup>. Rahner concludes that infinity is the condition in which the existence of the finite is possible: the idea of infinity, against which humans measure things that are finite, inevitably points towards an origin and destiny that that the idea reflects.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> K Rahner, 'Theology and anthropology', in *Theological investigations*, Vol. IX, Trans. G. Harrison (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), 28.

<sup>14</sup> Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Though as we shall see in later discussion, exactly what is meant by 'foundational' as this term is applied to a reading of Rahner on the basis of his speculative approach is debatable.

<sup>16</sup> Though as Egan points out, according to Rahner there is no such thing as a fully 'natural' person as every person is graced with the offer of God's self-communication. See *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> J. O'Donnell, 'The mystery of faith in the theology of Karl Rahner', *Heythrop Journal* 25 (1984):303.

<sup>18</sup> Egan, *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 17-18.

Rahner asserts that endemic to being human is an inner feeling of something less than total satisfaction. Human experiences of the finite are never fully satisfying, and are characterised by a sense of being on the way but never having quite arrived.

Consequently, humans experience life's finite realities as a pathway, an ongoing pursuit of the infinite. In the fifth century, Christian theologian Augustine observed that 'our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you'<sup>19</sup>.

Rahner's philosophical argument shows that the study of humanity points towards what Christian theology reveals. Thus, the purpose of the proclamation of the Christian faith is not the external imposition of a belief that must be uncritically accepted. Rather, Christian theology will naturally relate and connect to the paradox and inescapability of the human condition—and the consequent dilemma people face every day.

[People] may try to evade the mysterious infinity which opens up before...[them] in...[their] questions. Out of fear of the mysterious... they] may take flight to the familiar and everyday. But the infinity which...[people] feel...[themselves] exposed to also permeates...[their] everyday activities. Basically...[humanity] is always still on the way. Every goal that...[a person] can point to in knowledge and in action is always relativised, is always a provisional step. Every answer is always just the beginning of a new question...[Each human being] experiences... [the self] as infinite possibility because in practice and in theory...[people] necessarily place every sought-after result in question...[and therefore] it is always situated] in a broader horizon which looms before...[humanity] in its vastness...[A person] is the spirit who experiences...[itself] as spirit...[Human beings] do not experience... [themselves] as *pure* spirit...[Human being] is not the unquestioning and unquestioned infinity of reality...[Being human] is the question that rises up before...[each person], empty, but really inescapably, and which can never be settled and never adequately answered by...[any human being]<sup>20</sup>.

Humans face the frightening condition of an incomprehensible infinity, which they experience as the continual questioning that emerges in the context of their apparently finite existence. This condition they experience themselves as powerless to resolve.

Rahner is arguing for an essential understanding of humans as transcendent beings.

Rahner's position is more subtle and far less alienating than a religious fundamentalist

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<sup>19</sup> K. Rahner, *Happiness through prayer* (Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1958), 33.

<sup>20</sup> K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith*, Trans. W.V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 32.

approach; he is not arguing against empirical and material anthropologies or dismissing modern views of the nature of human existence using an anti-intellectual appeal to a superior ‘special revelation’. While Rahner acknowledges the right of various scientific anthropologies to define and describe humanity in terms of the empirical realities of this world (history, culture, genetics), he also proposes that an observable feature of human existence is ‘the fact that...[humanity] raises analytical questions about...[itself] and opens...[itself] to the unlimited horizons of such questioning’. This observation leads Rahner to conclude that humanity has already transcended ‘every conceivable element of such an analysis or of...empirical reconstruction’<sup>21</sup>. In simple terms, the nature of human beings as analytical questioners of their existence points towards a spiritual nature and orientation that exists at a level outside of the scope and methodology of the empirical process.

According to Rahner, a person who engages in this natural, observable process of self-analytical questioning is acting as a spiritual being in accepting and embracing the ‘inescapable situation of self responsibility’<sup>22</sup>; they are choosing to face rather than deny or repress the mystery of their existence. This spirituality is the *Vorgriff*, ‘an a priori’<sup>23</sup> “power” given within human nature[,]...the dynamism of the spirit as it strives towards the absolute range of all possible objects’<sup>24</sup>. People may or may not be conscious of the fact that they are expressing or repressing their natural spirituality. When discerned through philosophical reflection, this process may be sensitively addressed in Christian proclamation. Therefore, everyday human existence can legitimately be recognised as an everyday spirituality, the inescapable human condition, which is

unceasingly for the absolute, in openness towards God. And this openness towards God is not something which may happen or not happen...once in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>22</sup> K Rahner, *The content of the faith*, 228.

<sup>23</sup> A philosophical term that for Rahner distinguishes aspects of the human make-up that are a general, universal property of all human persons rather than the result of the social/spiritual/intellectual development of a particular individual through life.

<sup>24</sup> K Rahner, ‘Man as spirit’ (from *Hearers of the word*, chapter 5) in *A Rahner reader*, McCool, G. ed. (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 16.

awhile...It is the condition of the possibility of that which...[humanity] has to be and always...is in...humdrum daily life<sup>25</sup>.

The 'holy mystery of God' is the name Christian theology gives to the observable, universal human experience of the mystery of being, the infinite mystery within which every person actually experiences life. The words of Paul to the pagan philosophers of Athens reflect this understanding: 'For in him we live and move and have our being'<sup>26</sup>.

Transcendence identified, however, is not the grace of a fear relieved! The spirituality of natural human existence is bound to remain frustrated and unfulfilled. Though humans experience God as 'near' in the sense that they experience his infinity as the scope within which humans progress through finite and concrete realities, God is in essence infinite and therefore totally 'other' to humans as creatures dwelling in finite space and time. Human beings experience the infinite only in and through the medium of the finite which propels them ever in the direction of an infinite horizon of meaning that ironically recedes before them. Thus, the 'natural' spirituality of the human makeup does not and can never fulfil or complete itself. In fact the natural dynamism of the human spirit is a factor of preconditioning by the 'infinite ground of human existence': 'God'. Such a preconditioning orientates the finite human person to hear the word of the infinite person—the holy mystery<sup>27</sup>. Only in the divine initiative of self-revelation can believers truly experience the holy mystery of God himself as he draws close. The observable and experienced reality of anthropological transcendence, however, reveals that in the very essence of being human, there is an 'a priori keyhole': a need to hear and receive the word of the holy mystery that provides information about the 'key' itself: God<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, theology begins with a consideration of the nature of humanity that reveals the need for divine revelation that Rahner refers to as a 'capability', or 'potency'—an 'ontological obediential potency'<sup>29</sup>—for the free revelation of God<sup>30</sup>. Such a revelation

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Acts 17: 28 (NIV).

<sup>27</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith*, 57-64.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,19.

<sup>29</sup> A phrase that exemplifies Rahner's tendency to use language that is difficult for a general readership to comprehend! In this statement his meaning is simply that human beings have as part of their natural

must occur in history—time, space, geography, culture—where humanity lives. Despite the fact that humanity has a natural need to encounter God, the ‘being of infinity’, humanity does not have the capacity to facilitate this encounter. As it is beyond the capacity of human intellect and natural power to reach and grasp God, God chooses freely to enter finite space and time to grasp humans! The God who is unknowable to humans in incomprehensible mystery chooses to make himself known by communicating a word about God’s eternal life in the concrete contexts of human history:

Even as spirit and precisely as spirit the human person is a *historical* being. Hence it is not only in our biological existence, but also for the very foundation of our spiritual existence, that we have to turn toward history. It follows that from the start, by our very nature, we are orientated toward the historical event of a revelation, in case such a revelation should occur. If, in supreme freedom, God chose, instead of self-revelation, to remain shrouded in silence, we would reach the peak of our spiritual and religious existence by listening to the silence of God<sup>31</sup>.

Rahner’s theology of mystery that begins with an understanding of humanity as the ‘being of transcendence’, orientated towards the incomprehensibility of the ‘being of infinity’, is an anthropology of silence waiting to hear the word of self-revelation from the mystery of the one who is ‘holy other’ and yet at the same time is the fulfilment of all that is truly human. The human transcendent capacity is

the plainest, most obvious and most necessary condition of possibility for *all* spiritual understanding and comprehension...For all other understanding, however clear it might appear, is grounded in this transcendence. All clear understanding is grounded in the darkness of God<sup>32</sup>.

The starting point, then, on the intentional spiritual journey is the willingness to enter into dialogue with the constantly present mystery that continually calls, beckons and draws humans far beyond their preoccupation with the concrete contingencies of life that are able to be managed, grasped, categorised and mastered. The human ontological capacity for transcendence means that beginning the intentional spiritual journey is at one and the

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makeup a dynamism of spirit that orientates them towards the possibility of divine encounter. That this orientation is ‘obediential’ reveals something about Rahner’s personal context of spiritual formation: his vow of obedience to his Jesuit superiors and ultimately to the hierarchical structures of the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>30</sup> Rahner, *Hearers of the word*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith*, 22.

same time a leap into the arms of the unknown and a natural recognition of that which has always been close.

Mystery is something with which we are always familiar, something which we love, even when we are terrified by it or perhaps even annoyed and angered, and want to be done with it. [Having] touched...[their] own spiritual depths, what is more familiar, thematically or unthematically, and what is more self-evident than the *silent question*<sup>33</sup> which goes beyond everything which has already been mastered and controlled, than the unanswered question accepted in humble love, which alone brings wisdom? In the ultimate depths of...being...[people] know nothing more surely than that...[human] knowledge, that is, what is called knowledge in everyday parlance, is only a small island in a vast sea that has not been travelled. It is a floating island, and it might be more familiar to us than the sea, but ultimately it is borne by the sea and only because it is can we be borne by it. Hence the existential question for the knower is this: Which...[do you] love more, the small island of...[your] so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery? Is the little light with which...[you] illuminate this island—we call it science and scholarship—to be an eternal light which will shine forever? That would surely be hell<sup>34</sup>.

Rahner's idea of anthropological transcendence and the universal, 'natural' human spiritual orientation towards the mystery of God is the significant contribution to his theology of mystery. People 'know' this at some level of their being but fear the unexplored darkness of the infinite possibilities of meaning that rise up before them in light of their questions. It is therefore much safer—though ultimately unsatisfying—for the modern secularists to immerse themselves in preoccupations with the material and measurable aspects of their existence. Rahner's driving passion in his pastoral/theological endeavours was to call people from the false safety of their 'narrow huts' into the 'darkness' of infinite mystery which faith illuminates as eternal love<sup>35</sup>.

### **Critical reflection on the mystery of human transcendence: the problem of obscurity**

Developed through his transcendental methodology, Rahner's concept of the mystery of the human person is certainly open to criticism, particularly from a contemporary early twenty-first century perspective.

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<sup>33</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> K. Rahner, *Encounters with silence*, Trans. J.M. Demske (New York: Newman, 1960), 3-10.



The most obvious criticism of Rahner's transcendental approach is that it is difficult to discern its logical basis in relation to his terms of reference. To fully understand Rahner's approach requires background reading in the sources that he worked with and creatively adapted, including a grasp of the philosophy of Aquinas and the nineteenth century interpreters of Aquinas that influenced Rahner's own understanding; and an understanding of Kant's 'turn to the subject', Hegel's cultural relativism; and Heidegger's synthesis and critique of both<sup>36</sup>. In short, Rahner's speculative proposals on the transcendental nature of human beings are a creative theological adaptation that presupposes an understanding of a significant philosophical tradition that simply is not reasonably accessible or desirable to the vast majority of his potential readers.

The reason behind the difficulty of accessing a clear understanding of the foundational logic of Rahner's transcendental theology relates of course to the fact that his primary goal is to influence the ecclesial Roman Catholic structures of his era. Rahner, therefore, is arguing for a reinterpretation and creative development of an intellectual tradition that is familiar to a very limited primary target audience: those with the power within this system. Rahner's ideas profoundly influenced the theological training of a generation of Catholic priests and, subsequently, the thinking of many church going Catholics. Rahner's ideas have also influenced the broader Christian theology–spirituality dialogue.

Though Rahner's transcendental thought has become profoundly attractive and influential, his philosophical epistemology remains obscure to all but a select group of academic theologians. Adams notes that, even among the ranks of academic philosophical theologians, Rahner's framework is considered dated in light of subsequent developments in thinking<sup>37</sup>. This of course is an inevitable outcome of any thinker who seeks to re-express ancient concepts within the intellectual frameworks of another era. Though Rahner can hardly be blamed for the fact that scholarship is continually on the move, it does however highlight a difficulty for contemporary readers: a possible disconnect between the aesthetic of his ideas and the intellectual basis around which the

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<sup>36</sup> Adams, *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 216-217; Kelly, *Theologian of the graced search for meaning*, 38-39.

<sup>37</sup> *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 211.

ideas are structured and established. Readers may enjoy the aesthetic but find that they are unwilling or unable to understand the original thinking, the logic supporting the aesthetic.

**Further critical reflection: the perception of philosophy trumping biblical source**

Critics of Rahner also perceive a lack of explicit Christocentric and biblical focus in regard to this aspect of his theologising. The most notable critic in this regard, Hans Urs von Balthasar, was one of Rahner's peers. Balthasar's concerns, as outlined below, are representative of the general criticism voiced in various times and places: that Rahner's complex transcendent philosophising is theologically suspect in its lack of clear Christocentric focus and biblical sources. Contemporaries and colleagues, Rahner and Balthasar maintained both a friendship and mutual respect throughout their careers; they also expressed significant points of difference in their respective theological projects.

Eamonn Conway, in his evaluation of Balthasar's criticism of Rahner<sup>38</sup>, highlights Balthasar's main concerns. Conway explains that biblical contemplation was of primary importance to Balthasar and, like Rahner, he was strongly motivated to lead the Church away from the legalism of dry scholastic speculative theology to a unity of spirituality and theology with reference to the church fathers<sup>39</sup>. Balthasar was much taken by the work of the Protestant theologian, Karl Barth—with whom he also maintained a personal friendship. As Conway notes, 'Balthasar saw Barthian theology as a yardstick by which on could measure Catholic theology'<sup>40</sup>. Balthasar felt that Catholic theology needed the biblically based, Christocentric corrective that he saw Barth bringing in his neo-orthodox response to the Protestant existentialism of the likes of Bultmann. Balthasar shared with Barth a reluctance to cede too much to natural theology in the revelatory process and an emphasis on the need for explicit, biblically based proclamation of the historical Christ. In this context, as Conway explains, Balthasar was critical of Rahner's transcendent philosophising, believing that Rahner was falling into the trap of the liberal tradition of

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<sup>38</sup> *The anonymous Christian – a relativised Christianity? – an evaluation of Hans Urs Von Balthasar's criticisms of Karl Rahner's theory of the anonymous Christian*, European University Studies (Series 23) (Vol. 485), (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

Schleiermacher: seeking to build a bridge between Christianity and the worldview of post-enlightenment reasoning at the expense of appealing primarily to the biblical witness. Balthasar's criticism of Rahner climaxed in the publication of *The moment of Christian witness*, which includes a pointed satire of 'the anonymous Christian'<sup>41</sup>.

Gaspar Martinez<sup>42</sup> notes that Johann Baptist Metz, Rahner's 'student, collaborator, and...friend', is a 'key figure' capturing 'some of the potentialities and problems in the theology of Rahner'. Martinez notes that Rahner's philosophical view attempts an a-historical, universal construction of the human condition as a means to 'establishing an inner relationship between grace and nature'<sup>43</sup>. Metz was concerned not just to show the relevance of dogma to the individual existential of the everyday person but to 'relate the Christian message to the situation created by a colonising, evolutionistic-triumphalistic, and oppressive modernity that does away with the subject and causes massive suffering and sheer annihilation'<sup>44</sup>. Martinez explains that, for Metz, theologising closely with the gospel texts is essential to the exposition of a Christian message that is truly good news to the poor who suffer, as Jesus did, as a result of systemic evil within social-historical concrete realities. Thus, for Metz, 'the Christ event, as a foundation of hope in history, must be interpreted as a dangerous memory of suffering that proleptically announces a definitive eschatological salvation'<sup>45</sup>. Metz's concern is that in Rahner's complex appeal to a philosophical worldview as a means to establish the connection between grace and the human condition, the primacy of the dangerous gospel memory is lost, or obscured, and that Christianity loses touch with the radical nature of the challenge to systemic evil so vividly reflected in the drama of the cross.

### **Responses to criticisms of Rahner's philosophy of transcendent human being**

It is not difficult to see why many have noted a lack biblical and Christological focus in Rahner's complex outworking of anthropological transcendence. Rahner tends to use biblical quotations sparingly in his theological writing; often his lengthy discourses have

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<sup>41</sup> We have already briefly outlined this theory in chapter one.

<sup>42</sup> 'Political and liberation theologies' in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 249-263.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 251.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 255.

scant if any reference to the Jesus of history or the Christ of faith. Although it can be argued that Rahner's early philosophical works (*Spirit in the world; Hearers of the word*) are not definitive or binding on the diverse and creative corpus that follows, it does seem that even in his earliest published works [I included this link as this idea seemed to be disconnected from the initial caveat], his essential view of humans as transcendent, orientated to existential mystery, is a pervading theme in his treatment of various theological topics. For some, Rahner's transcendent philosophising has either replaced or taken too much of the place that should be occupied by a more intense reflection on biblical sources and a more vigorous and consistent reference to the centrality of Christ. They perceive that Rahner begins with a philosophical view of life and then seeks to adapt the Christian message to this essentially secular worldview. The following excerpts from a recent theological article demonstrate that these concerns continue to be raised by contemporary scholars.

'[T]he knowledge of man's resurrection given with his transcendently necessary hope is a statement of philosophical anthropology even before any revelation in the Word'. Such a statement clearly reflects the fact for Rahner it is our transcendental experience of hope that is the determining factor in his thinking and not exclusively the man Jesus who rose from the dead and enabled the disciples' faith<sup>46</sup>. [please check the apostrophe in the original, and do you want to mention the exclusive language?]

Molnar argues that Rahner's 'transcendental method and his ontology' are the consistent self-authoritative references in Rahner's theologising rather than the biblical sources that emphasise a Christological focus.

The critique that Rahner's philosophy reveals a non-biblical and non-Christocentric focus in his theological project can be countered, firstly, with Bacik's observation that Rahner's biblical and Christological focus is clear and obvious in Rahner's work as a whole—and is particularly apparent in his more informal books of prayers, homilies and interviews<sup>47</sup>, a point demonstrated in previous chapters by references to Rahner's Ignatian spirituality

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<sup>46</sup> P. Molnar, 'Love of God and love of neighbour in the theology of Karl Rahner and Karl Barth.' In *Modern Theology* 20 (4) (Oct 2004): 569.

<sup>47</sup> J Bacik, 'Is Rahner obsolete ? – what his critics get wrong', *Commonweal* 132 (2) (2005): 23.

and his meditations in *Encounters with silence*. Indeed, W. Thomson describes Rahner's orientation as 'pneuma-Christocentric'<sup>48</sup>.

Though this critique is difficult to sustain in texts where Rahner is not using his philosophy of transcendence as a deliberate method for re-interpreting doctrine for apologetic purposes, it does, however, raise lingering questions:

1. Is Rahner actually involved in two theological projects, one based on transcendent philosophising, the other on mystical reflection on the biblical Christ?
2. Are these projects separate rather than intertwined?

Karen Kilby's perspective on Rahner as a non-foundationalist is useful when considering these questions. In Kilby's view, Rahner's early transcendental projects should be viewed as the beginning of an ongoing and developing theological discourse rather than as the primary hermeneutic through which to interpret the whole of Rahner's theological corpus<sup>49</sup>. She advocates reading Rahner's early philosophical writings alongside his later writings and considering his theology, sources and pastoral motivation in light of the resulting tensions, harmonies, contradictions and developments. Kilby demonstrates that this reveals a profound discontinuity between Rahner's original and later anthropological perspectives: she argues that in *Hearers of the word*, Rahner is at pains to emphasise the distinction between the conditions of the possibility of a human reception of divine revelation and the actual experience of a divine revelation, but in the later *Foundations of the Christian faith*, Rahner has moved on. She notes that *Foundations* includes a perspective on 'transcendental revelation' as opposed to a mere transcendental orientation, and follows from Rahner's development of the concept of the 'supernatural existential'<sup>50</sup>. Kilby insists that a careful comparison and analysis of Rahner's earlier and later writings reflect a discontinuity rather than a synthetic progression of thought.

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<sup>48</sup> 'Word and Spirit, hermeneutics and transcendental method: exploring their connections in Karl Rahner'. In *Philosophy and Theology* 7 (Winter, 1992): 198.

<sup>49</sup> See 'Philosophy, theology and foundationalism in the thought of Karl Rahner' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 ( 2) (2002): 127 -140.

<sup>50</sup> To be discussed at length in the next section of this chapter.

Though Kilby is certainly not the first to criticise the ambiguous and irreconcilable concepts within Rahner's broader corpus<sup>51</sup>, her criticism is not a dismissal of Rahner's anthropological/theological project. Rather, she seeks to free Rahner's theology from the restriction of a foundationalist reading. In Kilby's view, it is better to understand Rahner's transcendental theology as *one* way of speaking about the ahistorical character of an element of human experience. Kilby's understanding of Rahner enables readers to retain the *content* of the theology (the aspect of a universal experience that Christian theologians may justifiably identify as a spiritual intuition or orientation) without feeling bound to a particular *way* (a philosophical method with its roots in a particular cultural/historical worldview) of explaining this reality. This releases readers to engage with what Kilby refers to as Rahner's 'mature theology' in a more 'tentative...modest, and perhaps, indeed, more *usable*' way<sup>52</sup>.

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza is also a non-foundationalist reader of Rahner who offers additional helpful ideas on framing Rahner's transcendental anthropological project within his total theological discourse. For Schüssler Fiorenza, Rahner's early works establish an epistemology for communicating an essential theological idea in an intellectually credible way. In his view, Rahner is thinking theologically within philosophical frameworks rather than using a philosophical view as a primary source of his theological ideas<sup>53</sup>. Having established his philosophical epistemology as a method for communicating and questioning, Schüssler Fiorenza notes that Rahner moves on to address a wide variety of topical, concrete pastoral issues in a variety of ways and genres; he does not use only academic speculative philosophical language<sup>54</sup>. Schüssler Fiorenza observes that in his later writings, Rahner also moves beyond a purely a-historic anthropological epistemology, emphasising the experience of grace in salvation history, the Christological centre of the experience of grace, the importance of pastoral praxis for

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<sup>51</sup> See for example Grenz & Olson, *20<sup>th</sup>-Century theology*, 238-254.

<sup>52</sup> Kilby, 2002, 140.

<sup>53</sup> 'Method in theology', in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 71.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

theological method, and the importance of ‘mystical initiation’ into the practices of the Christian faith<sup>55</sup>.

Most importantly, Schüssler Fiorenza highlights the flexible, adaptive, creative and particular way that Rahner uses the term ‘transcendental’.

Rahner’s use of ‘transcendental’ is often read exclusively in relation to Kant’s use of the term transcendental. Yet this common reading must be avoided because of decisive differences...[First,] Rahner speaks of the transcendental experience as an experience of God and here he differs very much from Kant who would never speak of such an experience. Second, though Rahner refers to the a priori, he thereby refers to the historically conditioned human experience of grace. Third, Rahner’s use of the term ‘transcendental’ is frequent and diverse: transcendental experience, transcendental reflection, transcendental subject, a transcendental-anthropological way of asking questions, a transcendental method, and a transcendental experience. The breadth of his use of the term ‘transcendental’ indicates both its centrality and certain ‘looseness’ in its meaning. *It is better to understand ‘transcendental’ not as a strict philosophical category in Rahner’s theology but much more as a concern about the anthropological significance*<sup>56</sup>.

It is likely that concerns about Rahner’s transcendental way of explaining the human person as an ultimate mystery will remain—as will suspicions regarding his transcendental method as a mechanism for thinking, questioning and explaining theological issues within this paradigm. Paul Molnar reaches the conclusion that Rahner’s transcendental approach is not redeemed by the non-foundationalist reading of his work; his transcendental way of explaining Christian truth has obscured his focus on the biblical witness to Christ alone as the object of faith, and his transcendental method leads Rahner into ‘repeated inconsistency and difficulty’<sup>57</sup>. Molnar seeks to demonstrate this by his analysis of Rahner’s transcendental approach to the re-construction of the Christian idea of love of neighbour as intrinsic to love of God. Molnar uses the theological method of Barth, with its emphasis on the biblical witness to Christ, as a constant positive reference point, and to portray Rahner as a theologian who has lost his way from the true reference points of the faith. It is clear from reading Molnar that he has both read Rahner and the contemporary sympathetic arguments on Rahner as a non-foundationalist, yet remains

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 69, 70-71, 78-79, 80-81.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 77, emphasis mine.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Love of God and love of neighbour in the theology of Karl Rahner and Karl Barth’, 2004, 568-569.

unconvinced. In the process, however, Molnar himself is unconvincing—largely because his critique reflects throughout the use of Barth as a hermeneutic lens with which to evaluate Rahner, rather than as a genuine source of dialogue and dialectic.

In light of his biography, his Ignatian spirituality, and his spiritual classic, *Encounters*, Rahner is ultimately an ecclesial, mystical and pastoral theologian before he is a student of philosophy. In light of this conclusion, it seems reasonable also to propose that Rahner is both biblically orientated and Christocentrically focussed. This proposition will be further developed in the following chapter. Rahner's idea of anthropological transcendence as way of explaining the human person as a being orientated to mystery seems to be apologetically motivated as well as being creatively reflective of a central Augustinian idea: 'our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you'.

Rahner's work in transcendental philosophy is advocating for humans as beings of mystery in existential proximity to *the* being of mystery who is ultimately expressed in the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, within a particular hierarchical and dogmatic system. This philosophical way of explaining the mystery of the human person has its ultimate origin in Rahner's personal encounter with the silence formed and shaped through Christian proclamation and practice. It represents a stage along the way to a fuller participation in, and openness towards, an encounter with silence. Rahner's proclamation and practice is the appropriate context for understanding his transcendental explanation of the human condition.

### **Spiritual reflection on the transcendental concept of being orientated to mystery**

As pure theological reflection, Rahner's construction of the transcendental concept of the mystery of the human person yields a particular and rich spirituality. To live as human beings and not merely as clever animals, humans must face the mystery of their own existence, and, in doing so, simultaneously face the ultimate being of the mystery that faith names as 'God'. Rahner's model of humans as creatures of enormous intelligence and creativity demonstrates that facing the mystery of existence and the possibility of faith does not require an anti-intellectual escapism and dumb subservience to a prescribed religious worldview. Rahner's transcendental method reveals intellect, imagination and



spirit dancing together in appreciation of the fullness of all that it means to be human. His vision of a creative and free expression of the intellect in the face of mystery leads to an understanding of the boundless space and sustaining presence of the eternal—a vision leading towards a posture of silent listening where speculation ends and the possibility of revelation begins.

**The mystery of infinity in proximity: a near and present deity**

In his idea of the ‘supernatural existential’<sup>58</sup>, Rahner proposes an answer to the question of human angst from the living tradition of Christian faith. In his concept of anthropological transcendence he has established an intellectual basis for a view of humans as beings who can never actualise or fulfil their existence through the material and empirical aspects of life alone. Rahner’s answer to the dilemma of unfulfilled and frustrated human existence is twofold:

- a) the possibility of relational intimacy with the life of the infinite mystery completes and fulfils human existence, making humans human, and not just a species of ‘resourceful animals’<sup>59</sup>;
- b) Christianity shows people the mystery of the infinite is near, and that participation in the life of this mystery can become a reality rather than be experienced as a constant and unexpressed longing.

The theological basis for the whole of Rahner’s anthropology—and of particular relevance to the development of his idea of the supernatural existential—is that the whole purpose of God’s creation begins and ends in love.

God wishes to communicate himself, to pour forth the love of which he himself is. That is the first and last of his real plans and hence of his real world too. Everything else exists so that this one thing might be: the eternal miracle of infinite Love. And so God makes a creature whom he can love: he creates... [human beings]. He creates... [humans] in such a way that... [individuals] *can* receive this love<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> Rahner takes the term ‘existential’ from his mentor Martin Heidegger who uses it in his analysis of human existence to designate those components that are constitutive of human existence as opposed to the existence of non-human creatures, see Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 36.

<sup>59</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 51.

<sup>60</sup> K. Rahner, ‘The relationship between nature and grace’, in *Theological investigations* Vol. 1, Trans. C. Ernst (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 310.

Because God created human beings specifically for the purpose of freely offering himself in personal love<sup>61</sup>, it logically follows that human beings must always be able to receive this love. For Rahner, this is the logical conclusion of 2 Peter 3:9: that God desires that all people experience salvation<sup>62</sup>. Our capacity for *orientation* towards the mystery is a ‘natural’ spiritual component of being human. The human capacity to *receive* the revelation of the mystery, to experience the proximity of the mystery as love and as therefore holy, is a supernatural ‘potency’. It is in fact ‘absolutely’ the ‘centre and root’ of being human<sup>63</sup>. This potency to receive the word of the holy mystery and to enter into the depths of God is supernatural because human beings, as God’s real partners, receive God’s love as a free gift, not as something they are owed<sup>64</sup>.

Furthermore, this supernatural potency is given to every human person and not just Christians. It is not a ‘created grace’. It is not a ‘gift from’ God but the offer and possibility of receiving the ‘gift of’ God.

For, without destroying the fact that grace is God himself in self-communication, grace is not a ‘thing’ but—as communicated grace—a conditioning of the spiritual and intellectual subject as such to a direct relationship with God. The most objective reality of salvation is at the same time necessarily the most subjective: the direct relationship of the subject with God through God himself<sup>65</sup>.

This potency is **the core** component of the human person. It is present, silently and always, as an invitation and offer to participate in the divine life of the holy mystery. This grace, God as a free gift, is not what Christians traditionally have understood as ‘saving’ grace. Rahner argues that the experience of salvation is simply the actualisation of true human existence through accepting God’s personal, self-giving and revealing love<sup>66</sup>. God is an abiding presence to every human being, and in God’s life, human beings find their own true centre of being. God’s abiding presence is invitational not invasive: God’s presence as the true centre of each human being does not mean that each human person is

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<sup>61</sup> K. Rahner, ‘God is love’ (from *Theological investigations*, Vol.1,117-125.) in *The content of faith*, 255-256.

<sup>62</sup> J.P. Galpin, ‘Before the holy mystery: Karl Rahner’s thought on God’, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 9 (2) (1993): 233.

<sup>63</sup> Rahner, *Theological investigations* Vol. 1, 311.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 312-313.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*,28.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 314 - 315.

choosing to enter into the mystery of true life in him. This possibility always exists, however—and the fact that God is a continual abiding presence means that at some level each human being is familiar with God’s proximity. In some way human history is conditioned and influenced by human experiences of God’s closeness.

The offer of God’s proximity is not just metaphysical; it is part of human history. In the fullness of time, it is the climax of salvation history: the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ. The Christ-event objectifies the absolute and primary truth of Christianity in history: ‘God as a person, freely wished to love us’<sup>67</sup>. This flesh and blood declaration of love becomes definitive and unsurpassable because not only does Christ appear in history but he also ‘abides eternally’<sup>68</sup>.

[The] metaphysical goodness of God...is knowable and in a way familiar; it is hidden because of original sin and is clearly disclosed when human beings come to know God in the supernatural history of salvation<sup>69</sup>.

The ontological dynamic of the supernatural existential enables humans to experience the Christ of faith, to recognise what has always been ‘familiar, yet hidden’, and entering into the eternal reality of the concrete gospel of the Jesus of history. Therefore, the supernatural existential makes possible, through the Christ-event, the fulfilment of all that a human being is created for: immersion in the holy mystery of the divine life, in and through all things in this life, and ultimately beyond all finite realities and into the unknown eternal bliss of the life that continues after death<sup>70</sup>.

As a result of divine initiative, the human spirit has been permanently modified: its natural dynamism has been transformed into a drive towards the God of grace and glory<sup>71</sup>: ‘the burning longing for God himself in the immediacy of his own threefold life’<sup>72</sup>. The ‘natural, created existential’ of anthropological transcendence that orientates a person towards the mystery is both complemented and conditioned by a ‘supernatural

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<sup>67</sup> Rahner, *Content of the faith*, 255.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>70</sup> Rahner, *Theological investigations*, IV, 36-73.

<sup>71</sup> G Mc Cool, ed., *A Rahner reader*, 185.

<sup>72</sup> Rahner, *Theological investigations*, Vol. 1, 312.

existential'. This directs the natural longing for the infinite to the possibility of participation in the mystery of divine love. Because this supernatural existential is at the centre of every human life, then the whole of human existence and history may be understood as being conditioned by grace. Rahner's idea of the supernatural existential is an expression of the Pauline concept 'where sin increased, grace abounded even more' (Romans 5:20), and of the Catholic idea expressed in the Vatican II *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: 'everything genuinely human can be an echo of God and the occasion for encountering God's gracious presence'<sup>73</sup>.

The supernatural existential also enables Rahner's idea of 'the anonymous Christian'. An anonymous Christian participates in the life of the mystery without consciously attributing this life to the historical Jesus or the visible church. This participation is possible because the Holy Spirit, through the Christ-event, makes the mystery present in proximity to the world, and because every human being is graced with the capacity to respond to the proximity of God. A person may actually begin to enter into the depths of God without explicitly connecting this experience with Christian doctrine. The life of an anonymous Christian becomes recognisable and familiar as divinised life because it displays the attributes of that which is not strictly definable and must therefore represent transcendence above the definable data of everyday life: mystery.

The practised Christian will recognise the Christ-like rhythms of the Holy Spirit in the lifestyle and practice of people who do not hold to the cognitive definitions of Christ and faith<sup>74</sup>. Examples of unconscious participation in the life of the mystery include accepting the inescapable situation of self-responsibility (facing rather than avoiding or denying transcendence); faithfully fulfilling loving duty and obligation towards others without reward; realising the blissful meaning of love; accepting death without despair in the midst of life; experiencing a joy that cannot be named<sup>75</sup>. These and similar human actions

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<sup>73</sup> Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 38.

<sup>74</sup> L.J. O'Donovan, 'Losing oneself and finding God', *America* 191 (14) (2004): 15; E.F. Rogers, 'The mystery of the Spirit in three traditions: Calvin, Rahner, Florensky or, you keep wondering where the Spirit went', *Modern Theology* 19 (2) (2003): 249.

<sup>75</sup> Rahner, *Content of the faith*, 228.; K Rahner, 1974, 'Unity of the love of neighbour and love of God (from *T.I.* Vol. VI, 236-8, 245-47) in *A Rahner reader*, 239-244.

may be described as a ‘mysticism of everyday life’ as they are grounded in ‘genuine faith, hope and love and contain a primordial experience of God’<sup>76</sup>.

One of Rahner’s most eloquent expositions of the proximity of God as the true centre of human existence is contained in his devotional classic, *Happiness through prayer*. Rahner begins the text with a lament over the human condition in the context of modern life.

[Human life]...is made up of many and varied activities. Deep in the heart of...[every human] is the longing, fitfully glimpsed and but half realised, to gather up all these strivings into an intense pursuit of one all-embracing objective worthy of the toil and tears and devotion of the human heart. Such is the half-shaped dream; but the reality is a picture of heaped up activities, where the trivial jostles with the less trivial, and the less trivial elbows the important things, and there is no unity of design, nor any intensity of single, concentrated purpose. There is no real perspective of values: what is essentially trivial but immediately urgent, looms large and commands attention; while what is essentially important, but not immediately urgent or insistent, is relegated to the hazy recesses of the background<sup>77</sup>.

The joyful news against this dreary and all-too-familiar background is very simply that a person ‘may turn from it all; and immediately the noise of one’s activities sinks to silence as, in a spirit of reverence and love, [one] speaks to God in prayer’<sup>78</sup>. Prayer is not ‘the speaking of many words...but the raising of the heart and mind to God in constantly renewed acts of love’, and is essential to human existence: it nurtures our longing for the unity of our action and our intention that this longing may live into eternal life. ‘With one swift upward glance of...[the] soul’, individuals get as near as their finite nature will allow them to ‘that sublime fusion of all...activities into one glowing point of heat and light’. Only in heaven can a person achieve the full synthesis of all faculties and energies in the contemplation of the beatific vision; here on earth, through prayer, a person is enabled to look upon God as ‘through a glass darkly’ and in this process comes as near as possible to ‘that unity of action and purpose for which...[the] heart has a deep and secret longing’<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>76</sup> H. Egan, *Karl Rahner – mystic of everyday life* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 57.

<sup>77</sup> K. Rahner, (Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1958), 7.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

But in fact, this ‘swift upward glance of the soul’ is at one and the same time a downward glance into the depths of the human spirit, largely ignored in the normal rush and tyranny of the humdrum. In the process of becoming more present to the depths of their inner being, individuals become present to the God of all glory and grace who is always present in grace, and ‘closer to them than they are to themselves’<sup>80</sup>. Humans must enter into their own sense of nothingness, and there discover, in their embrace of powerlessness, the power and life of God which becomes their life. ‘Deep cries unto deep: the depth of our nothingness unto the depth of the power and majesty and wisdom of God’<sup>81</sup>. The ‘splendid paradox’ of entering more deeply into the self is that in ceasing to be oneself—in the sense of living a life characterised by control and preoccupation with that which is manageable, concrete, material—individuals become more entirely at one with themselves

because God is more the true centre of our being than we are ourselves. The sheer immensity of God urges us to realise our being to its fullest through transcending the limitations imposed by choosing to remain our own centre... In this new freedom from thralldom to self, every word and act becomes a lived prayer, because the presence of God suffuses the whole pattern of living<sup>82</sup>.

The way down is paradoxically, the way up! This is highlighted in the following comments which articulate more clearly what Rahner means by the proximity of the holy mystery and the human ontic capacity for participation in the divine life.

Deep in our buried heart, we find this seed of the Divine, this restless reaching out towards something infinitely beyond the things of this world; and we find strength to pray<sup>83</sup>.

These glimpses of strange infinities within us are pointers to a thirst for Infinity, for God, which has been placed by our Creator in the very depths of our nature. We must not seize on these infinities—these ‘magic casements opening’ into the recesses of our being—as idols to be enthroned in our lives. Their very multiplicity would only increase that modern disease we have called *Angst* and which is a vague dread accompanying the apprehension of freedom and limitless

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<sup>80</sup> An Augustinian phrase that Rahner repeatedly makes use of in this text.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 19.

possibilities but without a definitive object. The far-flung horizons within us must lead us to the infinity of God, if we are to find peace and rest<sup>84</sup>.

Our Father Who art in the depths of my heart, transforming its hollow emptiness into a heaven on earth<sup>85</sup>.

Rahner's concept of mystery in proximity is more than a clever abstract philosophical reflection on the meaning and dimensions of the presence of grace in human life. For Rahner, mystery in proximity powerfully emerges from the spiritual experience and pastoral observation of the Christian layperson/pastor/priest. Thus, Rahner's speculative philosophical argument is always servant, rather than master, to the expression of his deepest and most profound personal experience of God.

### **Critical reflection on the mystery of infinity in proximity**

Trying to grasp Rahner's idea of the supernatural existential conceptually is like trying to get a firm grip on liquid soap! What does it really mean that the true centre of a person's life is actually external to the person, located in the sacred other; and that God is constantly present to all people as gift, as possibility, rather than as a saving presence? How can a person really participate unconsciously in a recognisably Christian life of faith? In his development of the concept of the supernatural existential, Rahner is seeking to affirm a concept of grace that permeates rather than overlays the creation; at the same time he is seeking to preserve the essential Augustinian argument: grace as gift rather than as natural component of human beings, and arguing for an understanding of grace as the gift of God himself rather than an external substance separate from God. Rahner argues for the universal experience of grace as existential: an unavoidable aspect of human experience but not an actual 'substance' or 'property' of the individual. As he was somewhat unclear about the exact relationship between the supernatural existential and grace itself, the ambiguities and seeming contradictions that arise within the Rahner corpus around his definition and explanation of this concept are hardly surprising!

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 19.

Theologians are continually attempting to ‘correct’ and synthesise his thought on this subject<sup>86</sup>.

But what does all this really mean? Does Rahner’s concept actually provide answers to the mysteries of grace, salvation, the universal origin and destiny of the human race—or lead to more questions?

Answers relating to the meaning of Rahner’s idea of mystery in proximity are provided by spiritual intuition rather than conceptual formation. The idea of the supernatural existential means something because it connects with the inner depths and observable experiences of humans. The idea and expression of the supernatural existential frees individuals to explore and experience the mystery of God in a way that is real and true to their actual experience. It opens the door from a narrow and prescribed process for accessing grace and leads them out into a more spacious place where grace is an eternal and pervasive presence in and through all things. Though people may not understand the rhetorical nuances of Rahner’s refinement of the historical doctrine of grace and its relevance for shaping conceptual frameworks of Christian salvation, they are drawn into the living reality and spiritual sources of the concept when they access Rahner’s experience of grace in proximity through his published prayers, meditations and homilies. The life and power of the supernatural existential is in its devotional expression and affect.

George Vandervale argues that the value of Rahner’s idea of the supernatural existential is in the simple affirmation of the biblical/experiential reality of God’s gracious closeness through Jesus and the Spirit, and suggests that Rahner may actually be setting a trap for himself in seeking to ‘grasp’ the self-giving of God in an ontological concept<sup>87</sup>.

Vandervale’s criticism is tempered by understanding the original context for Rahner’s formation of the concept of the supernatural existential: a theological debate (the *novelle*

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<sup>86</sup> See D. Coffey, ‘The whole Rahner on the supernatural existential’, *Theological Studies* 65 (1) (2004): 95 - 105 and Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 32-41, from which most of these conclusions are drawn.

<sup>87</sup> ‘The grammar of grace: Karl Rahner as a watershed in contemporary theology’, *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 445-459.



*theologie*) in which Rahner's primary target group is the magisterium of the hierarchical church<sup>88</sup>. In this academic debate, Rahner agrees *with* his theological peer de Lubac's proposal for an understanding of grace as coexistent rather than separate from nature, but argues *against* de Lubac's view, shared by orthodox theologians, that the human movement towards God is empowered supernaturally, by grace, rather than a *purely* natural human response. In this context, Rahner must offer more than a spiritual reflection if he is to win his case and argue for what he perceives to be a useful middle ground in the debate between the neo-scholastics and the supporters of de Lubac. In this complex setting perhaps the 'trap' suggested by Vandervale is systemically unavoidable. Vandervale's point—that the essential idea of the supernatural existential is spiritually and pastorally helpful even if logically vulnerable at some points—is shared by sympathetic commentaries on Rahner.

In reflecting on Rahner's continuing relevance for the present and future, Bacik proposes that Rahner's insistence on the organic unity between theology and spirituality 'constitutes...his lasting contribution to the spiritual quest of the twenty-first century'<sup>89</sup>; he reads the concept of the supernatural existential as a theology of the heart—a theological position difficult to express and synthesise as a cohesive and watertight conceptual argument. While critics may continue to uncover gaps in Rahner's logic and supporters may continue the work of 'reforming' his ideas, spiritual seekers will *feel* and experience the essence of Rahner's concept of the supernatural existential: God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves (Augustine), and in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

### **Summary of the anthropological perspectives of Rahner's theology of mystery**

Two key aspects of Rahner's thought—anthropological transcendence and supernatural existential—contribute to the idea central to his theology: human beings' deepest experience of themselves is at one and the same time an experience of the God who remains mystery while at the same time draws close to humans in the proximity of love.

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<sup>88</sup> See Coffey, 'The whole Rahner on the whole supernatural existential' and Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 32-41 for details of the debate.

<sup>89</sup> 'Is Rahner obsolete?', 23.

While humans can never grasp the mystery, they can be grasped by the mystery—and in the experience of being grasped, become more fully human at the same time as becoming more completely spiritual<sup>90</sup>. Rahner's theology of mystery reflects a profound spirituality of silence: the nature of human existence is a constant non-verbal, unconscious, yet profoundly significant message of divine origin, destiny and presence. In this sense the mystical reality of the gospel is truly incarnate: the silent word is not far from humans, speaking to each individual in the very nature and structure of the particular way in which each person experiences being human as a living dynamism of mystery.

Rahner's lecture series, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, provides a window into the concept of mystery in Catholic theology, and by implication, in Christian theology and pastoral ministry to the whole world.

### **The concept of mystery in Catholic theology**

[Modern people]...find the mystery of God so all-embracing that they cannot easily bring themselves to accept a multitude of mysteries which look very much like the complications of human reasoning which has tied itself up in knots<sup>91</sup>.

In his lecture series, Rahner reconstructs the concept of mystery in a way that remains true to the essence of tradition and scripture while releasing its dynamic content for a kerygma (proclamation) that will achieve a mystagogic<sup>92</sup> function. These lectures demonstrate that his ideas about mystery and their implications for both Church and culture are in essence both a beckoning from and towards an encounter with silence.

According to Rahner, the problems associated with the traditional Catholic view of multiple 'mysteries of faith' are essentially a consequence of the church's over-emphasis on the mysteries of its multiple, dogmatic statements and its under-emphasis on the object of God as *the* mystery. This imbalance has created a concept of 'mystery as the property of a statement', and has given rise to a faulty theological logic

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<sup>90</sup> See Egan, *The Cambridge companion to Rahner*, 18; O'Donnell, 'The mystery of the faith in the theology of Karl Rahner', 301.

<sup>91</sup> Rahner, *Theological investigations*, Vol. IV, 37.

<sup>92</sup> A term Rahner uses to describe the process of helping everyday people make real connections between their experience of life and of themselves and the dynamic elements of the Christian faith.

- around the concept and meaning of mystery, particularly as the Church has sought to defend its position against a rational, empirical culture<sup>93</sup> that states that the ‘mystery’ of propositional dogma is provisional: various statements about God and humanity cannot now be rationally understood because of humanity’s spiritual and existential distance from God;
- that suggests it is possible to live with the rational tension between the ‘mysteries’ and the perceived ‘realities’ of human existence because eventually (in the eschaton) all things which now do not make sense will become reconciled to reason: ‘truths obscure and impenetrable for the moment...will be clarified later on and so finally be adequate to the demands made by human reason’<sup>94</sup>, which, argues Rahner, amounts to a subversion of revelation to a cultural/historical worldview: ‘mystery’ defined by ‘reason’ and in the negative—defined as ‘mystery’ because it cannot be understood rationally<sup>95</sup>.

Against this position, Rahner proposes mystery as something that both transcends current rational categories of meaning and is integral to the experience of being human in each and every era. Accordingly, Rahner introduces a series of rhetorical questions that turn the argument for an understanding of mystery as a temporary, ‘one-day-to-be-resolved-by-reason’ issue on its head.

- What if *reason* itself is a spiritual faculty which reveals the presence of *the* mystery from which such reason draws its existence?
- What if mystery is not provisional at all (something which is ‘mysterious’ only until a future time when the ‘answer’ to the mystery is given) but is primordial and permanent and in fact it is the current system of rational thought that is provisional and contingent?<sup>96</sup>

Rahner does not directly answer these questions; they operate as an invitation to the listener/reader to explore the dimensions of their meaning in light of lived spiritual experience. Having raised these questions, Rahner offers his own vision of mystery from his particular theological perspective.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 41.

He begins his reconstruction with an appeal to the doctrine of the *beatific vision*<sup>97</sup>. In light of this doctrine, Rahner asserts that ‘mystery’ has nothing to do with a ‘regrettably permanent limitation of our blessed comprehension of God’<sup>98</sup>. Rather mystery is the substance of human vision, the object of ‘blissful love’. This ‘visio beatifica’ is the ‘permanent presence of the inexpressible and nameless’. In experiencing this vision individuals do not ‘grasp’ God (that is to say, comprehend God with the faculties of human reason); rather individuals are grasped by the mystery. The supreme ‘act of knowledge’—knowing and being known by the mystery—does not in any way result in the abolition or diminution of the mystery; the known and the incomprehensible remain indiscernible. This personal encounter acts as the ‘final assertion’ of the ‘eternal and total immediacy’ of the mystery<sup>99</sup>: an encounter with mystery moves a human being beyond the world of meaning defined by human reason alone and enables an engagement with the living presence and sacred knowledge that is both the primordial source and ultimate fulfilment and perfecter of human reason. Rahner asserts that mystery is the

all-embracing exigency which cannot be mastered, comprehended or challenged...[M]ystery is not merely a way of saying that reason has not yet completed its victory. It is the goal where reason arrives when it attains its perfection by becoming love<sup>100</sup>.

Rahner argues that ‘love’ rather than ‘knowledge’ is the one key word that ‘conjures up the essence of humanity’, and that therefore, ‘the last word is with love and not

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<sup>97</sup> The doctrine of the beatific vision is the idea in Roman Catholicism of ‘The clear, immediate, intuitive knowledge of God which results in heavenly bliss’. According to the definition of Pope Benedict XII in 1336, the blessed in heaven ‘see the divine essence by an intuitive vision and face to face, so that the divine essence is known immediately, showing itself plainly, clearly, and openly, and not meditatively through any creature’ - P. Stravinskias, ed., *Catholic encyclopedia* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Books, 1991), 119-120. The beatific vision with its biblical basis in passages such as 1 Cor 13: 9-12 and I John 3:2 usually points towards the anticipated experience of the blessed in heaven - M.J. Erickson, *Christian theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 1228. Rahner’s use of this term also includes this futuristic understanding. Yet one suspects also that with his emphasis on direct, personal encounter with God that ‘beatific vision’ has an element of ‘realised eschatology’ in Rahner’s mind. The way he uses the terms in these three chapters on mystery certainly hint at an experience of God, through the provision of the supernatural existential, that suggest the beatific vision penetrating the experience of the earth-dwelling believer.

<sup>98</sup> *Theological investigations*, IV, 41.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

knowledge. For we are not saved by knowledge but by love'<sup>101</sup>; love and knowledge act together in a perichoretic<sup>102</sup> dynamism with love as the primary force and ultimate goal of the relationship<sup>103</sup>. In this sense, mystery is the primordial, eternal, loving presence by which humanity may be grasped and drawn into participation in the divine life which ultimately leads to consummation in the event of the beatific vision. Such a vision reveals mystery as the source and goal of knowledge but cannot nor will not be defined by such. In this sense, the 'answers' to the mysteries of faith are not to be found in progressive cognitive enlightenment but in existential immersion in a divine love that defines and makes sense of the entire human journey in categories of meaning that cannot be expressed or explained in words; Rahner's theology of mystery clearly points towards an encounter with silence.

In beginning with his appeal to the beatific vision as the basis for reframing the theological meaning of mystery, Rahner has the end in mind. In the second lecture, when he sketches the anthropological/theological basis for the possibility of encounter with mystery in the beatific vision (fleshed out earlier in this chapter), Rahner argues that the elevation of grace—which results in a divinised human existence orientated towards the beatific vision—does not eliminate mystery but makes its proximity possible<sup>104</sup>. God can be known by grace but never comprehended; mysteries are removed but not rationally resolved. Mystery is contemplated but never defined<sup>105</sup> To illustrate his point Rahner contends that *experiencing* the Trinitarian life of God means no longer relying on a word or concept *about* the Trinity: in experiencing the Trinity the concept of the Trinity has been manifested in its own substance. This does not, however, mean that the Trinity has been 'clearly understood' or made 'intelligible'<sup>106</sup>. Though the mystery remains the mystery, questions of meaning and transcendence are 'answered' because in experiencing

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Meaning 'interpenetration'.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 43-44.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 54-55.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 56.

the Trinity, longing is fulfilled; human orientation towards divinity has been consummated<sup>107</sup>.

Rahner's concept of mystery has nothing to do with a multiplicity of propositional statements that must be accepted as mysteries on the basis of ecclesiastic insistence and rational intelligibility. Rather, mystery is synonymous with the concept of the eternal and immediate presence of the divine being. 'Mystery is already there with the very essence of the natural and supernaturally elevated being of...[humanity]<sup>108</sup>. The relevance of the 'plural mysteries' of Christian doctrine—a closing footnote to the second lecture—becomes the major focus of the third.

Rahner's initial comments in regard to the nature of Christian doctrine as mystery seem at first to be rather dismissive if not derogatory. He views Christian doctrine as at best representing a 'derivative' and 'secondary' mystery arising in the first instance from the constantly present primordial mystery. He goes on to state that so-called 'individual mysteries' are not mysteries in the original sense of the meaning of God as mystery 'because they do not seem to leave the mystery to subsist as it is, but claim to know something definitive about it which will satisfy curiosity'<sup>109</sup>. What is better, according to Rahner, is 'a silent reverence for the nameless'. As he develops his argument on this topic, Rahner demonstrates Christian doctrine has a definitive place as the enhancer of a graced response to the proximity of the mystery.

Delineating between the natural and graced state of humanity with reference to the essential role of theology, Rahner argues that a philosophy of religion may identify humanity as transcendent and orientated towards the infinite horizon, but cannot provide any meaning, resolution or fulfilment for the transcendental state. Only theology, through revelation not confined to words but also as the result of the inner giving of grace—the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 60.

silent experience of God—is able to direct individuals to the consummation of their primary orientation in the experience of the beatific vision<sup>110</sup>.

Rahner asserts Christian doctrines are an ‘articulation of the one single mystery of God’. They point to the revelation that enables people to experience the fulfilment of their natural and supernatural orientation to the mystery:

it has been revealed in Jesus Christ that this absolute and abiding mystery can exist not only in the guise of distant aloofness, but also as proximity to us...God has imparted himself to us through Jesus Christ in his Spirit as he is himself, so that the inexpressible nameless mystery which reigns in us and over us should be in itself the immediate blessedness of the spirit which knows, and transforms itself into love<sup>111</sup>.

Christian doctrines present the historical reality of the mystery in concrete form. They do not bring the mystery into being but testify and witness to the possibility and reality of what at some level humans already know: mystery is concretely present through incarnation and grace<sup>112</sup>..

For Rahner there is, however, a clearly defined sense of the core of Christian doctrine which both proclaims the unity of the mystery and is the basis and source from which all other expressions of true Christian doctrine find their authenticity as concrete words about the mystery:

it is impossible that the [beatific] vision should reveal God under aspects which were hitherto completely unknown, just as it is impossible that God, when seen face to face, should keep concealed within himself definitive truths and realities which he absolutely refused to reveal and impart<sup>113</sup>.

Therefore, while each of the core Christian doctrine mysteries ‘is indeed of unfathomable depth and infinite extent’, the number of mysteries—each of which signifies the infinity of God—cannot be indefinite. Rather, by virtue of their derivation from the core doctrines

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 72-73.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 59-60, 72.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 63.

of the faith, the multiplicity of Christian doctrines and statements present the unity of the mystery consistently<sup>114</sup>.

For Rahner, these three essential truths of faith within the broad field of Christian theology and doctrine may be considered mysteries in the sense that they articulate the concrete form of *the* mystery:

1. the mystery of the Trinity;
2. the mystery of the hypostatic union;
3. the mystery of the beatific vision.

Rahner argues that other Christian doctrines or mysteries are incorporated or reduced into these essential mysteries. For example, ‘original sin’ finds its meaning within the broader concept of the ‘supernatural sanctification of...[humanity] by grace prior to...[an individual’s] personal decision’<sup>115</sup> (a concept emerging from the doctrine of the beatific vision). Transubstantiation<sup>116</sup>, which cannot be defined as a mystery in relation to a supposed ‘transubstantiation of one purely natural reality into another’ (as no ‘mystery’ exists in our objective knowledge of created things), is conceivable only on the basis of hypostatic union<sup>117</sup>. The mysteries associated with soteriology<sup>118</sup> and redemption are ‘reduced’ into the concept of the Incarnation<sup>119</sup>. These three theologies, which Rahner articulates as trinity, incarnation (hypostatic union) and the ‘divinisation of humanity in grace and glory’ (beatific vision), provide the source and framework for all Christian doctrines.

In his brief explanation for why these three elements of Christian doctrine form the ‘canon’ of essential mysteries, Rahner observes that the exclusive and essential mystery of the Trinity is self-evident: ‘if any real mysteries are possible at all, they must exist in

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>116</sup> The Roman Catholic teaching of the ‘change of substance’ of the physical communion elements into the actual body and blood of Christ – P. Stravinskis, ed. *Catholic encyclopedia*, 940.

<sup>117</sup> Hypostatic union: the doctrine of the coexistence of two natures in the one historical person, Jesus Christ, who the creeds proclaim as fully God and fully human.

<sup>118</sup> The theological study of salvation.

<sup>119</sup> *Theological investigations*, IV, 64-65.



the immanent life of God’<sup>120</sup>. The Incarnation, and the divinisation of humanity in grace and glory, form an essential duality of theological meaning and purpose. Through the Incarnation, God imparts his being to created nature: in the Incarnation, God’s gift is his self. The same may also be said of grace: though medieval theology understood grace as created—a substance given by God to humanity—Rahner appeals to the medieval ontology of the beatific vision and to the teaching of Leo XIII and Pius XII to claim that what is given in grace is God himself<sup>121</sup>. In Jesus, ‘God goes out of himself into “the other” in such a way that he bestows himself upon the other by becoming the other’<sup>122</sup>. Created reality comes from God. Supernaturally, reality is the going out of God himself towards the creation. Thus, Jesus—fully God and fully human—is the ontological basis for the presence of the Logos in the human soul in the beatific vision<sup>123</sup>.

Rahner implicates the mystery of the Trinity in the Incarnation’s role in the divinisation of humanity. The gradual revelation of the Trinity, particularly in the New Testament, reveals something quite wonderful and glorious:

God has given himself so fully in his absolute self-communication to the creature, that the ‘immanent’ Trinity becomes the Trinity of the ‘economy of salvation’, and hence in turn the Trinity of salvation which we experience *is* the immanent Trinity. This means that the Trinity of God’s relationship to us *is* the reality of God as he is *in* himself: a trinity of persons<sup>124</sup>.

It is in the very nature of God’s Trinitarian being to reach out to humanity in eternal proximity, and humans are saved by their experience of encountering and being drawn into the Trinitarian life of God.

### **Brief excursus: understanding Rahner’s theological reductionism**

Rahner’s assertion of the three primary doctrinal expressions of mystery (incarnation, hypostatic union, trinity), with limited explanation or argument to support his conclusions, may come across to readers as bold, sudden, debatable and potentially controversial. The lack of reference to Scripture, historical theology, or contemporary

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 67-68.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 69.

theological discussions is fairly typical of Rahner's discursive style; unsupported assumptions based on novel philosophical constructions leave Rahner vulnerable to criticism.

For those familiar with the Rahner corpus, however, his idea of an essential trinity in Christian doctrine has recognisable and credible sources. As Robert Schreiter notes, Rahner is influenced by patristic theology that

seems to emphasise the role of the incarnation in God's saving plan over that of the suffering, death and raising of Jesus. The point of the patristic writers is that in God's assuming our humanity in the incarnation redemption is already achieved<sup>125</sup>.

Coffey argues that Rahner's Christology is also rooted in the distinctly Ignatian idea that the Incarnation is the climactic point of creation<sup>126</sup>. Rahner's emphasis on the divinising effect of the Incarnation, and his view that the resolution of original sin and the meaning of the cross and resurrection find their place under the Incarnation as the idea of primary meaning, have their basis in key Christian spirituality traditions. Nevertheless, Rahner's view of the Incarnation may be surprising and even shocking to those who are more used to the traditional Western emphasis on the cross as the pivotal event and the Incarnation as the beginning to the process of salvation rather than as a climactic event of creation. His ideas can and have been challenged (see discussions focusing on Rahner's Christology in chapter 5). Though Rahner's position offers an alternative theological perspective, it is neither foreign to Christian theology nor reliant on unbiblical, secularised philosophical ideas.

William Thomson's view that the exploratory nature of the topical theological essay—Rahner's primary writing style—'demands an economy of language and a certain concentration of theme'<sup>127</sup> explains the radical and minimally justified reductionism of Rahner's third lecture on mystery. Thomson concludes 'is important to read Rahner's

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<sup>125</sup> 'The anonymous Christian and Christology' *Missiology* 6 (1) (1978): 38.

<sup>126</sup> 'Christology' in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, Marmion, D. & Hines, M. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 112.

<sup>127</sup> 'Word and Spirit, hermeneutics and transcendental method: exploring their connections in Karl Rahner' *Philosophy and Theology* 7 (Winter 1992): 190.

*Investigations* much like the biblical canon, as series of texts requiring mutual clarification and correction'<sup>128</sup>. Thomson demonstrates that Rahner's proposition regarding the 'self-evident' primacy of the doctrine of the Trinity being offered without reference to Scripture or broader theological discussion in his lecture on mystery depends on an earlier theological essay in *TI I*. Here, Rahner's careful biblical reflections on the Trinity and the desire to move from a purely scholastic abstract approach to a more person-centred approach as reflected in the New Testament is apparent. Thompson concludes that the Rahner corpus gathered in *Theological Investigations* reflects an overall 'biblical grammar', which is evident to those who are willing to read his works in all of their parts—even when his use of biblical citations is sparing<sup>129</sup>.

Tracing Rahner's understanding of mystery as a theological concept involves going through the valley of philosophical complexity, engaging in critical discussion in relation to the transcendental concepts underpinning theology of mystery, and labouring to examine these in light of the Rahner corpus and his ecclesial context. Though there may be some enduring questions and a heightened awareness of flaws in Rahner's thinking and methodology at the end of this process, there is also a valuable insight into a profoundly Christian and important spiritual theology, a theology that deserves to be listened to and lived with. Rahner's theology has implications and is fruitful for discerning a Christian spirituality of silence and all that this implies for human encounters with God and Christian ministry in a secular western cultural context.

### **Rahner's theology of mystery: implications for proclamation**

Rahner's theology of mystery directs the church away from an unfruitful defence of the indefensible. For Rahner, the role of the Christian church is not to make gods of its propositional statements or to perpetuate a false concept of revelation as contained, owned and dispensed by a select group within the church. Rahner agrees with those refusing to believe the church's presentation of God as

a hypothesis for explaining phenomena until science can give the true explanation, or something to frighten children until they realise that nothing

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 191, 197.

extraordinary happens if they are naughty. The true God is the absolute, sacred mystery to which one can only point in silent adoration<sup>130</sup>.

Rahner argues that atheists' silent experiences of unfulfilled metaphysical longing make it likely they are much closer to God in honesty and reality than 'Christians' who babble about God in clichés and regard the divine as a question that they have long ago rationally settled to their own satisfaction<sup>131</sup>.

Rahner's theology of mystery teaches that the origin of any statement about God must be understood as a direct and personal encounter with the silent mystery at the initiative of the divine. Christian doctrines are human responses, human attempts to say something about the self-revelation of God in human language. As such, they are important: the initiative of God in history can obviously only be learned as people are introduced to the history of the events and words of revelation. Humans cannot invent a saviour to suit themselves; a saviour *has* appeared at God's initiative at a certain time in history. The important issue is that, by grace, people in Jesus' time recognised Jesus as their saviour and experienced the saving effect of his life and work. The historical witness emerges from the experiences of contemporary witnesses. In Jesus, people encountered in space and time the flesh and blood manifestation of all their hearts longed for and were ontologically conditioned to experience. Today, the words of Christian witness 'to the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6) are expressed truly as emerging from silent existential witness; others, enabled by grace, find in Jesus the personification of the mystery that they too have always lived with and longed for—often at a level below consciousness and cognition. Nevertheless, proclamation does not define the mystery. It is not as if somehow through the human history of listening to the self-revelation of God, humans finally arrive at the ultimate definition and mastery of the nature of divinity. Were this so, humans would not belong to God—God would belong to human beings! Were this so, individuals would no longer need to adopt a listening posture in their relationship to the divine. Human words about the mystery are at best incomplete stammerings that point towards the reality of eternal love and the wisdom of

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<sup>130</sup> Rahner, *Content of the faith*, 227.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, 228.

abandonment to the eternal life in this love. Ironically, this ‘abandonment’ results in ‘finding’ the true meaning and fulfilment of human existence<sup>132</sup>.

In light of Rahner’s theology of mystery, ministry of proclamation involves three movements.

1. A movement towards an appreciation of the existential basis of Christian doctrine: away from a concept of ‘cosmic prescription/law’ and towards an understanding of the record of a living existential witness to the self-revelation of the God who makes himself known but is never grasped. In this sense, Christian doctrine and proclamation act as elements of grace-originated spiritual guidance and direction. These elements have their root in the silent encounter with divinity in history in the depths of the human spirit of actual people; when rightly expressed, they act to support and facilitate the unique journey of encounter with the silent mystery for a new generation of spiritual seekers.
2. A movement towards a deliberate interiority as a prerequisite and ongoing necessity for any public expression of faith. Modern life leads to exhaustion and fragmentation: as everything is done ‘on the run’, individuals get by with the very minimum of what they absolutely have to know about any given topic to enable them to juggle tasks and responsibilities and to ‘keep all the plates spinning’. What do human beings need to know about faith? What is absolutely necessary to stay in the divine ‘good books’? Individuals want to know the basic facts, the ‘four spiritual laws’, the ‘Reader’s Digest’ version—or less! Rahner’s theology of mystery teaches that individual believers have nothing to say that has any meaning to anyone else unless they are actively participating in a regular immersion in silence. Humans cannot ‘skim’ faith; individuals cannot shortcut intimacy with God. Christians must find the courage and discipline in grace to enter into the depths of themselves guided by the Holy Spirit. Believers have nothing to

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<sup>132</sup> K. Rahner, ‘The mystery of the human person’ (from *Christianity at the crossroads*, 11-20) in *Content of the faith*, 79-80.

say about the mystery until in silence they have entered into the mystery<sup>133</sup>: without a spiritual practice of immersion anything individuals say will be babbling clichés. A true expression of the living faith is contoured by personal experience of holy mystery, the primordial source of Christian doctrine.

3. A movement away from the diatribe of religious ‘ethnocentrism’ and towards the silence of humility. The church has a responsibility to proclaim faithfully its witness to the life of the mystery that emerges from its living history of listening to the mystery. However, because the mystery remains mysterious, a being that cannot be grasped by the human intellect, the church must also discern between the time to speak and the time to remain silent. It is not for individuals to dictate to others their experience of listening to the mystery. Rather, believers support others through the resources of their faith tradition and spiritual journeying. No Christian dare prescribe how the mystery may or may not act and speak in the unfolding history of revelation. Ultimately, the best individuals can say about their understanding of the mystery of eternal love is that they are continually standing in silence before the mystery. In their silent humility before the incomprehensible majesty of the divine, believers—people of every culture, race, creed and tradition—stand together as one human family before God<sup>134</sup>.

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<sup>133</sup> It should be noted of course that Rahner’s concept of this kind of immersion was profoundly influenced by the Ignatian concept of ‘God in all things’. Therefore, when we speak here of ‘immersion in the mystery’ we are not talking of such an immersion as something else that a person has to do as in ‘one more task to be added to the list’. Rather, we are speaking of a way of living that could be described as active/contemplative – a mysticism of everyday life.

<sup>134</sup> In his article ‘How would Karl Rahner respond to *Dominus Iesus*’, Conrad Gromada speculates on the position Rahner would take in relation to the recent declaration of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith about the role of Jesus as universal saviour and the place of the Roman Catholic church in God’s salvific plan for the world, *Philosophy & Theology* 13 (2) (2001): 425-435. Gromada concludes that Rahner would find himself in agreement with the basic concern of the declaration (Jesus is *the* saviour, the church has a unique role) but would be at odds with the spirit or tone of the declaration (a negatively framed decrying of the growth of religious relativism). In his view, Rahner’s retrieval of the concept of mystery allows him to engage with other faiths and traditions in a far more positive and invitational way as shaped by the following understandings: a.) Becoming a Christian is a life-long process, b.) All human language and rituals are ultimately inadequate in the face of mystery, c.) A non-competitive approach best facilitates all ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

### **Theology of mystery as dynamic challenge to empirical hegemony**

Rahner's theology of mystery offers a direct challenge to a form of Christian proclamation and ecclesiology that seeks to force an acceptance of propositional 'truths' on everyday people with no more intellectual basis than 'because the Bible/church declares it so'! For Rahner, the truth of Christianity is truth in the sense that it has been and is experienced as ultimately life-enhancing and can be explained as life-enhancing within the broad framework of in-depth philosophical reflection on the meaning and experience of existence. Rahner is against an anti-intellectual fundamentalism that reacts defensively against any and every scholarly or scientific theory that challenges its historic and current interpretation of sacred texts. On the other hand, Rahner is equally scathing of a secular, empirical 'fundamentalism' that seeks to frame and explain the whole of the mystery of human existence within the narrow confines of western, cultural enlightenment thinking or 'modernity'.

[T]he mystery is the only thing that is certain and that goes without saying. It calls forth the movement which examines whatever can be explained, but it is not gradually exhausted by this movement which we call science; on the contrary, it grows with the growth of our knowledge<sup>135</sup>.

Before closing this chapter focusing on Rahner's theology of mystery, it is appropriate to briefly review how Rahner's thinking challenges the church and the worldview prevailing in his era—a perspective that continues to wield considerable influence at the beginning of the twenty-first century<sup>136</sup>.

In *Foundations of Christian faith*, Rahner contends that human beings are creatures of infinite horizon because they can question everything. Therefore, engagement with transcendence is an inevitable consequence of being human. People cannot choose whether or not they will be orientated towards the infinite horizon—they simply are: it

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<sup>135</sup> Rahner, *Content of the faith*, 227.

<sup>136</sup> It has become fashionable in many circles of Christian leadership to speak of the passing of modernity as an ideological/philosophical era and to hail the present cultural influence of postmodernity. However, while it is certainly true to say that people of our current era are less satisfied with the idea of science and technology as the answer to all human issues and are more interested in the meaning of spirituality and mystery than were the preceding generation, it is a mistake to conclude that the processes of empirical reasoning are not still a major influence in our worldview. I find Pete Ward's discussion of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of 'Liquid Modernity' more representative of what is actually happening in the early stages of the twenty-first century than I do many of the sweeping generalizations being made by some contemporary Christian leaders and authors. See *Liquid church* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 13-21.

comes with the territory of their anthropology. However, people may choose one of three common forms of transcendent evasion:

- a) a naïve preoccupation with the controllable world of the concrete and material, where the questions of meaning are suppressed by their being ignored;
- b) a recognition that an ultimate question encompasses human experience but assuming that engagement with the question can be postponed, and that attempts to find any kind of answer are fruitless;
- c) a focus on getting on with life's tasks, knowing that, while an ultimate question encompasses everything, as there is no hope of ever finding an answer, the question is deliberately suppressed and rejected as unanswerable and therefore meaningless<sup>137</sup>.

Rahner suggests that a worldview that dismisses a serious engagement with the obvious reality of existential transcendence and the search for a meaningful spiritual answer to the questions it raises is far from enlightened; the view of empirical science and human reasoning as the ultimate evolution of human knowledge and development is in fact a form of denial and psychological repression. Rahner's philosophical argument for a theology of mystery lays the platform for an apologetic against an exclusively secular approach to life and against the view that Christian theology is nothing more than an outdated relic of a pre-modern era.

Rahner also reflects in *Foundations* on the pervasive existence of the word 'God' in human language, and what it would mean for humans as a species if this word (or a term with equivalent meaning) were to disappear from their vocabulary.

'God' is not just any word in which language, that is, the self-expression of the self-present of world and human existence together, grasps itself in its ground. This word *exists*, it belongs in a special and unique way to our world of language and thus to our world. It is in itself a reality, and indeed one that we cannot avoid. This reality might be present speaking clearly or obscurely, softly or loudly. But it is at least there as a question... [Because the] word 'God' occurs as a question to us, [it] is an image and likeness of what it announces. We should not think that,

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<sup>137</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 33.



because the phonetic sound of the word ‘God’ is always dependent on us, therefore the word ‘God’ is also our creation. Rather it creates us because it makes us truly... [human]<sup>138</sup>.

Rahner argues for the undeniable reality of the existence and experience of holy mystery that has moved people to choose a name to express this reality. This name, ‘God’, constantly points humans towards the existential reality from which the expression in language derives in the first place. Without the term ‘God’ or an equivalent, people forget the true *meaning* of their existence and become lost in preoccupation with the individual *details* of their existence. They would never face the totality of the world and of themselves as existing ‘helplessly, silently, and anxiously’. They would not notice that only from this location can they consider the questions—instead of asking questions about the questioning itself. They would not notice that their lives involve manipulating different aspects of existence rather than ever facing existence in its unity and totality. People in this state would ‘remain mired *in* the world and *in*’ themselves, ‘and no longer go through that mysterious process which’ they *are*<sup>139</sup>.

Thus the existence of the term ‘God’ challenges the claim that an empirical rational worldview completely defines human experience. Such a worldview may be tempted to write off the language as the product of a speculative psychological longing for something ‘other’. For Rahner, however, such a longing is clear and irrefutable evidence of the existential reality that prompts imaginative and linguistic attempts to express the reality central to anthropology, and what ‘being human’ means.

This word [‘God’] exists. It is in our history and makes our history. It is a word. For this reason one can fail to hear it, as the scripture says, which hear and do not understand. But it does not cease to exist because of that...it is itself the final word before wordless and worshipful silence in the face of ineffable mystery. It is the word which must be spoken at the conclusion of all speaking if, instead of silence in worship, there is not to follow that death in which...[humanity] becomes a [race of] resourceful animal[s] or...sinner[s] lost forever<sup>140</sup>.

The argument above is primarily from the perspective of a philosophical appeal to the ‘obvious’ existence of mystery: that which becomes before and after empirical

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 51.

rationalism and is in fact at the centre of human being. In a section from *Happiness through prayer*, Rahner actually picks up a concept from the human sciences to explain what theology can facilitate when humans are willing to engage on the journey into this centre. Having waxed eloquent about the potentiality for the unifying and liberating possibility of the ‘upward/downward’ glance of the soul in prayer (discussed in the earlier commentary on the ‘supernatural existential’), Rahner addresses an anticipated audience of ‘enlightened’ critics.

To many, all this may seem the poetic weavings of mere wishful thinking, since we are not really aware (consciously) that we have such a treasure within us. This objection, however, is based on an outmoded idea; for the surface mind, thinking only in terms of materialistic being—that is to say, admitting the existence of consciousness alone—is an anachronism surviving from the ‘enlightenment’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, we know that the mind of... (a person) is not consciousness alone, and that below the level of consciousness are infinite possibilities, unfathomed depths, unmeasured horizons<sup>141</sup>.

Rahner observes that modern psychiatry has penetrated the depths of this unconscious world of the human psyche but in so doing has conveyed the impression that the deep wells of human existence are full of darkness, bitterness and horrors. What is needed—and Christianity can provide—are the ‘eyes of faith’ that will help individuals to enter into their own depths and find there are no

pools of stagnant bitterness, but the waters of infinity springing up into eternal life. It is easy to stir up the slime; but it needs faith to see, behind and through all these dark forces, a much more powerful force—the power and presence of the Holy Ghost... we cannot truly know ourselves except through this realisation that our whole nature is in the image of God’s immensity<sup>142</sup>.

Rahner argues that the human science of psychiatric medicine and therapy simply ‘discovers’ what has existed long before: an unthematic, unconscious experience of infinity that profoundly influences the whole of human existence. To such an existential view, Christianity testifies and uniquely provides the means to find the unifying connection to an inner psyche that results in the sweetness of life—rather than an encounter with terror from which most people would rather run away or hide. Therefore, in the true meaning of the word, happiness is experienced through prayer: the medium

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<sup>141</sup> Rahner, *Happiness through prayer*, 26-27.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 27-28.

alone that enables individuals to face and embrace the central mystery of their own existence and discover the reality that they are safely grasped and apprehended by the eternal word of love.

Rahner's theology of mystery, expressed in his primary concepts of anthropological transcendence and supernatural existential, not only informs the proclamation of the church, but opens a crack in the wall of the empirical worldview's secular hegemony. Believers, drawn to the hints of light and splendour that shine through this opening, begin to realise that what they had previously thought to represent the horizons of human endeavour and meaning are merely pointing towards the glory of the infinity beyond. This glimpse of infinity is like awakening to something long suspected but indefinable. Once individuals glimpse the light of infinity, they are drawn by its warmth to realise that immersion rather than definition is the real point of the journey. The light helps believers to see that the empirical sciences draw their meaning from that which is around them, before them, after them, and over them. They are not the definers of meaning; they are expressions of the dynamic human intellect that help humans understand the small and finite boundaries and rhythms of human existence in this world, and through which the glorious infinity of divine love encounters and draws individuals towards the true life of the vast open spaces beyond.

### **Conclusion**

Essentially, Karl Rahner's spirituality of silence demonstrates that mystery exists before and beyond all words, all reasoning, all empirical analysis. The existence of mystery confronts each and every human being with a permanently present silent question. When, as beings elevated through grace and orientated towards intimate union with the being of the silent question, individuals finally discover language that enables them to name and recognise the one who attracts their hearts, language that leads them back into silence and the blissful experience of reverent awe. Entering into silence is different from the experience of silence that first prompted this spiritual search. Humans initially experience silence as an encounter with a dark and unknown terror of unresolvable infinity; believers enter silence as beings who are known, deeply loved and cherished. In this silence individuals can never be lost or left to wander in the trackless wilderness of unlimited

expanse. The one whom believers have learned to name as God has eternally orientated them to the infinity of his love.

## Chapter 5: Word and sacrament—explicit formation of inner silence

What we call ‘the Church’ as the eschatological presence of God’s truth and love contained in word and sacrament, is nothing other than the continuing validity of the historical fact that the history of God’s sharing himself with us began in Jesus Christ, is believed in today, and continues to unfold in the present and the future<sup>1</sup>.

The previous chapter concluded with a reflection on the possibility of a silence transformed: a movement from existential terror to an experience of boundless, loving space. This chapter, reflecting on the essential soteriological<sup>2</sup> bridge between the two encounters with silence, will explore Rahner’s thinking on the explicit elements that form a full, holistic and conscious completion of the work of interior grace. In Rahner’s theology of mystery, experience and grace make spiritual formation a real and possible factor in universal human potentiality; in his theology of word and sacrament, elements that are an intrinsic part of the spiritual process bringing about the fullness of this potential. God’s communication with human beings transforms the silent experience of their inner depths into a living word of everyday grace. Rahner’s universal spirituality of silence—from which the possibility of the anonymous Christianity emerges—is deeply rooted in and connected to a sacramental, anthropological vision intrinsic to his spiritual theology of word.

The exploration of Rahner’s theology of word and sacrament is important for establishing what his spirituality of silence *is* and what it *is not*. The chapter on Ignatian spirituality refers to the Rahnerian Ignatius proclaiming his profound sense of apophatic nearness to God—and corresponding ambiguity in his references to other ‘external faith supports’.

Such is the strength of this silent, personal encounter that even if other external supports to faith, such as a canon of scripture, were to disappear, or did not exist in the first place, the saint would remain secure and at peace<sup>3</sup>.

Superficially, this comment could be interpreted as disregarding the importance of Holy Scripture and other liturgical elements traditionally associated with Christian spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> K.Rahner, *Belief Today*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 116.

<sup>2</sup> Of salvation.

<sup>3</sup> My paraphrasing of Rahner’s comment in, *Ignatius of Loyola*, Trans. Ockenden, R. (London: Collins, 1979), 12.

formation. For Protestants, this seemingly dismissive view of the central, abiding importance of the Bible could well become a significant barrier to further engagement with Rahner's thought and his influence as a spiritual guide.

However, as this chapter demonstrates, the apophatic, contemplative existential characteristic of Rahner's expressions of the immediacy of God can only be understood as a state of being that flows only from a participatory immersion in word and sacrament. For Rahner, anthropological transcendence is fully actualised through the universal grace existential in a dynamic process of formation that radically involves word and sacrament. Word and sacrament are the means through which God forms and constitutes church. The church exists as the sacramental form that proclaims both the present reality and actualised possibility of a personal encounter with silence.

Focussing on Rahner's theory, theology, and spirituality of the word reveals that he considered engagement with the scriptures vitally important to the awakening, actualisation, and formation of the silent word of the supernatural existential. As Rahner's experiential theology of silence is reflected in his understanding of the meaning and role of the scriptures, his approach to scripture facilitates a dynamic spiritual engagement with the biblical text and seeks to protect the spiritual seeker from the legalistic and unhelpful constrictions of a fundamentalist reading or hearing.

Rahner's spiritual, theological understanding of the word leads seamlessly into his understanding of sacrament. Rahner presents a vision of the significance of the sacraments and *the* sacrament—and the effects of both on universal human sacramental participation in the divine life. He makes clear connections between the explicit sacramental form of the church's life and the proclamation and facilitation of an encounter with silence for all human beings.

### **The centrality of scripture, and its nature and purpose in spiritual formation**

Though Rahner did not regard himself as a biblical scholar, according to Robert Kress<sup>4</sup>, former students, colleagues and many of his commentators have recognised in his teaching and writing an understated mastery of the essence of both the overall *sense* of Scripture and the exegetical process. For example, in his discussion on word and spirit in Rahner, Thomson refers to the ‘biblical grammar’ of the *Theological Investigations*.

My impression is that when the Incarnation is the central theme of essays in the *Investigations*, the *Pneuma*, though frequently mentioned, is in the background...it is rather when he turns to the ‘third’ mystery, that of grace, that a more sustained attention to the (incarnate) Word–Spirit interplay takes place. This, of course, reflects the basic structure or grammar of the creed, which in turn reflects the basic narrative of biblical revelation...The experience of grace in the Spirit leads to the incarnate Word, in other words. *This creedal and biblical structure of the ‘Investigations’ would seem to lend some legitimacy to Rahner’s observation that his style of transcendental Christology is ‘closer’ to Scripture than that of ‘classical’ Christology...* (Emphasis mine) Here let me speak of what I would call the ‘biblical grammar’ of Rahner’s view of the Spirit. I use the word ‘grammar,’ partly because in the *Investigations* Rahner somewhat sparingly offers biblical citations...even when the biblical ‘structure’ is present<sup>5</sup>.

Kress notes that though Rahner is not an exegete in the technical scholarly sense, he is a lover of the biblical texts, and widely recognised for his capacity to draw theological meaning from the words of the Bible. Harvey Egan claims ‘Rahner preached almost daily for much of his fifty-two years of priestly life’<sup>6</sup>; perhaps this intense commitment to biblical preaching most clearly demonstrates his skills in biblical exegesis. Rahner’s preaching legacy and its importance to those who study his thought is evidenced in the popular publication of a liturgically structured, topical selection of his homilies, *The great church year*<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> R. Kress, *A Rahner Handbook* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 64.

<sup>5</sup> W.Thompson, ‘Word & Spirit, hermeneutics and transcendental method: exploring their connections in Karl Rahner,’ *Philosophy & Theology* 7 (Winter 1992): 193 & 197

<sup>6</sup> H. Egan, *Karl Rahner – Mystic of everyday life* (New York, Crossroad, 1998), 105.

<sup>7</sup> Trans. Egan, H. Raffelt, A. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1993)

George Vass<sup>8</sup> argues that Rahner's understanding of the purpose and function of words in the unfolding history of revelation and salvation demonstrates the importance of the biblical texts and themes in his work. According to Vass, Rahner's core ideas are

- as God is essentially hidden and unknowable because divinity transcends time and space, God takes the initiative and discloses himself within time and space through 'intra-mundane realities, one of which is the word';
- God's speaking to humans through words does not mean that the words are able to fully convey the personhood of God—words from God do not contain God himself; the words individuals speak never fully and completely reveal their depth and complexity; however, in the act of speaking, individuals open themselves up to another person—the words act as hints and pointers towards the mystery of each individual's dynamic reality;
- God chooses to open up his life to human beings through the medium of a language they are able to grasp: human words; however, in grasping the language, individuals have not grasped God—the words are gifts that lead individuals towards a participation in the dynamic reality of the mystery of God's personhood<sup>9</sup>.

Vass understands Rahner's view—that words contain an implicit message about the meaning of an encounter with silence—to mean that the spiritual seeker does not master knowledge about 'God' through words. He also asserts Rahner does not regard an encounter with silence as a personal experience of God that bears no relationship to words. Rather, Rahner claims that the words of scripture facilitate a sense of participation in the divine life by prompting human awareness of God and the nature of his disposition towards human beings. Vass demonstrates that Rahner's theology of silence is not a theology without words but a theology that redeems the function of words in the dynamic unfolding of the spiritual life.

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<sup>8</sup> G. Vass, *A theologian in search of a philosophy – understanding Karl Rahner*, Vol. I (London: Sheed & Ward, 1985), 95.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 96-97.



What makes the words of scripture distinct from other words in the sense of their unique spiritual capacity for leading the spiritual seeker into a participation in the life of God? Karl-Heinz Weger<sup>10</sup> says that, for Rahner, the words of scripture are unique in their spiritual capacity because they are the objectivisation of the life and faith of the early church. Rahner argues that the apostles of Christ experienced the direct revelation of God in their actual relationship with the historical Jesus; they proclaimed the essentials of their experience to a broader audience. As their listeners experienced this proclamation as a saving personal encounter with the living Christ, they formed the Christian church. Biblical authors wrote down aspects of the proclamation and the spiritual experiences of the early Christian communities. Over an extended period of time the church, reflecting on its lived spirituality, discerned particular writings as worthy of canonical status. The original authors of the canonical books were not conscious of their being inspired—they wanted to establish a faithful record of what they felt it was important to say for the salvation of their readers and hearers. They were not ‘mindless secretaries’: their thoughts and words were influenced by their particular historical and cultural context. Every single phrase or idea is neither necessarily inspired nor ultimately revelatory. However, Christians trust that, in willing the church into existence, God also willed into existence an accurate record of the essential historical words and deeds necessary for the salvation of each and every generation<sup>11</sup>.

Weger’s explanation demonstrates that Rahner’s view of the scriptures is a spiritual theological perspective. The words the church has discerned as the true and authentic witness to the historical climax of God’s revelation are the faithful record of the lived encounter with divinity as experienced by the original witnesses and those to whom the original message was proclaimed. In the words of Rahner himself, ‘[t]he New Testament must...be understood as an expression in writing of an already reflective early

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<sup>10</sup> K.-H. Weger, *Karl Rahner – an introduction to his theology*, Trans. Smith, D. (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 180-181.

<sup>11</sup> Rahner also views the Old Testament scriptures as revelatory in that they show a progression in salvation history, pointing to the grace that is to come and has now arrived in Christ as perpetually witnessed to by the whole life of the Church, see, ‘The word and the eucharist’, in *Theological Investigations* Vol IV, Trans. Smith, K. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 273.

Christianity, which is directly anchored to the historical Jesus'<sup>12</sup>. Likewise, the process of deciding on the New Testament canon and on the nature of its special inspiration emerges as primarily a reflection on the lived experience of the Spirit, and the immediacy of the silent encounter with God in the context of the everyday life of the early generations of Christians.

As depicted above, Rahner's view of the scriptures sounds suspect to those who wish to maintain a theory of inspiration that holds that every single biblical word or phrase is uniquely and absolutely inspired and authoritative. Others will want to question the logic of Rahner's assumption that individuals can know the Bible to contain an absolutely true and accurate record of what is necessary for salvation based on the social/spiritual existence of the church. Both these ideas are open to debate from a variety of perspectives. However, two things are clear:

- a) Rahner views the biblical narrative to be an intrinsic component of Christian life and faith;
- b) Rahner's approach to, and understanding of, the scriptures is mystical.

### **Rahner's speculative theological concept of the word**

Rahner was concerned about the absence of a robust theology of the word in Roman Catholic theology and the theological training of priests.

Alas, that there should still be no theology of the Word! Why has no one yet set about gathering together, like Ezekiel, the scattered members on the fields of philosophy and theology and spoken over them the word of the Spirit, so they rise up a living body<sup>13</sup>!

His view was that because, within Roman Catholic theology, the concept of the word had been subverted under the primacy of doctrine and dogmatic theology, the scriptures were referred to primarily as teaching sources for the formation of the all-important doctrines of the church. Rahner wanted to help Catholics rediscover the profound spiritual power and meaning of the word itself as a source of spiritual formation and the encounter with

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<sup>12</sup> *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, Imhof, P. & Biallowons, H. eds. Egan, H. Trans. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 228.

<sup>13</sup> K. Rahner, 'Priest and Poet', in *Theological Investigations*, Vol III, Trans. Kruger, K.H. & Kruger, B. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 294-295.

silence. He felt that the movement in Protestant theology towards a fuller appreciation of the importance of the sacraments<sup>14</sup> should be matched by a Catholic movement towards a fuller appreciation of the word; in this way both traditions would move closer to a comprehension and engagement with the two primary elements that together ‘constitute the church’<sup>15</sup> Rahner noted this movement was already taking place—in a Catholic biblical theology that

has ceased to regard itself as a mere transmitter of proof-texts for the thesis laid down by the theology of the schools. As it listens more attentively to Scripture itself, it can no longer overlook the fact that the Old Testament and above all the New have more to say about the living, efficacious, mighty and creative word of God than the standard theses of the theology of the schools has grown accustomed to say about it<sup>16</sup>.

Rahner’s self-initiated project: to develop a theology of the word that broadened the understanding of Catholic Christians from the limited *didache* (teaching) to a greater appreciation of the ‘mighty, creative *dabar* (word)’ that brings about transformation as it is proclaimed and read. Rahner’s commitment to this project was motivated by his desire help the Church and everyday Christians re-engage with the Bible as an integral source of spiritual formation.

Protestant readers recognise that the use of Holy Scripture as ‘proof-texting ammunition’ for particular doctrinal opinions is hardly an issue that is exclusive to dogmatic Roman Catholic theology. Many Protestants know from personal experience what it is to suffer under the tyranny of those—both in pulpit and pew—who take it upon themselves to forcefully argue for universal submission to particular religious opinions on the basis of selected biblical texts. Rahner’s view that the primary nature and purpose of scripture is to be a dynamic medium through which God opens himself in a uniquely interpersonal way in the silent depths of the spiritual seeker will be refreshing for many outside—as well as those inside—the Catholic tradition.

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<sup>14</sup> See W. Pannenburg *Christian spirituality and sacramental community*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983), 31-49, for reflections on this late twentieth century trend.

<sup>15</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, 253.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 255.

Following and drawing from John Ackley's<sup>17</sup> exposition of Rahner's transcendental framework of five conditions for the possibility<sup>18</sup> of a human concept of a word of God provides a deeper insight into Rahner's speculative theology of the word. Whilst Rahner's theology of the word is *expressed* within the *framework* of his transcendental philosophical approach, the actual *content* and *implications* resonate with a mystical theology of spiritual direction.

### **The word as God's self-communication with humanity**

Ackley explains Rahner's biblical conviction as 'the threefold *experience* of God as Father, Son and Spirit [that] corresponds exactly to the *nature* of God'<sup>19</sup>. According to Ackley, Rahner proposed his now famous Trinitarian formula<sup>20</sup>—'the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity'—in contrast to the Catholic Trinitarian doctrine tradition that conceptually separates the immanent nature of God in three persons as mystery, and the economic Trinitarian actions of God in history as that which is revealed. Rahner's formula means that the *actions* of the Trinitarian God are the natural and free expression of who the Trinitarian God *is* in himself. God says something to humans about the immanent nature of God's community of being: the saving acts in history are performed by a Trinitarian God whose persons express a level of differentiation in function and role. Nevertheless, there is absolute unity within the Godhead between who God is and what God does<sup>21</sup>.

The saving word of the Trinitarian God, therefore, is more than a verbal description of recognisable revelatory historical acts. The saving word of the Trinitarian God is a 'whole-of-person' communication: God's acts in history point humans towards an awareness of the interpersonal differentiation of God in the community and unity of his essential being. Christologically, this means that when Jesus enters the hypostatic union

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<sup>17</sup> J. Ackley, *The church of the word – a comparative study of word, church and office in the thought of Karl Rahner and Gerhard Ebeling* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 35-56.

<sup>18</sup> 'Conditions for the possibility' (of knowing and willing) Rahner's development of theology of word typically reflects his transcendental reflection on the subject – see D. Donovan, 'Revelation and faith' in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, Marmion, D. & Hines, M. eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>19</sup> *The church of the word*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> See D. Coffey, 'Trinity' in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 98-111, for a detailed discussion and evaluation of Rahner's Trinitarian formula.

<sup>21</sup> J. Ackley, *The church of the word*, 37-38.

with humanity—his ‘economic’ role in history—he is not doing something new or outside [cf ‘other than’] his role and place within the immanent Trinity because

the incarnation of the Logos is...[not to be] regarded as the incarnation of just any one of the three divine persons, so that any other of them could just as well have become...[human], but as the incarnation of the Word precisely and exactly *as* such, since on account of his inner-trinitarian propriety it is precisely he who becomes...[human] and who alone can do so<sup>22</sup>.

The humanity of Christ ‘is not an outward mask’ but ‘by virtue of its origin, the constitutive real symbol<sup>23</sup> of the Logos himself’<sup>24</sup>. Jesus, the Logos of the immanent Trinity, is ‘bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh’<sup>25</sup>: eternally human as well as divine. In this sense, a real ontological relationship between God and humanity exists<sup>26</sup>.

Rahner’s Trinitarian formula, from which his idea of ‘word as real communication’ is drawn, has been discussed, evaluated and criticised. Coffey notes, however, that the major concern with the formula has to do with perceptions of ‘modalism’ relating to technical inadequacies in Rahner’s development of the concept of ‘person’ in its unique sense of the divine oneness-in three<sup>27</sup>; these technical debates are outside the parameters of this thesis.

Thomas Torrance’s argument that a main strength of Rahner’s formula is its concept of the self-communication of God<sup>28</sup> encourages an appreciation of Rahner’s theology of word as real self-communication of God, and as a theological aesthetic—a beautiful divine meditation. Torrance discerns in Rahner’s ideas the perception that the ontological connection between humanity and the eternal Logos has always been silently true of the human story. Rahner argues that, if the Logos is intrinsically connected ontologically with humanity and the Logos is also integrally one with each other member of the Trinity as well as one with the whole of the Trinity, then humanity has both its ultimate genesis

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<sup>22</sup> K.Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol.IV, 256.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Real symbol’, a phrase we will discuss in more detail further on in this chapter.

<sup>24</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, 90, in *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> J. Anderson, ‘Ascension power’, in *The upper room disciplines* (Nashville, Tennessee: Upper Room Books, 2007), 148.

<sup>26</sup> J.Ackley, *The church of the word*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Trinity’ in the *Cambridge companion to Rahner*, 98-99.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

and completion in the immanence of the Trinitarian God. The word that reveals to human consciousness what has always been silently true—and therefore also in some way has always been existentially known—is not a verbal statement; it is the flesh and blood revelation of the Logos, Jesus Christ, expressing the Trinitarian God in history, time and place. Human beings consciously encounter the innermost silent truth and reality of their existence through the awakening that comes when Word expresses itself as Incarnation. Word in this sense is a radical, historical intervention that evokes the profound spiritual awakening of the silent primordial truth that humans are connected to—and find their ultimate belonging in—the Trinitarian imminent God.

### **The word in history as categorical revelation**

The previous chapter demonstrated that God's movements into history are an important aspect of Rahner's unique approach to transcendental thinking. Whilst Rahner's transcendental approach is aimed at the development of an a-historical, universal concept of human spirituality, his absolute commitment to Christian doctrine as received truth results in a mutual interpretative process between the a-historical universal and the specific time, place and events of the unfolding revelation drama. Rahner understands word as a function of spiritual discernment, or categorical revelation, within history. However, the ambiguous nature of history means that though God is active in history, humans find it hard to separate God's acts and interventions from the acts of people and groups and mere strange or unusual events.

According to Ackley<sup>29</sup>, Rahner's answer to the ambiguous nature of history is that a discerning word is needed to distinguish between the revelatory and the random. The Old Testament prophets are prime examples of divinely inspired speakers who point very specifically to

a particular event which stands out from the rest of history, in which the primordial struggle between life and death is expressed and interpreted so that the enduring question in history is permanently answered.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See also D. Donovan, 'Revelation and faith' in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 83-97, for an outline of Rahner's view of the clarifying nature of the word in the development of categorical revelation in light of history's ambiguity.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

Having discerned their revelatory content, the prophetic interpretive word moves certain acts of history from the realm of the ambiguous to the realm of concrete. The prophetic word enables humans to discern the self-disclosure of God in unique and unrepeatable specific acts in time and space. Through the prophetic word believers have received elements of revelation that are categorical in nature and call for specific individual responses.

The words of scripture function as a spiritual guide, showing the occasions in human history when God has approached humanity in self-disclosure. Donovan notes Rahner's view that the historical development of scripture as categorical revelation climaxes in the gospel accounts of the life and destiny of Jesus Christ<sup>31</sup>. Although the biblical words of categorical revelation are an external and concrete source they also reflect and imply a subjective transcendental process. The canon of Scripture is discerned as the true and correct record of God's revelatory acts precisely because the words of the prophets and other biblical authors are received by believers as objective confirmation of their transcendental experience of God<sup>32</sup>. In the same way the preaching of the word in every generation is confirmed as revelatory when it is experienced as an external and explicit confirmation of an internal, graced inner narrative—the ever-present silent word of God's existential reality. This is a bone of contention for Rahner critics: that human experience—albeit mystical experience—'proves' the authenticity of the scriptures. This is a deviation from the orthodox understanding of Scripture as the absolute, objective definer of the human condition, needing no existential 'support' or validation.

Donovan's explanation demonstrates Rahner's understanding of the categorical nature of the word as a special revelation is a spiritual theological view: the word is *the* word because it is spiritually meaningful. The word is recognised as *the* word because the community of faith has discerned the actualising influence of its ministry—people experience transcendental fulfilment in terms of Christian salvation—in direct encounter

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>32</sup> J. Ackley, *The Church of the Word*, 41-42.

with *this* word. Thus the word is validated as *the* word because it touches and awakens the silent, absolute truths of human existence.

In light of this mystical understanding of the word, its absolute truth does not need to be argued: its mystical effect is its own validation and testimony. The nature of the mystical validation of the word as experienced truth also implies the need for a mystagogical process of biblical self-exploration and skilled direction. The truth of the word cannot, by the very spiritual nature of the biblical text, be intellectually forced or emotionally imposed on another. The Spirit-led, self-discovery of the absolute truth of one's existence may occur only in sacred space: the free interaction between the person and the word through which God opens up his imminent Trinitarian being. This view clearly reveals the Ignatian Rahner, and underlines why Rahner insisted, particularly in the latter stages of his life, that the ongoing practice of the Exercises is important for the contemporary Christian life.

### **The incarnation of the word**

Rahner's conviction is that the ultimate message from God must be embodied within a real person. The true and definitive 'Word of God' is not a verbal expression but the absolute, whole-person communication of God by the act of going out of himself to the other (humanity) by actually becoming the other—in the person of Jesus Christ, God–humanbeing<sup>33</sup>. God gives himself fully to humanity in the life of Jesus Christ; Jesus, as a human being, gives himself fully to God in absolute surrender. On behalf of the whole of humanity Jesus ultimately fulfils the universal transcendent obligation and actualisation, the *potentia oboedientialis*<sup>34</sup>. On behalf of God, Jesus completes the work of ultimate ontological and experiential unity between divinity and humanity. Human history is now also God's history because God has entered time and space and has divinised and made sacred the mundane human journey. Humanity now has hope of true actualisation and

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<sup>33</sup> K. Rahner, 'The concept of mystery in Catholic theology', *Theological Investigations*, Vol IV, Trans. Smyth, K. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 112.

<sup>34</sup> Rahnerian transcendental terminology is discussed in the previous chapter on the experience of human mystery.



fulfilment in following the absolute self-giving of Jesus which triumphs over the common temporal boundary of death and reaches towards the infinite horizon of eternal life<sup>35</sup>.

Central to Rahner's theology of the significance of embodied Word is the historical drama of the resurrection. The prophetic word—the discernment and public identification of specific, one-off acts in history—is salvific in nature because these events address and resolve a particular question in relation to the major human existential angst: death as the barrier to full meaning and actualisation. Ackley notes that Rahner views the resurrection as the particular historical event that

signals the definitive Word of God, the divine self-promise in both word and deed that answers the radical question posed by death. The life and death of Jesus have symbolic-sacramental significance for us in light of the resurrection as the sign of God's salvific will that causes what it signifies<sup>36</sup>.

Jesus is the ultimate, climactic Word of God: his resurrection speaks unequivocally to humans as the validation of both the eternal nature of human being and God's promised welcoming of humans into eternal life.

Jesus is 'both the definitive expression of God and the supreme fulfilment of humanity'<sup>37</sup>. Human beings share in the 'new miraculous humanity' that Jesus inaugurates because the world, created by God, has become God's existential reality through Jesus' intervention in human history. From the resurrection perspective, 'God created the world and everything in it with the possibility of being assumed by God to become the material for an Incarnation of the Word'<sup>38</sup>. God has spoken the Word of his whole person through the medium of Jesus' full participation in the human transcendental experience: Jesus has become the absolute answer to human transcendental hopes, through the faith-abandonment of crucifixion, and the death-triumph of resurrection<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> J. Ackley, *The church of the word*, 42-48.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> For a fuller discussion of Rahner's theological understanding of the salvific meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ see, J. O'Donnell, *Karl Rahner – Life in the Spirit* (Rome, Gregorian University Press, 2004), 47-57 and in Rahner's own words: 'Interpreting and experiencing the words and deeds of Jesus today' in *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 231; K. Rahner, *Prayers for a lifetime*, Raffelt, A. ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), 81.

Rahner's incarnate view of the word moves the understanding of the biblical text from the realm of religious discourse into the centre of a lived spirituality of silence in the midst of an everyday life. According to Rahner, the New Testament reveals that human beings are integrally connected to the Trinitarian life in an ontological way, and that the Trinitarian life has moved towards humans in the fullest possible embrace, assuming and triumphing over each and every barrier to full human existence. The scriptures guide believers verbally to the Word of the Trinity in time, space and history; the incarnate Trinitarian Word is an existential message. The Jesus of history speaks to humans through his participation in an everyday life. It is in the context of the whole of Jesus' everyday life that human salvation has been worked out. Humans life is an ontological and experiential union with the Trinitarian God. This experiential spiritual union with the Trinity is not primarily worked out or expressed in religious discourse; rather, Trinitarian life is the believer's silent experience of God's presence as the transcendent and transformative factor at the centre of every mundane aspect and activity of human being. This Trinitarian Word saves. It connects Rahner's theology of the word and his spiritual meditation on 'God of my daily routine'.

It's evident that routine is not just a part of my life, not even just the greatest part, but the whole. *Every* day is 'everyday.' Everything I do is routine, because everything can rob me of the one and only thing I really need, which is You, my God. But on the other hand, if it's true that I can lose You in everything, it must also be true that I can find You in everything. If You have given me no place to which I can flee and be sure of finding You, if anything I do can mean the loss of You, then I must be able to find You in every place, in each and every thing that I do...If every day is 'everyday,' then every day is *Your* day, and every hour is the hour of Your grace<sup>40</sup>.

### **Acceptance of the Word results in freedom and faith**

Ackley notes Rahner's third condition for the possibility of understanding the theological validity of a word of God: 'it must fulfil a genuine human need and bring about a real change in a person'<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> *Encounters with silence*, Trans. Demske, J.M. (New York, Newman Press, 1960), 49-50.

<sup>41</sup> J. Ackley, *The church of the word*, 53.

Rahner's transcendental perspective means that Jesus, the incarnate Logos, must be understood as the fulfilment of human freedom: humans are always on the way, experiencing themselves as unfulfilled in their transactions with the temporal and material events and circumstances of their everyday lives. The human experience of existential frustration points individuals towards an infinite horizon of meaning and being that Christianity frames in theological terms as 'God'. In this sense, individuals long for self-expression in their reaching for infinity—yet remain frustrated by their inability to transcend the limitations of space and time.

Jesus, as the Word of God, enters history so that God—the infinite and the *object* of the human longing for freedom—becomes accessible in time and space. Ackley observe that

the absolute unity of transcendental object of freedom (God) and the subjective hope of freedom (humanity) at last appear as the reality of freedom in Word made flesh<sup>42</sup>.

Self-actualisation of transcendental hope can be experienced only in the full self-giving of a person to others. Paradoxically, self-actualisation is achieved through self-emptying. Only in God is a unified act of love possible: the pouring out of a person's whole being to another, without reserve. Thus, 'the love of God revealed in the Son made flesh is the ground of true human freedom'<sup>43</sup>.

Humans know Jesus as God's Word because he makes possible their full experience of freedom through their participation in God's divine self-giving, self-actualising love. This experience expresses itself in the transformed perspective of faith. Such a faith is willing to courageously base its hope for life on something far deeper and more primordial than the modern historical constructs of empirical science, and success in terms of wealth accumulation and public achievement. The life perspective of faith justifies itself 'before the tribunal of truth and conscience'<sup>44</sup>. Historically based on the proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth, this faith is existentially known as the freedom to say 'Yes' to

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 56.

- a radically simple acceptance of the fullness of one's humanity without guilt and anxiety;
- an affirmation of the eternal validity of human life by facing death with confidence and peace;
- the beauty, truth and pure spiritual meaning of loving sacrificially and pouring out time, resources and reputation on behalf of the wellbeing of others;
- a confident acceptance of the fact that God's grace is everywhere and always at work and that, therefore, it is possible to experience a rest from constant anxiety, worry and self-defence because in such a grace 'we live and move and have our being'<sup>45</sup>.

According to Rahner, humans know that the word of God is taking effect because it demonstrates its power by meeting the deepest and most central human needs for self-actualisation in self-giving love, and transforms the human experience of everyday life into a participation in the rest of faith. This experience of God's word is by its nature 'fraternal' or 'communal': the Logos is by its nature relationally inter-Trinitarian and expresses this life on earth through the community of faith—the church<sup>46</sup>.

Rahner asserts that the word of God creates church by offering individuals a way to live their birthright—ultimate freedom—through a mystical participation in the love of God that by nature goes out from self to another. Church in this sense is truly the inevitable community of God's children who are 'born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a...[parent's] will, but born of God'<sup>47</sup>. God's word is the spiritual guide to a sense of freedom humans long for but do not know how to reach, nor are they able to reach it without the word that not only directs but spiritually empowers their mystical participation in this freedom. In this sense God's word is more than 'word' in the way that humans are culturally conditioned to understand words as language. God's word is more than speech. God's word is spiritual presence, sacramentally facilitating the mystery

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<sup>45</sup> Acts 17: 28a.

<sup>46</sup> J. Ackley, *The Church of the Word*, 55-56.

<sup>47</sup> John 1: 13.

toward which it points. God's word saves by awakening and forming the inner silence of the true spiritual nature of human beings. God's word empowers individuals to embrace fully the non-verbal expression of the gospel: the profound and active silence of giving and serving rather than constantly talking. This evokes one of Vorgrimler's anecdotes (chapter 1<sup>48</sup>): Rahner's pastoral inclination leads him to spend the morning responding to the needs of a vulnerable young person at risk of suicide and neglect preparing an important lecture; the theologian of silence puts words about God to one side in favour of a spiritual participation in the love of God, in and through a less verbally eloquent form of service to the other.

### **Rahner and the ministry of the preached word**

A reflection on one of the themes of his spiritual classic, *Encounters with silence*, provides a clue to Rahner's view of the purpose of the preached word. 'You have told me through Your Son that You are the God of my love, and You have commanded me to love You'<sup>49</sup>. Preaching is the ministry of passing on the gifts of God's words so that listeners find the courage<sup>50</sup> to believe that the ultimate answer to the mystery of human longing and fulfilment is the loving presence of divinity in silent proximity.

But would I, a wretched creature, doomed to die like a fly that lives for a day, pitiful sinner—this too is true—have the courage really to believe, to hope, to admit that this God wants this absolute nearness to me, if I did not look up to Jesus, he who was crucified, descended into death and rose from the grave?<sup>51</sup>

Chapter 4 focuses on Rahner's idea that the silent ultimate nearness of God is the constant existential experience of each and every human—whether they have heard someone proclaim this truth or not. The reality of the supernatural existential—the presence within humans of the Holy Spirit—gives to the individual the grace of potential awakening to fullness of life. However, for Rahner, the proclamation of the word

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<sup>48</sup> See page 12, chapter one of this thesis, original reference: *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> K. Rahner, *Encounters with silence*, (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1960), 8.

<sup>50</sup> For Rahner's broader view on faith as an expression of existential courage see, K. Rahner, *The practice of faith – a handbook of contemporary spirituality*, Lehman, K. & Raffelt, A. eds. (London: SCM Press, 1985), 260-265.

<sup>51</sup> K. Rahner, *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 83.

facilitates such an awakening and supports individuals in their embracing of the ultimate truth of human existence.

An analogy from human relationships may further clarify the significance of the preached word for Rahner. People on the fringe of a social group may avoid contact with, or conscious awareness of, a very popular person at the centre of the group. This avoidance or lack of awareness may have nothing to do with their feelings of aversion or ignorance—and everything to do with their self-concepts, and their assumptions that their having a dynamic, intimate relationship with this popular person is inconceivable. The underlying belief: as popular people are not interested in people on the fringe, it would be audacious and risky for someone on the margins of a group to attempt to initiate a relationship with anyone at the centre—people on the margins simply do not have the social power or resources to do so. But when the popular person at the centre takes the initiative, this changes everything: people at the centre have the power and resources to re-define the self-concepts of those on the fringe, and to restructure the social order.

The preached word is a message from God who is at the centre of all things and in whom all things find their meaning, value, belonging and fulfilment. God sends individuals the power and resources to penetrate the silent alienation of human unbelief.

According to Egan, Rahner regards the preaching of the church as an offer from God of ‘both the proclamation of the truth and the gift of hearing it as truth’<sup>52</sup>. Ackley understands that the ‘sacramental character of proclamation consists in the fact that it not only points to salvation as a sign, but *is*... the event of salvation itself because it makes known who Jesus is as the Word of God’<sup>53</sup>. In Rahner’s words,

if Christianity in its foundation and origin is not primarily the communication of truths (as true *propositions*) but the reality of incarnate, crucified and risen Son of God, and if *this* fundamental reality...includes the *word* as an intrinsic element, then this can only mean that in its first *Christian* application the word is

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<sup>52</sup> Egan, *Karl Rahner - Mystic of everyday life*, 106.

<sup>53</sup> J. Ackley, *The church of the word*, 51.

*sacramental*: a sign in which God's saving will is made present for us in our history<sup>54</sup>.

Rahner regards the preached word as efficacious in and of itself; it communicates presence and substance as well as form<sup>55</sup>. Consistent with Rahner's concept of grace<sup>56</sup>, the preached word is God's gift, and not something external to God's life and personality. The proclaimed word reaches its climax in the focus on 'God's consummate saving act of Christ's cross and resurrection'<sup>57</sup>, and thus leads naturally into the Eucharistic sacrament—by its nature, the Eucharist is a 'condensed word of God'<sup>58</sup>.

Of course, in light of Rahner's central idea—the holy mystery of sacred presence and the universal supernatural existential—the external spoken word is efficacious precisely because God has already preached his silent word into the unconscious depths of each human person. Egan notes that it is because of this silent inner preaching that a human person is able to hear the external word of grace in mundane language as an illumination of faith<sup>59</sup>. According to Ackley, Rahner sees the working of the 'inner word of grace' in conjunction with the 'external, historical word of revelation' as two 'mutually complementary "moments" in the one Word of God which expound and interpret each other'. Therefore, the external word of 'God's victorious grace in the crucified and risen Christ' speaks to the 'anointed depths' of the everyday person. Spirit meets with spirit in a dance of new life into which the hearers of the word are drawn<sup>60</sup>. According to Rahner, the

external, historical word expounds the inner one, brings it to the light of consciousness in the categories of human understanding, compels...[individuals] definitely to take a decision with regard to the inner word, transposes the inner grace of...[humans] into the dimension of the community and renders it present

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<sup>54</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. III, 243-246, in *The content of the faith*,. Lehman, K. & Raffelt, A. eds. (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 51.

<sup>55</sup> The social and historical existence of the Church itself is ultimate evidence of the sacramental power of the word that has created in a permanently visible sense a community of eschatological witness to the final and absolute word of God that speaks of salvation victory for the whole world, see K.Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV*, 272-273.

<sup>56</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, or 'pure word', J.Ackley, *The church of the word*, 52.

<sup>59</sup> *Karl Rahner - Mystic of everyday life*, 114-115.

<sup>60</sup> *The church of the word*, 52.

there, makes possible the insertion of grace into the external, historical field of human life<sup>61</sup>.

The word of scripture does not come to believers as an absolute external truth, separated from their everyday existence. The word of scripture comes to individuals to reveal and bring to light the absolute truth of their silent, ever-present existential reality. The ministry of preaching is a delicate and nuanced work of spiritual formation and certainly should never be exercised as a dogmatic, manipulative, or uncritical use of rhetorical power. Egan notes Rahner's conviction that those who are called to proclaim this saving word should themselves have first been thoroughly mentored in an experiential knowledge of the rhythms of silence in the Christian spiritual tradition. Egan also notes Rahner's view that preachers should be involved in a rigorous dialectic comprising

- a) meditation on the theology of the church in order to grasp its essential, spiritual meaning;
- b) thinking deeply about contemporary cultures' worldviews so that preachers-as-spiritual directors proclaim a truly spiritual word in a language and form that is comprehensible, and consistent with the intellectual frameworks of the hearers<sup>62</sup>.

Rahner's theology of the preached word asserts that preaching is ultimately a ministry of the exposition of the ever-present, inner, graced narrative of the silent word; before they are qualified to speak, preachers must first enter silence in a personal and prolonged way. Would-be preachers must be in touch with the supernatural existential of their own being and have experienced the formation of a spirituality of both biblical text and Christian theology. Preachers cannot—must not—simply pass on religious phrases that they have not spiritually embraced and discerned. Preachers must enter the sacred silence of the spiritual heart of the text, and listen until they know how to be the midwife of the new birth as word-of-grace-in-history effects a sacramental connection and awakening to consciousness of word-of-grace-as-existential. This is a ministry into silence through word, and to silence by word.

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<sup>61</sup> K. Rahner, *TIIV*, 259.

<sup>62</sup> *Karl Rahner – Mystic of everyday life*, 115-116.



In light of the implications of Rahner's view, all would-be proclaimers of the word may well cry out, with St Paul, 'who is equal to such a task?'<sup>63</sup>. Rahner's own feelings of vulnerability in relation to the ministry of preaching, in juxtaposition with his high conviction of its sacramental efficacy, are palpable in these words:

Receive us [priests/preachers] as the ambassadors of Christ. Exert your heart and mind by God's grace to hear God's word in these human words of ours, our struggling, lamentable words that often seem to have paled—the holy, blessed, mighty word that brings us God himself and his everlasting life. If you accept us on these terms with brotherly understanding and forbearance, always gazing through us at the Lord who sent us, then dear brothers and sisters, our word will bring into your lives the consolation, the strength, the eternal life that is offered to you in God's word. And this word entrusted to the priest by holy mission can be spoken into the concrete situation of an individual human life with an ultimate authority, an ultimate power, an ultimate relevance, such that, in accordance with God's promise, what he has done for...[people] now becomes present in that life in ultimate truth, deed, and power. Then this word is called the sacramental word<sup>64</sup>.

### **The primacy of scripture in the theological process**

For Rahner, the proclamation of scripture has primacy in the theological process because 'theology is a derivative of the primary reality of the kerygma itself'—a 'scientific reflection' on the experience of the word<sup>65</sup>. Rahner's theology of the word should be read as his careful, deliberate reflection on his lived experience of the scripture and his observation and interpretation of the lived experience of the church, and not as the original source of his views about scripture. Rahner also celebrates the movement back to a creative and charismatic exploration of biblical/exegetical sources—as opposed to a mere cerebral propagation of a fixed, received tradition<sup>66</sup>—in modern theology, and regards dogmatic theology's attentive listening posture in its relationship to the scriptures as 'the most direct and ultimate source of Christian revelation'<sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> 2 Corinthians 2: 16b.

<sup>64</sup> *Prayers and meditations*, Griffiths, J. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 29.

<sup>65</sup> Egan, *Karl Rahner – the mystic of everyday life*, 105; Ackley, *The church of the word*, 49-50.

<sup>66</sup> *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 354.

<sup>67</sup> K. Rahner, *Prayers and Meditations*, 89.

### **Personal reading of scripture as a discipline of spiritual formation**

Rahner's brief essay, 'Reading the Bible'<sup>68</sup>, demonstrates his view of the importance of the personal reading of scripture to the spiritual formation of the everyday believer. In this essay, Rahner discusses the many and varied nuances of personal experiences and preferences in the way Christians read scripture, the nature of the relationship between divine and human authorship, the spiritual essence of Bible reading, and its ultimate purpose.

At the beginning of his essay, Rahner asserts that 'Bible reading belongs necessarily to the spiritual life'<sup>69</sup>; he defends this precept against a hypothetical challenge from some Christian mystics. According to Rahner, that Desert Fathers 'in their radical renunciation' of the material world 'actually gave up Holy Scripture' does not imply that engagement with scripture is an optional discipline for the everyday believer. Rahner argues that 'the Spirit of God had so filled them; the whole of Scripture had become so interior to them, that they no longer had need of its words and letters'<sup>70</sup>, and suggests that when seasoned Christians have lived and breathed spiritual lives dynamically formed through a relationship with scripture for decades, the word becomes a living and integral part of their interior being. Having become fully initiated in the spirituality of the Holy Scriptures, seasoned Christians may become less dependent on rereading God's word. Though this position may be considered controversial by those in Christian leadership—particularly within the Protestant tradition—who strongly advocate daily personal Bible reading, it clarifies that Rahner's interior spirituality must pass through—rather than bypass—an extended and engaged process of biblical formation.

Rahner uses the exceptional nature of the Desert Fathers' mystical experiences to advocate that, for everyday Christians, extended regular Bible reading be the norm. He recognised that Christians with differing intellectual capacities and personality traits will have different ways of approaching their personal reading of scripture. Some will prefer a more methodical, exegetical approach. At the other end of the spectrum will be those

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<sup>68</sup> K. Rahner, *The practice of faith*, 85-87.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

who, like mystics, experience such a powerful transformation from ‘a single word of Scripture’ that ‘this single word’ will continually ‘resound in their life, so that they really need not read much more in Scripture’<sup>71</sup>. Though the majority of Christians will fall somewhere between these two polarities, most will benefit from regularly reading the Bible.

Rahner is clear about the common features of all approaches to personal scripture reading. Firstly, Christians read scripture to sustain and nurture a genuine love of God and neighbour. Secondly, it is an engagement with the word of God, *not* because readers are able to intellectually grasp the full meaning of the relationship between the original divine inspiration of scripture and the very real human expression of the biblical authors that the scriptures reflect, *but* that when

this reading is genuinely supported by the vehicle of the inward grace of God, by the Holy Spirit who is given to us and who has inspired these Scriptures, then we hear in Holy Scripture not just discourse about God but God’s actual word to us<sup>72</sup>.

Thirdly, the Bible is a book that Christians never finish because its work in the individual is eternal: readers never simply ‘finish’ with these words either through the physical discipline of reading periodically, or by being transformed by the experience of being filled with the spiritual essence of a particular biblical theme or passage because God’s words are eternally engaged in believers’ souls.

Finally, Rahner advocates that whatever method Christians use to read scripture they must approach the word in stillness, solitude and silence. This approach allows scripture to penetrate urgent and superficial human preoccupations and speak what really matters to individuals spiritually. In the midst of this stillness individual believers must read the word with the whole of their lives and hearts. Human lives and hearts are informed by each individual’s personal context and situation. The ‘Spirit who fills this word is the selfsame Spirit who is hidden as well in the interior of our own life situation’<sup>73</sup>. In this way believers experience the interpenetrative work of the Spirit as a spiritual weaving

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 87.

together of their lives. Through the eternal themes of scripture, the word becomes the gift of God that re-creates human existential frames of reference and divinises human experiences of their everyday lives.

### **Lingering questions around Rahner's theology of the word**

Rahner approaches scriptures as a mystical theologian in the tradition of the *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading), and the Ignatian biblical meditation influences are obvious. He explains his theological understanding of the word within the framework of his transcendental view. This view reflects the spiritual conviction that God is deeply and constantly present to the whole of creation and has given himself in a particular way to humanity. This view also reflects Rahner's absolute commitment to demonstrate that the Christian doctrine—that the Bible is a sacred book understood as the word of God—is reasonable from the perspective of intellectual reflection on human experience. Rahner's speculative theology of the word is vulnerable to the same general criticisms as his transcendental project: his view of natural theology is too high and his speculative theology is too strongly influenced by his concern for contemporary intellectual relevance.

For some readers, Rahner's theology of the word generates lingering questions despite its Christological focus—notably, the locus of the authoritative nature of scripture. Rahner gives the mystical experience of God primacy—believers recognise scripture as God's word because it confirms their prior experience of the silent, subjective word. This is anathema for those who believe that there is no mystical experience apart from the words of scripture and that faith comes *from* hearing the word not that faith is *confirmed* in the hearing.

The capacity of individuals to accept Rahner's theology of the word will boil down to their personal assessment regarding the nature of his approach: does he offer an authentically pneuma-Christological view based on scripture and historical theology, or is Rahner's transcendental approach in general at odds with the received biblical tradition.

The juxtaposition of two articles—both claiming a Barthian<sup>74</sup> reading of Rahner but arriving at radically different conclusions—demonstrates clearly the effect of personal assessment/interpretation.

Paul Molnar, in his comparison between Rahner and Barth's differing approaches to 'Love of God and love of neighbour'<sup>75</sup>, uses Barth as a lens to critically evaluate Rahner whom he believes has lost—albeit unconsciously—the sense of the objective authority of scripture and is therefore adrift in a dangerous sea of humanistic, transcendental subjectivity.

I hope to show that whenever a clear distinction between the love of God and the love of neighbour is not in evidence, then, theological anthropology unintentionally tends toward a Pelagian view of the creator/creature relationship...it is not the object of Christian faith alone that constantly dictates his [Rahner's] theological conclusions; rather it is precisely his attempt to explain the traditional doctrines according to the tenets of his transcendental method and his ontology of the symbol that repeatedly cause inconsistency and difficulty for him<sup>76</sup>.

Molnar discusses his belief that Rahner's essential starting point in his theology is his philosophical idea of transcendence rather than the historical/biblical Christ and the scriptures that speak of him. Molnar's view implies that the whole of Rahner's theological project is flawed because it opens the door for an understanding of a mystical participation in the life of Christ apart from *first* encountering the external word and being led to repentance by the Spirit *through* the word. Molnar's objection reflects an ongoing theme in Rahner criticism that views his transcendental apologetic as diminishing the absolute unique place and function of the scriptures in the revelatory process that leads to Christian salvation.

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<sup>74</sup> Karl Barth, a Protestant contemporary of Karl Rahner, labelled as 'neo-orthodox' for his distrust of the liberal, existential approach to theology and known for his high view of the revelatory necessity of Scripture, his low view of natural revelation, and his Christo-centric hermeneutic stance.

<sup>75</sup> *Modern Theology* 20 (4) (Oct 2004): 567-99; Molnar sees the difference as essentially that Barth sees love of neighbour flowing on from the explicit biblical/Christocentric encounter with the love of God, whereas Rahner believes that an encounter with the love of God can be discerned biblically/Christocentrically from our observation of extraordinary moral activity.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 567 & 568.

In contrast, William Thompson argues that Rahner's 'transcendental hermeneutics'—an interpretation of reality with an emphasis on the subjective process—is based upon Rahner's biblical reflection on the interplay between trinitarian word and spirit<sup>77</sup>. Thompson unpacks his thesis with reference to the 'biblical grammar' of *Theological Investigations* showing, with reference to a wide variety of *TI* articles, the strong logocentric and pneumatological overtones of Rahner's thought and his prioritising of New Testament reflection over and above the dogma of scholasticism. Thomson also notes Rahner's 'rehabilitation of the Greek patristic theme of divinization'<sup>78</sup> and the 'narrative theology' of his Ignatian-style meditations<sup>79</sup>. Thompson argues that a careful reading of the whole Rahner corpus (just as a reading of the whole Bible is necessary for appropriate exegesis) will lead to a radically different conclusion around the authentically Christian sources of his thinking.

The 'idea' of an 'Absolute Saviour,' arising from the Spirit-given sense of expectancy coming from our world of the supernatural existential—which is the real core of all forms of Rahner's transcendental Christology—does not seem to be a hopeless attempt to deduce the particular Jesus from human universal structures. It is rather an articulation of the (Spirit-given) universal conditions of the Incarnation found within this intentionally graced universe. It would seem that the only way we could deny the legitimacy of *this* (inclusive) kind of transcendental Christology would be to 'rip' the Spirit from the incarnate Word, which of course is impossible on Trinitarian grounds. If you will, transcendental Christology and narrative Christology are distinct, but never separate, as the Spirit and the incarnate Word are distinct but never separate<sup>80</sup>.

Thomson advocates a pneumatic understanding of Rahner's concept of 'transcendental' that orientates specifically to the logos of the biblical narrative. It is in this sense that he offers his essay as a 'Barthian reading of Rahner'. His conclusion: 'Without denying the important differences between these two great theologians, perhaps we can glimpse here a significant dimension of union between them'<sup>81</sup>, namely their mutual emphasis on word/spirit interplay within a trinitarian frame of reference.

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<sup>77</sup> 'Word and Spirit, hermeneutics and transcendental method: exploring their connections in Karl Rahner', in *Philosophy and Theology* 7 (Winter, 1992): 185-212.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 204.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 209.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 210.

These two interpretations of Rahner's relationship to the scriptures and the concept of Christian truth probably will continue to contest and interact with one another in ongoing Rahner commentary. In his summary of the 'Rahner versus Balthasar' debate, Clifford Longley proposes that the key tension between these two influential giants advocating the way forward for Roman Catholicism is in relation to the concept of the placement and presence of truth:

when the Church goes forth in fulfilment of its mission to teach all nations, is the truth already out there [in the form of the universal presence of God's Spirit in the supernatural existential], ahead of the Church, waiting to be identified [through the word of scriptures and the ministry of the Church]; or is the truth that which the Church brings with it, its gift to the world? [ie no one can experience the truth of God's Spirit and saving power *until* the word is proclaimed]<sup>82</sup>.

Clifford's summary identifies the ongoing point of difference between this Barthian/Balthasurian view<sup>83</sup> (Balthasar respects Barth's emphasis on scripture as the starting point and perpetual frame of reference for the human experience of grace and revelation) and Rahner's idea of a silent word that is freely active at all times and in all places, from which the scriptures in their original sense derive their substance. Time will only tell whether and to what extent theological commentators will seek to reconcile these two broad views, or whether, as Longley observes, they will continue to be 'a pair of rival factions' facilitating a 'burgeoning industry' of Rahner/Balthasar interpretative commentary in which 'no two [interpreters]...seem to agree'<sup>84</sup>.

### **Rahner's spirituality of silence as it emerges in light of his theology of the word**

Rahner is concerned that the primordial spiritual power of the word is repressed through the misappropriation of the text as a mere prop for official doctrines and political agendas. This unhealthy silencing practice is unhelpful to the spiritual life of the individual Christian, and to the institutional life of the church and its capacity to fulfil its mission as eschatological witness to the historical reality of the Incarnation. If the church is to proclaim the ultimate saving word—Christ himself—the people of the church must hear the voice of the biblical text in a free and uncompromised way. True Christian

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<sup>82</sup> 'Rahner versus Balthasar and all points west', in *Priest and People*, (October, 2004): 364.

<sup>83</sup> See under heading 'Further critical reflection – the perception of philosophy over biblical source', pages 13-14.

<sup>84</sup> 'Rahner versus Balthasar', 363.

spiritual direction allows for the ongoing prophetic spiritual impact of the biblical text, empowered by the Spirit, to recreate the inner life of the reader/hearer. This is a work of primacy, immediacy and intimacy that should not be frustrated, interrupted or muted by preconceived doctrinal agendas. Rahner is against the silencing of the word by religious agendas that operate as a barrier between the external word of grace and the silent, inner graced narrative of the supernatural existential.

Rahner advocates that an efficacious human experience of the biblical text is a sacramental possibility because the silent word of grace and the presence of the Spirit is already an intrinsic component of the human condition. In preaching or reading the conceptual word, grace meets grace, and an unconscious yet familiar holy mystery begins to find its voice, enabling a more deliberate and truly mutual participation in the rhythms of the divinised life. The preached or read word does not bring the presence of God. It awakens listeners/readers to the present reality of God as the existential centre of their being. When conceptual external word acts as a living witness to historical revelation, the silent inner witness of believers' experiences of God greets individual believers as familiar friends. In this greeting, the primordial unconscious dialogues with the form and substance of actual revelatory words and events of universal salvific impact. The spiritual outcome is that individuals are able to live in a unifying congruence of intellect, spirit and will, expressed in and through an everyday experience of love for God and their neighbours. Such an awakened spiritual existence produces a silent spiritual activism, a gospel without words, that inevitably creates the community of the Church and permeates the broader human society with the aroma of kindness, justice and mercy.

Rahner advocates an immersion in listening silence for those who aspire to the preaching ministry. Immersion in silence is staying in a state of contemplation until word, theology and culture penetrate the silent, sacred heart. This enables preachers of the word to function as existential exegetes, and facilitates the spiritual process whereby the spoken word of historical revelation interprets, shapes and forms the silence of the inner word into a conscious participation in the trinitarian life.



Rahner advocates that all believers practise the simple Christian spirituality tradition of staying with the word long enough in silence and in solitude for true quiet and listening to begin. Only then, when the dust storms of the anxious thoughts and urgent demands have been allowed to settle, are individuals able to see through the haze of the finite to the glory of their infinite horizon of existence in God. In these moments of silence and stillness believers emulate the silent Mary; unlike the distracted Martha<sup>85</sup>, they will be able to hear the word speaking about issues of eternal significance.

In this sense, the biblical texts become the safe guide to any person who wishes to explore the meaning of the inner life. Who dares look deeply into the dark recesses of the unconscious and deeply hidden inner drives and agendas of their own existence? Who dares to look frankly and clearly at the person within, the living, honest reality of the creature underneath and behind the everyday social persona? According to Rahner, it is the silent presence of God himself who enables believers to find light in the deepest darkness of their psyches and to learn to love the vulnerable creature within. It is, however, the word that empowers the exploration of mystery with the capacity to discern the substance of light and life, God and self. The word illuminates the difference between open doors and blind alleys, distinguishes wisdom from false enticements, and separates the substance from the shadow. Believers may enter safely into the listening silence because the word comes with them and enables them to meet and recognise the true inner voice of the present Spirit.

Finally, and most importantly, Rahner's explanation of the dialogue between external word and existential grace provides the Christian with the hermeneutic key to the silence of God. In *Encounters* Rahner models the task of all Christians: interpreting God's silences. It is one thing to hear from God a word of encouragement in difficult times. God's encouraging word comes in a variety of ways—a line from a sermon, a word of wise counsel from a friend—and is interpreted subjectively. Most Christians will discern times and places in their lives when they believe that God has 'spoken' to them with a timely word in a desperate situation.

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<sup>85</sup> See Luke 10:38-42.

But what about the times when no word is forthcoming? What about long-term illnesses, the unexpected tragedies and the day-to-day trials when it seems that God is silent? What about the long silences between the occasional divine words of comfort?

In *Encounters*, Rahner demonstrates that the absolute silence of God is also a form of God's word. It is however, an implicit word, an 'invisible word' without concrete form or substance. The task for Christian seekers is to grow in their spiritual capacity for interpreting the silence of God.

Rahner offers Christians an understanding of the resources they have to facilitate their interpreting God's silence. Rahner's theology of the word—in fact his whole approach to his creative theological project—implies Christians have a freedom in the Spirit to reflect carefully on the interplay between external word and the spiritual intuition of prayer. Rahner's theology of the word leads Christians from being passive hearers of the word to becoming dynamic and proactive relational interpreters of the heart and mind of God. This is what Rahner means by his concept of the spiritually formative purpose and dynamic of the silence of God.

You are the last answer, even though incomprehensible, to all the questions of my heart. I know why You are silent: Your silence is the framework of my faith, the boundless space where my love finds the strength to believe in Your Love<sup>86</sup>.

A reflection on Rahner's theology of the word and the meaning of this for a Christian understanding of a spirituality of silence points clearly to Rahner's late-life emphasis on the importance of Ignatian spirituality. Rahner asserts that the exercises and their related prayer structure make sacred space possible. Here the human silence of stillness and meditation engages with the living spirituality of categorical revelation, in the form of scripture supported and permeated by the inner graced narrative of God the Holy Spirit. In this sacred space God may be 'heard' and his silences interpreted. This understanding informs Rahner's much-repeated conviction that the 'Christian of the future will be a mystic or...will not exist at all'<sup>87</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> *Encounters with silence*, 56.

<sup>87</sup> K. Rahner, 'The Spirituality of the Church of the Future', *Theological Investigations* Vol. 20, Trans. Quinn, E. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 149.

### **The sacrament of the word**

In reflecting on the meaning of word *and* sacrament in Rahner and their contribution to the ongoing development of Christian understandings of his spirituality of silence, for systematic purposes I have chosen first to explore the meaning of word and secondly the meaning of sacrament. However, in Rahner's mind the two concepts are indivisible and integral components of the whole:

these two powers cannot simply exist side by side, without relation to each other, if they constitute the one Church as the one presence of the one salvation in the one Christ<sup>88</sup>.

The indivisible nature of these two 'powers' in Rahner's thinking is self-evident in his understanding of the sacramental nature of the preached and read word in the spiritual life of the listener.

Rahner's thoughts on the spiritual significance of primordial words in his essay, 'Priest and poet'<sup>89</sup> add another dimension to Rahner's thoughts on word-as-sacrament. Words are incarnational by nature; they are 'the embodiment of the thought'<sup>90</sup>. As such, words are the actual efficacious presence of the spirit which they express. There is no better way to explain this idea than the following extended quotation from Rahner's essay.

There are words that divide and words which unite; words which can be artificially manufactured and arbitrarily determined and words which have always existed or are newly born as by a miracle; words which unravel the whole in order to explain the part, and words which by a kind of enchantment produce in the person who listens to them what they are expressing; words which illuminate something small, picking out with their light only a part of reality, and words which delimit and isolate, but there are also words which render a single thing translucent to the infinity of all reality. They are like sea-shells, in which can be heard the sound of the ocean of infinity, no matter how small they are in themselves. They bring light to *us*, not we to them. They have power over us because they are gifts of God<sup>91</sup>.

Rahner distinguishes between utilitarian words that satisfy the mind in terms of providing knowledge enabling mastery over material things, and words that 'spring up out of the

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<sup>88</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol IV, 254.

<sup>89</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol III, 294-317.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 295.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 295-296.

heart, which hold us in their power, which enchant us'<sup>92</sup>. Rahner names the latter as 'primordial words'. A primordial word is distinguished primarily by the spirit and context of its speaker: when Francis of Assisi uses the word 'water', it has a very different power of meaning than for the chemist seeks to dissect the material properties of H<sub>2</sub>O. Primordial words cannot, by the nature of their being, be subjected to empirical analysis and mastery of their functional components.

'O star and flower, spirit and garment, love, sorrow and time and eternity!' exclaims Brentano, the Catholic poet. What does this mean? Can one say what it means? Or is it not precisely an uttering of primordial words, which one must understand without having to explain them by means of 'clearer' and cheaper words?...Blossom, night, star and day, root and source, wind and laughter, rose, blood and earth, boy, smoke, word, kiss, lightning, breath, stillness: these and thousands of other words of genuine thinkers and poets are primordial words. They are deeper than the worn-down verbal coins of daily intellectual intercourse, which one often likes to call 'clear ideas' because habit dispenses one from thinking anything at all in their use'<sup>93</sup>.

For Rahner, the efficacy of such primordial words is their power to enable the transition from the individual experience in time to the infinite movement—a transcendental movement of the human spirit. The primordial function of certain kinds of words reveals something like a sacramental principle: these words act as a bridge between temporal and infinite, utilitarian and mystically inspirational experiences of life. A primordial word is sacramental in that it does not

speak merely "about" a relationship of the object in question to the hearer: it brings the reality it signifies to us, makes it 'present'...whenever a primordial word of this kind is pronounced, something happens: the advent of the thing itself to the listener'<sup>94</sup>.

Rahner argues that a primordial sacramental experience of transcendence-through-word may be observed, or at least experienced, in the common human journey.

The idea of the sacramental nature of words is very important in terms of expanding an understanding of what Rahner means by the 'supernatural existential' and the 'divinised world of everyday life'. Gesa Thiessen takes up this theme in her essay on Rahner's

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 296.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 298.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 299.

‘theological aesthetics’. With reference to ‘Priest and poet’ she makes the following comments.

Poetry, especially great poetry, is important, because it takes shape where the human being radically faces who he or she is. Such facing oneself includes sin, guilt, hatred, deep pain, and failure. But in such authenticity, Rahner asserts, the ‘happy danger’ of meeting God is more likely than in the philistine avoidance of all the chasms in human existence. If one prefers to live at a superficial level, one is likely to meet neither doubts nor God...both the poetic word and the theological word can reach the human heart, which in turn may encourage and enable one to open up to the divine mystery<sup>95</sup>.

Theissen discusses Rahner’s broader view that all great art—visual and auditory, verbal and non-verbal—has within it the potential to lead people into the transcendental encounter with silence. Theissen also notes Rahner’s view that religious content is not necessarily synonymous with this sacramental effect.

Rahner states that it would be theologically naïve to think that only explicitly religious acts will be conducive to a salutary relationship with the divine. A painting or a symphony, he argues, may be so inspired by divine revelation and by God’s gracious self-communication that it conveys something about the human being in the light of the divine. When a work of art reaches and is revelatory of the depths of human existence, it reaches the realm where true religious experience takes place<sup>96</sup>.

However, Rahner also notes that when he paints

the crib with Jesus, Mary and Joseph, using areoles to show from the outset what is being presented, I have, objectively speaking, a religious picture. It may, in fact, not be very religious, because it is unable to evoke in those who see it a genuine and deep religious reaction. There exists what we call religious *Kitsch*<sup>97</sup>.

The transcendental potential of words that evoke the depths of human experience and the sacramental nature of the biblical text that reveals the true nature, orientation and fulfilment of human longing come together, for Rahner, in the person of the priest, who is called to be the poet of the word that ultimately saves. In ‘Priest and poet’ Rahner promotes the idea of an everyday possibility of sacramental words climaxing in the proclamation of the ultimate sacramental word, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>95</sup> ‘Karl Rahner: towards a theological aesthetics,’ *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 231.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 228

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*.

The word of the priest [the word that is a proclamation of the historical reality and universal saving effect of the life, death and resurrection of Christ] is the word of God. It is spoken by God in the infinite *katabasis* of his self-revelation, and brings the inner and most infinite light of God into the darkness of...[humanity]... The word of God is the eternal Logos of God who was made flesh...All the words of God previously spoken are only the advance echoes of this word of God in the world...It was precisely this person who is the *Word*, not another person of the most holy Trinity, who became in flesh the word of God directed to us<sup>98</sup>.

### **Rahner's sacramental vision and the silent anonymous Christian**

Rahner's vision of universal grace and anthropological orientation to God includes the idea of 'anonymous Christianity'<sup>99</sup>. However, Rahner's 'anonymous Christian' construct may be fully and properly understood only by tracing the implications of his unfolding sacramental vision of Jesus, and from his sacramental vision of the church.

Understanding this concept in its full context is important for the following reasons. The idea of the anonymous Christian seeks to offer a theological explanation for the universal possibility of a way of life that reflects Christ but does not verbally confess the Christian creeds. This idea unfolds as a proclamation of the universal influence and impact of the gospel as a global human reality, everywhere and always silently present and working. The idea of the anonymous Christian conditions the church to better position itself as the eschatological community that offers the mystagogical resources to enable the silent Christianity of the anonymous to find voice and confession. In short, the anonymous Christian idea is an important and significant expression of Rahner's spirituality of silence. It is also the expression of Rahner's spirituality of silence that is experienced as profoundly helpful by many and profoundly criticised by some. In Rahner's sacramental vision, his construct of the anonymous Christian finds its natural expression.

### **Jesus the sacrament and 'real symbol' of God**

The sacramental power of the word is derived from the actual person and event that it points to and proclaims: the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Rahner describes the incarnation of Jesus as the 'real symbol'<sup>100</sup> of God, which O'Donnell explains in the following way.

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<sup>98</sup> *Theological Investigations*, Vol III, 303.

<sup>99</sup> See chapters 4, 1.

<sup>100</sup> Rahner's full exposition of this concept is to be found in 'Theology of symbol', *Theological Investigations*, Vol IV, 221 – 245.

Many things in life act as signs that symbolise something: a green traffic light is a symbol for 'go', red for 'stop'; a nod of the head in Western culture means 'yes', a shake of the head means 'no'. These signs provide non-verbal, recognisable communication but are arbitrary: they don't represent in themselves the essence of the meaning of the communication. For example, traffic legislators could have chosen red as the 'go' sign and green for 'stop'—or have used different colours altogether. In contrast to an arbitrarily chosen sign for pragmatic purposes is a 'real symbol'. A gentle hug or kiss on the cheek is not merely a sign of affection; the gesture itself is full of the meaning and presence of the affection it seeks to communicate, and it brings about what it non-verbally proclaims. It is in this sense that Rahner describes the Incarnation of Jesus as the 'real symbol', or 'sacrament', of God<sup>101</sup>.

When God the Father wishes to express himself within the immanent Trinity he does so in his Word. When God the Father wishes to express himself in the world this same Word is expressed in the humanity of Jesus. Just as a human person is revealed in the world through their total bodily expression (physical presence, emotional or intellectual presence, words) and this bodily expression is a genuine and full expression of their essential person, so the bodily incarnation of the Logos is the genuine and full expression of God. The human Jesus is much more than an arbitrary sign of God's care and communication; Jesus is the genuine expression and presence of God. Jesus is the real symbol of divinity, bringing about the actuality of what his incarnation non-verbally proclaims<sup>102</sup>.

O'Donnell explains that, for Rahner, the 'real symbolism' of Jesus' sacramental life is highlighted by a reversal of logic in the traditional understanding of the creation/incarnation sequencing and its anthropological implications. The incarnation of the Logos is the 'condition of the possibility' for the creation, rather than the other way around. In other words, the Incarnation is not God's reluctant last-ditch effort to avert the

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<sup>101</sup> J.O'Donnell, *Life in the Spirit*, 41-42.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 42-44.

destruction of a sinful human race. Rather, the Incarnation is the reason behind the creation—God’s eternal plan is the revelation of himself in human form. The Incarnation is not a rescue mission of forensic justification aimed at delivering sinners from the hands of a wrathful God. The Incarnation is the always-intended natural extension of God’s love for others and his desire to reveal himself in relationship. Jesus would still have come to earth as the real symbol of God’s divinity in humanity whether sin was a problem or not. In this sense humanity has its anthropological origin in the eternal Logos—God and humanity are forever intrinsically linked through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth<sup>103</sup>.

**Excursus: real symbolism as an example of creative tension in Rahner’s theology**

Karen Kilby’s reflection on Rahner’s construction of Jesus as the real symbol of divinity highlights the creative tension that is often present in Rahner’s thought. Kilby argues that the idea of Jesus as the real symbol of God breaks down when Rahner’s theology of symbol is considered against the broader view of Christian theology that God is complete in himself and therefore does not *need* to express himself in real-symbolic form for any self-actualising purpose. She notes that, in his ‘real symbol’ idea, Rahner argues that inner thoughts and feelings must be expressed in words and actions so that the individuals expressing them can experience and fulfil their true reality. Rahner’s ‘real symbol’ actually facilitates what it signifies and is completed as a symbol by the reality it brings to pass. But can this idea really be applied to God who is already fully complete in himself? ‘Must’ God express himself through the Incarnation to become complete? Would it be truer to say that Jesus is the real symbol of God’s grace?<sup>104</sup>

Kilby’s questions evoke George Vandervale’s reflection<sup>105</sup> that, in the construction of a ‘supernatural existential’, Rahner sets a logical trap for himself by insisting on the mystery of God’s universal nearness as an ontological concept. The fact that both Kilby and Vandervale are sympathetic interpreters highlights that, even amongst his friends,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> K. Kilby, *Karl Rahner* (London: Fount, 1997), 43-44.

<sup>105</sup> See the discussion in our previous chapter on ‘The human experience of mystery’ under the heading ‘Critical Reflection on the Mystery of Infinity in Proximity,’ 29.



Rahner's dual commitment to received doctrine and transcendental re-interpretation does not always result in a thoroughly convincing theological argument.

Kilby's suggestion that Rahner's 'real symbolism' is best 'improved' by moving it from the realm of an ontology of God to a manifestation of the grace of God raises questions about what Rahner really meant when he spoke of grace as not a 'gift *from* God' but the 'gift *of* God himself in proximity'. If Jesus is to be understood not as the real symbol of God in the essence of his being but rather as the real symbol of his economic action in grace, this raises further questions about the immanent/economic formula.

The tensions reflected above tend to point to the Achilles' heel in Rahner's theological approach. The weakness, or vulnerability, in Rahner's thought is not that it lacks spiritual, historical and biblical veracity, but that it attempts to reconcile a creative, intellectual reflection on human experience with the preconception of the absolute correctness of received doctrine. The former commitment allows Rahner to roam broadly and freely in his re-imagining of the Christian doctrine in light of his understanding of the human condition and of spiritual theology. The latter commitment; however, means that Rahner must, to some extent, express his creative reflections in the language of concrete conclusions that must be made to fit within the framework and language of the received doctrine. Thus, as a spiritual reflection, the idea of Jesus as 'real symbol' communicates something beautiful and inspiring. At the level of academic reflection, however, it may be less than fully satisfying as a systematic Christological concept.

### **The redemptive meaning of the Incarnation**

Rahner was not convinced that the New Testament data supported an exclusive interpretation of the primary meaning of the Incarnation as a blood sacrifice offered to God to appease his wrath against sin.

First of all it is obvious that Good Friday does not mean changing the mind of an angry God who is disavowing human beings, but that this redeeming act itself proceeds from the pure initiative of God's holy love and is in no way effected by anything outside of God<sup>106</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> K. Rahner, *The great church year*, 158.

He recognised that sacrificial atonement was a recognisable, but not necessarily exclusive, New Testament interpretation of the death of Jesus which made perfect sense in light of the biblical historical setting in which blood sacrifice was a commonly understood element of the then contemporary religious/spiritual practice of the Jews.

However, Rahner discerned the limitations of this view:

- the meaning of blood sacrifice has no clear and natural connection to current religious/spiritual practice and is an abhorrence to the modern, secular mind;
- sacrifice cannot be understood in its fuller biblical sense as producing a change in God—his forgiveness and love are the motivating *cause* of the Incarnation, not the *outcome*;
- the primary or exclusive view of blood sacrifice as a dominant interpretation of the meaning of the Incarnation diminishes the significance and power of the resurrection.

Rahner developed an alternative view of the salvific nature of the Incarnation as it is fully expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In this he was much influenced by the Greek fathers as the following quote from *Theological Investigations* shows:

as the theology of the Greek Fathers comes into its own, the incarnation itself is being regarded as a moment of the redemption, and not merely as the act whereby someone is placed in a position where he can be redeemer, if he wills and dedicates himself to the task by a completely new act, so to speak. Thus the advent of the incarnate Logos of the Father is being inevitably seen as the most radical case of a salvific, creative word of God in general, which calls for a theology of the word of God as a soteriological entity in general<sup>107</sup>.

What follows is a synthesis of the explanations of this alternative view using ideas from Dych, O'Donnell, O'Meara and Rahner (from his essay 'On the theology of the incarnation')<sup>108</sup>.

For Rahner, human history is the common history of the entire human family and in this sense the destiny of one member of this family can hold significance for the whole.

It must be remembered that the history of humankind is *one and single*, so that there is an intrinsic unity between everything it contains from Abel to the last

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<sup>107</sup> *Theological Investigations*, Vol IV, 256.

<sup>108</sup> W. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (London: Continuum, 1992), 60-61; J.O'Donnell, *Life in the Spirit*, 39-58; T. O'Meara, *God in the world* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 76; K. Rahner, 'On the theology of the Incarnation', *Theological Investigations*, Vol IV, 105-120.

living human being, and each individual has a connection with all the rest, not merely those living at the same time or in the same place...but with all human beings right through the ages<sup>109</sup>.

Jesus is fully human and therefore fully belongs to the human family. Jesus is also fully divine and therefore is able to live his life in a unique way within and on behalf of the whole human family.

The God–man Jesus is able to express and live his humanity as the absolute fulfilment of the graced transcendence which is the universal human existential. He offers his life to God in perfect loving obedience and surrender showing that true life and actualisation of existence is found not in selfish accumulation and self-protection but in absolute abandonment to giving and going out from the self. Though the crucifixion of Jesus is a consequence of the radical prophetic expression of his human graced transcendence, he does not balk at the threat. Rather, he embraces death as the common aspect of the human journey with the same loving abandonment to—and trust in—the Father. In his resurrection Jesus demonstrates in the most absolute and powerful way that the life of actualisation through self-giving and loving has eternal validity and meaning. Jesus demonstrates the true meaning of human existence: *the way of love*. He also proclaims the absolute answer to the global human conundrum of death. In the resurrection, Jesus shows that life is not absurd, death is not a cruel cosmic joke or bitter irony, and that the meaning of love as a way of living and being lives on into an eternity of unspeakable joy!

Rahner's theology of salvation, as outlined above, provides the basis of the hope he speaks of in face of death's awful and bitter silence. Rahner is able to interpret the silence of the dead as an eloquent message of the joyful promise of the wonderful certainty of an eternal home precisely because the life and death story of Jesus makes sense of the entire human journey; the awful silence of death is transformed into the beautiful silence of the deep inner knowledge of the certainty of an eternal home, showing itself to be authentic in its differentiation from the finite by the very fact that, to human finite ears, no voice from the 'silent dead' is audible.

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<sup>109</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol X, 14-24, in *The content of the faith*, 400.

Your silence in this time of my pilgrimage is nothing but the earthly manifestation of the eternal word of Your love...That is how my dead imitate Your silence: they remain hidden from me because they have entered into Your life. The words of their love no longer reach my ears, because they are conjoined with the jubilant song of Your endless Love...And that is also the way they live for me. Their silence is their loudest call to me, because it is the echo of Your silence<sup>110</sup>.

Rahner's conclusion is that, in Jesus, God has given himself fully to the whole of humanity and that, through Jesus, humanity has given itself, vicariously, in the fullest possible way to God. Because Jesus is connected to the whole human family by virtue of his humanity and participation in history, 'somehow' the entire human race is included in the saving work of Christ. Rahner's Christological vision cannot imagine a world in which everyone is not somehow affected in a supernatural way by the fullness of this divine/human/divine movement.

The Christian knows that the light of the morning [a metaphor of the manifestation of saving grace in Christ] on the mountains is the beginning of the day that lights up the valleys. It is not a day that is confined to the higher levels, and so condemns the darkness below<sup>111</sup>.

This sketch of a redemptive view of the Incarnation as whole, in contrast to a more a traditional view of the cross as exclusive salvation event, provides the Christological framework for the supernatural existential. Within this Christological framework Rahner constructs his idea of the anonymous Christian.

### **The foundational sacrament of the church**

If Christ is the sacrament of God—or at least of the saving grace of God if we accept Kilby's modification to Rahner's construct—then, for Rahner, the church is the perpetual, historic sacrament of Christ.

Now the Church is the continuance, the contemporary presence, of that real, eschatologically triumphant and irrevocably established presence in the world, in Christ, of God's salvific will. The Church is the abiding presence of that primal sacramental word of definitive grace...the Church is truly the foundational sacrament, the well-spring of the sacraments in the strict sense<sup>112</sup>.

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<sup>110</sup> *Encounters with silence*, 57.

<sup>111</sup> Rahner, *The content of the faith*, 394.

<sup>112</sup> K. Rahner, *The Church and the sacraments*, 18, in Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 84.

The church is sacramental in the sense that its communal (cf institutional<sup>113</sup>) life creates a social context in which mystical participation in the life of the Spirit is brought into conscious proximity with its true source: Christ<sup>114</sup>. In this sense everything that the church and its members does and is, as Spirit-filled action, is sacramental. The life of the whole church, both gathered and scattered, proclaims, creates and facilitates an environment and spiritual atmosphere in which individuals can access and actualise the present reality of their connection to the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith<sup>115</sup>.

The Church knows that it is the sacrament and testimony, not for its own salvation, but for that of the world...so that the grace of which the Church is the enduring sign is victoriously offered by God even to those who have not yet found the visible Church and who nevertheless already, without realising it, live by its Spirit, the Holy Spirit of the love and mercy of God<sup>116</sup>.

Rahner's perspective on the individual sacraments of the church contributes to his view of Jesus as sacrament of God and the church as sacrament of Christ for all people, in all times and in all places.

### **The nature and place of the official sacraments**

For Rahner, the validity of the official sacraments of the church<sup>117</sup> is not based primarily on particular New Testament 'words of institution'. As a result of the ongoing, graced reflection of the church on its life and mission as foundational sacrament, some symbolic liturgical actions are recognised by the church, over time, as sacraments. Through its Spirit-led, action-reflection, the church is able to identify and direct people to participate in the symbolism of these sacraments as way of enabling them to more fully experience the grace of Christ<sup>118</sup>. It is in this sense that the sacraments facilitate the saving power of

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<sup>113</sup> Rahner never advocates for the abolition of the institutional structures of the hierarchical Church though he did perpetually and passionately advocate for their ongoing reform. Apart from the institutional structures, he speaks in many places about the essential witness of a true charismatic community of faith (not to be confused with a mere superficial 'Pentecostal' enthusiasm). His views on the future of Christianity and the Church foresee the increased significance and prevalence of small, dynamic communities of the Spirit reflecting an authentic sense of the shared life.

<sup>114</sup> Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 82-87; O'Meara, *God in the world*, 85.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> K. Rahner, *Prayers and meditations*, 72.

<sup>117</sup> As a Roman Catholic Rahner recognised seven sacraments: Eucharist, baptism, confirmation, penance, marriage, ordination, the anointing of the sick.

<sup>118</sup> See K. Rahner, *Prayers and meditations*, 28-29, for a clear statement of his view of the necessity of the definite historical person of Jesus and the visible signs of Church and sacrament as the 'detour' through which each person must pass to fully experience the 'pervasive Spirit' whose infinity is everywhere.

Christ. This is not to say, however, that the saving presence of Jesus is exclusive and may only be experienced within the (Roman Catholic) church<sup>119</sup>.

Rahner envision a graced humanity, a universal family living together within the universal effect of the redemptive Incarnation. Therefore, it is possible for the Christian to discern in alternative religions, in various artistic expressions, and even in honest, thought-through expressions of agnosticism and atheism, a sense of sacramental transcendence.

If the Christian sees that the non-Christian is kind, charitable and true to...[their] own conscience...[the Christian] will no longer be able to say nowadays 'All those are "natural" virtues'...On the contrary...[the Christian] will think 'There the grace of Christ is at work even in one who has not yet explicitly called upon it but who, at the same time, has already hungered after it in the unexpressed and unacknowledged longings of...[the] heart'<sup>120</sup>.

In each and all of these areas of their lives, individuals are seeking to express and live out the true symbolism of their primordial, unconscious spiritual experience of themselves. People all over the world are seeking to respond to the movement of the Spirit and their unconscious, yet very real, cosmic connection to Christ. It is, however, only in the church that people experience the benefit of a sacramental form that is truly and fully congruent with the life of the Spirit, in Christ, that enables the true flowering of the transcendent life<sup>121</sup>.

Therefore, the sacramental life of people outside of the church is at its deepest level a true symbolic expression, and is responding to a genuine movement of the Holy Spirit. It is also true in the sense that it is the Incarnation of Jesus that releases and liberates this movement of the Spirit. Outside-of-church sacramental expressions are genuine 'spirituality-on-the-way' but are also genuinely in need of guidance, formation and completion. Participation in the life of the church enables spirituality-on-the-way to connect more congruently with its true source and to benefit from the tried and true

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<sup>119</sup> Egan, *The mystic of everyday life*, 162-164; O'Donnell, *Life in the Spirit*, 70-72; Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, 46-47.

<sup>120</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol X, 14-24, in *The content of the faith*, 397.

<sup>121</sup> Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 61-62; Egan, *The mystic of everyday life*, 151-170.

spiritual rhythms that trace directly to the historical life and teaching of Jesus and the ongoing pilgrimage in the Spirit of his sacramental community.

Finally, because Christianity and the life of the church are the expression and fulfilment of existential human transcendence, the sacraments reflect and complete authentic rhythms of sacramental transcendence recognisable in everyday life<sup>122</sup>. In the dramatic symbolisation of the sacrament of the Eucharist, the most poignant example of this process, the essential ironies of human existence are juxtaposed and framed in a context of absolute hope, resolution and eternal promise. The Eucharist symbolises the absolute reality of evil and suffering at the same time as it symbolises the incomprehensible tendency of the human spirit to love and keep on loving even in the face of darkness and loss. Both the corruption of the powers and the noble, inexplicable sacrifice of a great spirited human being are here. In the Eucharist feast, there is both the juxtapositioning of opposites and the promise of transcendent resolution—loving sacrifice triumphs over bitter and cynical self-seeking and self-preservation; the hope of nobility is vindicated, faith made certain, eternity unveiled, true human destiny revealed. Individuals growing in a transcendent longing for a life of love and self-giving remain confused or oppressed by the seeming prevalence and triumph of evil, the Eucharistic sacrament of the church proclaims and fulfils the goodness and truth of their transcendental inclinations.

This interpretation of the sacraments moves them conceptually from the realm of the magical, archaic or purely ritualistic into a dynamic role: they witness continuously to the absolute saviour of everyday human existence. Whether or not this conceptual movement expresses itself as an effective communication, however, will surely depend on the capacity of various individual Christians and congregations to help members of the broader population make a meaningful connection with its logic.

The church then, as the sacrament of the cosmic grace impact of Christ on behalf of the whole human family, exists not only for its explicit membership but also for those who

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<sup>122</sup> See Egan, *Mystic of everydaylife*, 164-170, for a full discussion of the points of connection between all seven sacraments and everyday spirituality.

belong to it ‘anonymously’. The ministry of the church is one of constant sacramental renewal that may be understood as a ministry of ‘evangelisation’ that both supports the continuing journey of its explicit members, as well as facilitating the possibility of the mystical initiation of those who belong to it implicitly.

‘Evangelisation’ means for me simply the ever new proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus crucified and risen as the pledge that God communicates *himself* in forgiveness and ‘divinisation’ in his Spirit...and in so doing shapes the ultimate unity of...[human beings] among themselves and their history until what already *is* stands fully revealed: that God is all and in all and the inmost centre of our existence in the loving and hoping community of...[humanity]. Such ‘evangelisation’ is addressed to all people, is therefore on the one hand ‘mission’...but on the other an ever new proclamation of the Gospel to Christians because they are always on their way to becoming Christians in the ever new situations of their lives and of their society. ‘Evangelisation’ should be not *merely* an ‘indoctrination’ from without, but an initiation [into the life and rhythms of the Holy Spirit in the context of the community that gathers around Jesus Christ]<sup>123</sup>.

This is an initiation into the life and rhythms of the Holy Spirit in the context of the community that gathers around Jesus Christ.

Though Rahner’s idea of the anonymous Christian is illuminated by his sacramental theology, a question remains: what are the perceptions of its merits and deficits as a Christian idea?

### **Criticisms of the anonymous Christian**

Mark Worthing notes that Rahner’s concept of the anonymous Christian has attracted both widespread popular acceptance on the one hand and heavy criticism by various academic theologians on the other<sup>124</sup>. In his summarising of these criticisms Robert Schreier claims Rahner’s anonymous Christian

does not take into account sufficiently the fact that Christianity is by definition an explicit confession of faith in Jesus Christ; that the theory owes more to Rahner’s transcendental anthropology than to the biblical witness; that it does not provide adequately for the central Christian categories of justification and conversion; that it lacks specific Christological and kerygmatic content; that it might undermine

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<sup>123</sup> K. Rahner, *Christian at the crossroads* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 40-41.

<sup>124</sup> *Foundations and functions of theology as universal science – theological method and apologetic praxis in Wolfhart Pannenberg and Karl Rahner*, European University Studies, Series 23, Vol. 485, (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).



the missionary tasks of the Church; that it clouds the meaning of Church; that it shows insensitivity to the religious commitment of other people<sup>125</sup>.

Drawing attention to Hans Urs von Balthasar's fears that the idea of an anonymous Christian threatens to blur the confessional boundaries between church and world, and that the phrase belittles other faiths and ideologies, Worthing demonstrates Balthasar is anxious over the reverse implications of the anonymous Christian: of people of other faiths and ideologies labelling Christians as 'anonymous' atheists, Muslims or Buddhists, thus mutually diminishing the value of explicit faith confession<sup>126</sup>.

Eamonn Conway notes that Balthasar is against the idea of the anonymous Christian because he believed it was more closely related to a secular philosophical epistemology than to the biblical witness and because he felt that its effects were both compromising and debilitating the church<sup>127</sup>. Balthasar's pointed criticism of the post-Vatican II movements of the Roman Catholic church clearly have the concept of the anonymous Christian—perceived as having been adopted by the council—in his sights.

The Church seems to me to be a little like a watering-can with a hole in it. When the gardener comes to the flower-bed which he wishes to water, there is nothing left within. The Church reflects too little on the treasure in the field. She has sold much. But has she really got the treasure in return? She has descended into the valley of democracy. But can she still be the city on the hill-top?<sup>128</sup>

Worthing's summary of the criticisms of the anonymous Christian<sup>129</sup> also show that its influential Roman Catholic detractors include Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict) and the French theologian Henri de Lubac. Worthing suggests Ratzinger considers the anonymous Christian as a general humanistic idea of self-actualisation veiled thinly with the language of Christian theology.

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<sup>125</sup> 'The anonymous Christian and Christology,' *Missiology* 6 (1) (1978):30.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 286.

<sup>127</sup> E. Conway, *The anonymous Christian – a relativised Christianity? – an evaluation of Hans Urs Von Balthasar's criticisms of Karl Rahner's theory of the anonymous Christian*, European University Studies, Series 23, Vol. 485, New York: Peter Lang, 1993, 35-61.

<sup>128</sup> *In ibid*, 57.

<sup>129</sup> *Foundations and functions of theology*, 167-289.

Lubac validates the basic idea of an anonymous Christian (ie the Spirit at work in different times and places apart from the deliberate mission of the church) but repudiates as ‘false’ the extension of this idea to a universal human experience of a silent spirituality that may rightly be labelled ‘Christian’.

Worthing evaluates the idea of the anonymous Christianity from a Protestant perspective, and offers a balanced critique. At one level Worthing defends the idea of the anonymous Christian against the judgement that it is semi-Pelagic<sup>130</sup>. Worthing believes that this label is misleading as a descriptor of Rahner’s universal vision of a graced humanity. He prefers instead to frame Rahner’s view as ‘anthro-optimistic,’ and suggests that this view brings a helpful corrective to the ‘often too pessimistic view of humanity’ that characterises the Protestant tradition.

On the other hand Worthing is keen to advocate caution in relation to Rahner’s universal vision due to ‘its over-reliance upon philosophical traditions rooted outside of the Christian tradition’<sup>131</sup>. Worthing’s view is shared by the general school of thought that Vorgrimler refers to as ‘criticism from the right.’<sup>132</sup> In particular Worthing notes Pannenberg’s objection that the idea of the anonymous Christian does not take ‘seriously enough human perdition and our bondage to evil which is not social but has to do with our very nature as human beings’<sup>133</sup>. Worthing’s reference here relates to Rahner’s rejection of the traditional Augustinian doctrine of original sin and his re-construction of a social context of guilt which ‘corrupts and leads astray human freedom’<sup>134</sup>. It is not difficult to see here why the idea of the anonymous Christianity is controversial.

Another criticism levelled against Rahner’s universal vision of a silent, Christian spirituality, that may be expressed anonymously, is that its makes unfair, unrealistic and

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<sup>130</sup> Some see in Rahner’s transcendental approach a dualism where grace is dependent or co-dependent on anthropology. Our discussion in the previous chapter referred to an example of the view of Rahner as semi-pelagic with reference to Paul Molnar’s ‘Love of God and love of neighbour in the theology of Rahner and Barth.’

<sup>131</sup> *Foundations and functions of theology*, 172.

<sup>132</sup> *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 121 -130.

<sup>133</sup> *Foundations and functions of theology*, 168.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

unhelpful assumptions that diminish authentic dialogue between Christians and people of other beliefs and worldviews. The following quote from Hans Kung, Rahner's former student<sup>135</sup> —and later a colleague—expresses this criticism in vivid language:

Are the masses of the non-Christian religions really marching into the holy Roman Church? Or is this only going on in the theologians head? Anyway, in reality, they—Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and all the others, who know quite well that they are completely 'unanonymous' remain outside. Nor have they any wish to be inside...The will of those who are outside is not to be 'interpreted' in the light of our own interests but quite simply respected. And it would be impossible to find anywhere in the world a sincere Jew, Muslim or atheist who would not regard the assertion that...[he or she] is an 'anonymous Christian' as presumptuous. To bring the partner to the discussion into our own circle in this way closes the dialogue before it has ever begun...A pseudo-orthodox stretching of the meaning of Christian concepts like 'Church' and 'salvation' is no answer to the challenge of world religions<sup>136</sup>,

The importance of Kung's perception is the suggestion that a theological view, however attractive, must be reality-tested. His conclusion: Rahner's grand idea of a universal Christian spirituality of silence is nothing but a theological version of 'the emperor's new clothes'.

Kung's comments draw attention to the tension between Rahner's creative transcendental approach and his unreserved commitment to the received dogma of the Roman Catholic church. Is Rahner's idea of the anonymous Christian, as with his idea of the supernatural existential and real symbol, stretching credibility by trying to express genuine spiritual instinct and observation within the construct of a doctrinal assumption? Adams, in his article 'Rahner's reception in twentieth century Protestant theology'<sup>137</sup>, notes Lindbeck's conclusion that reconciling a creative transcendental approach with the assumption of received dogma involves Rahner in a process of 'intellectual gymnastics'—a comment not dissimilar to Kung's 'over-heated theological imagination'. Tyron Inbody, in his critical assessment of Rahner's Christology, proposes that Rahner is creative, courageous and industrious in his construction of a transcendental idea of a God-person who saves, but then simply attaches this idea to the particular historical Jesus of Nazareth on the

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<sup>136</sup> From *On being a Christian*, p.98 in Worthing, *Foundations and functions*, 287.

<sup>137</sup> *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*, 211-224.

basis only of the tradition of the church. ‘When push comes to shove...the anthropological method gives way to dogma’<sup>138</sup>.

The hierarchical structures of Rahner’s universalism demonstrate his bias towards the centrality of dogma, as this summary—focusing on understandings in chapter 4 and 5 based on the work of Dych, Egan and one of Rahner’s later interviews<sup>139</sup>—reveals. The reality of all human beings—across cultures and throughout history—‘silently’ experiencing a liberating transcendence of spirit, participating experientially as they respond behaviourally<sup>140</sup> to their divinised inner longings and yearnings, is a primary aspect of Rahner’s sacramental vision. Secondly, when viewed positively through the lens of the universal impact of grace through Christ, non-Christian religions are seeking to make their responses to divinised transcendence explicit and cognitive—a sincere though flawed approach. Thirdly, non-Catholic Christians on the way to an authentic sacramental experience of Jesus in an explicit sense remain not quite there in terms of a flawed or fractured historic connection to the actual events of the Incarnation. Finally, though the Roman Catholic church is far from perfected in grace, and within dogmatic boundaries may learn from the movements of the Spirit within any and all of the other groupings, it is the closest and most true sacrament of Jesus for the world. Rahner’s idea of ecumenism is not that the centrist authority of Rome, Roman dogma<sup>141</sup> or the Petrine office itself should be held up for debate, but that Rome ought to lessen the imposition and restriction of its influence on the global Christian churches.

When Rahner discusses the sacraments as expressions of the foundational sacrament of the church, he has in mind the seven formal sacraments of Roman Catholicism as primary

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<sup>138</sup> ‘Rahner’s Christology: a critical assessment’, *St. Luke’s Journal of Theology*, 4, 25 (1992): 308.

<sup>139</sup> See Egan, *Mystic of everyday*, 158-160; Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 96-98, and *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 49.

<sup>140</sup> Here Rahner is vulnerable to the charge of semi-Pelagianism.

<sup>141</sup> Rahner notes that the essential point of difference between Protestant and Catholic is simply that ‘for the Catholic theologian the logical explanation of the words of Scripture by the Church can definitely become a statement of faith; whereas for the Protestant theologian it remains basically theology, and it may always be revised and reversed’ *Prayers and meditations*, 39. For Rahner, such a statement of faith is the fixed starting point for doing theology so that while such statements may be, and in fact should be, creatively reinterpreted in different ages and contexts they can never be dismissed or viewed as erroneous in the first place.

expressions of mystagogical<sup>142</sup> initiation into explicit faith. Rahner asserts that these seven sacraments should be accepted as the action–reflection wisdom of the church through the ages despite the fact that the huge Protestant section of the universal Christian church arrived at a different conclusion long ago. Rahner argues inclusively that sacramental experience is not defined or limited by reference to these expressions, yet assumes exclusively that the authority of the Roman Catholic position on seven, not two, sacraments is not up for debate. Rahner is the tireless proponent of the idea that Roman Catholic teachings must and should be re-interpreted, re-imagined and expressed in new ways, informed by Roman Catholic dialogue with other Christians, non-Christian religions and the broader, modern, scientific worldview. Nevertheless, for Rahner, Roman Catholic dogma itself must always be the fixed point of departure and return in the revisionary process.

In light of the hierarchical structure of Rahner’s universalism, it is little wonder that detractors such as Kung take such deep offence at its perceived paternalism and distance from the actual religious consciousness of non-Christians. Kung and Rahner’s historic falling out was over the issue of the infallibility of the Roman Catholic magisterium<sup>143</sup>; Rahner’s default to the magisterium is also a stumbling block to the reception of his ideas by Protestant thinkers<sup>144</sup>.

### **Evaluating the criticisms of Rahner’s universal Christian spirituality of silence**

To what extent do the criticisms of Rahner’s idea of a universal, silent experience of Christian spirituality deter Christians from embracing this aspect of Rahner’s spirituality of silence?

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<sup>142</sup> ‘Mystagogical’: Facilitating participation in the life of the Spirit as it is expressed in the everyday, explained by Rahner in one interview in the following way: ‘bringing ... what we believe into the closest possible unity with ... the act of faith itself, and thus showing what the tenets of faith actually mean for the individual and society’, Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> For a fascinating and quite personal account of this see Bruce Van Vorst, ‘Kung and Rahner: duelling over infallibility’ and ‘Follow-up on the Kung-Rahner feud,’ *The Christian Century*, 88, 20 (May 1971): 617-622 & 88, 34 (Aug 1971): 997-1000.

<sup>144</sup> See, *The Cambridge companion to Rahner*, 220-221.

*The anonymous Christian as a non-biblical construct:*

This thesis demonstrates that accusations that Rahner is a theologian who relies more on a philosophical worldview than on biblical and theological sources are understandable but not justified. Chapter 2 demonstrates that Rahner's spirituality is profoundly Ignatian, mystical and influenced by the Greek Patristic tradition. Chapter 3 demonstrates that Rahner's spiritual theology of silence expresses itself in profoundly explicit Christian language. Chapter 4 demonstrates that Rahner's transcendental approach is influenced primarily by a spirituality integrating a philosophical worldview. This chapter demonstrates that Rahner's spirituality is profoundly biblical, sacramental and Christological and that his theologising is ultimately an integration of these elements.

This thesis also argues that the common criticism from the right that Rahner's universalism, and his theology as a whole, is more dependent on an extra-biblical worldview than on the narrative of Holy Scripture is simply far too simplistic and does not do justice to the whole Rahner corpus, or the complexity of the integration of his theological sources, his theological method, and the relationship between his spirituality and theology.

*The idea of the anonymous Christian is overly optimistic in its evaluation of the human condition:*

This thesis accepts Worthing's view that Rahner's positive vision of the Christ who comes as the climax of creation, and is the mystical way for the divinisation of the whole world, brings a welcome corrective to the negativity of the deficit mentality of the Augustinian-Protestant tradition. However, this thesis has not looked closely enough at Rahner's theologising of sin and guilt to adequately judge whether or not he does full justice to this negative theme in Christian theology. Rahner's optimism has its basis in the Ignatian creation and Greek divinisation worldviews, and is strongly influenced by his pastoral concerns, and his conviction that it is important to communicate the essence of faith in constructs that have meaning for a contemporary society in which blood sacrifice does not feature.

Does this lead Rahner into compromise for the sake of connection? Is one strand of the theological tradition emphasised at the expense of the eclipse of another? My reading of Rahner does not provide a definitive ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in response to these questions, and I am not able to dismiss this accusation outright. Certainly, Rahner’s tendency to ‘play down the significance of the fall, at least in its classical formulations’<sup>145</sup>, is recognised by his supporters. Rahner’s universalism does remain vulnerable to the accusation of being a one-sided view.

*The idea of the anonymous Christian as a diminisher of mission and explicit faith confession*

Are Christians disinclined to proclaim Christ and to distinguish themselves as an eschatological community of faith as a consequence of Rahner’s idea of a silent experience of an anonymous faith? The word–sacramental context of Rahner’s thinking, and his Ignatian emphasis on creating opportunities for mystical initiation into the church, contradicts this criticism. Rahner’s silent spirituality of the anonymous is his way of helping the church to establish a point of contact and reference on which to build better relationships for spiritual direction and influence.

*The idea of the anonymous Christian as a paternalistic expression*

Rahner, bound by his commitment to the Magisterium, paints a vision of universal spiritual inclusivity that can’t help but be tarnished in some way by the smudgy fingerprints of Roman Catholic, hierarchical dogmatism. Rahner is the penultimate harm-minimiser of the Roman, dogmatic tradition. His orthodoxy is generous and gracious, respectful of the other, a listening orthodoxy that longs to include rather than exclude. Nevertheless, at some level his idea of the anonymous Christian communicates an assumption made by the Christian theologian, on behalf of others, without their consent on consultation. To some extent any mono-religious worldview cannot avoid this and it may in fact communicate a strength rather than a weakness. Nevertheless, the Magisterium’s influence on Rahner’s sacramental vision of a Christianised, graced humanity creates a real potential stumbling block and barrier, depending largely on how the idea is used, communicated and explained.

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<sup>145</sup> Schreiter, ‘The anonymous Christian and Christology,’ 33.

### **The anonymous Christian as an idea along the way**

Ultimately, Rahner's silent spirituality of the anonymous Christian as a helpful idea 'along the way' rather than an 'end in itself'. Schreiter's critical assessment is that despite the 'coals heaped upon...[the] head' of the anonymous Christian, the idea 'has shown remarkable vitality'<sup>146</sup>. Schreiter attributes this vitality to the fact that Rahner has used the idea to attempt the integration of a range of themes pertinent to the place of the church in its mission to a contemporary world with secular, multicultural and multi-faith dimensions. Schreiter names these themes as

- a) the universal salvific will of God;
- b) creation and redemption theology;
- c) Christ, Christology and Soteriology;
- d) culture.

He refers to Rahner's own argument that individuals are free to reject his theory of the anonymous Christian but will still be left with the task of theological integration, re-imagination and culturally meaningful communication. Schreiter argues that it is precisely because this need exists, and is felt at a deep level by many Christians, that Rahner's idea of the anonymous Christian has experienced such a resilient life in the face of intense conservative criticism.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher's more recent analysis of the contribution of the idea of the anonymous Christian highlights themes similar to Schreiter's. She notes that

Rahner's systematic project is enduring precisely because he is able to maintain two essential teachings: God's universal will of salvation and the Christological affirmation of Jesus role as mediator of that salvation<sup>147</sup>.

Fletcher comments on the enduring legacy of the idea of the anonymous Christian as

- a) enshrined in Vatican II and influential in later Roman Catholic writings such as *Dominus Iesus*<sup>148</sup>;

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<sup>146</sup> 'The anonymous Christian and Christology,' 30.

<sup>147</sup> 'Rahner and religious diversity,' in the *Cambridge companion to Rahner*, 244.

<sup>148</sup> This document was discussed in our previous chapter.



- b) ) an ongoing contemporary influence in theological discussions, particularly those focussing on ideas of religious pluralism and inclusivism;
- c) ) a way for everyday Christians to hold to the idea of Christ as the ‘only name under heaven’ for salvation without automatically condemning everyone else to an eternity in hell<sup>149</sup>.

Neither Schreiter nor Fletcher suggest that Rahner’s idea is without problems or in need of adjustment. Schreiter suggests a more balanced and explicit Christological approach and a more faithful rootedness in biblical traditions, and raises the need for a more complex cross-cultural consideration of concepts such as universals, literalism in Scripture, and the difficulties of translation and differing horizons of meaning<sup>150</sup>. Fletcher notes the problems Christians encounter as they consider the reverse application of the theory, remarking that Christians might wonder how their faith in Christ constitutes membership as an ‘anonymous Zen Buddhist’. She concludes that as

Christians become increasingly aware of the differences among neighbours of other faiths, they will continue to inquire whether a concept like the ‘anonymous Christian’ can accurately reflect their lived experience, or whether new theological representations are needed. And as Christian theologians look ahead to new formulations that continue to speak to people, those who consider a theological response to religious difference surely will stand on the shoulders of Rahner to see where we have been and to think our way forward<sup>151</sup>.

Fletcher’s sentiment is a helpful way to frame the significance of Rahner’s universal and silent spirituality of the anonymous Christian as a step along the way to meeting the challenges of spiritual dialogue in a multicultural, multi-faith and ideological global village.

Pavel Hosek’s article ‘Towards a public theology of religious pluralism’ is a recent application of Fletcher’s views. One of Hosek’s important points is that in a ‘progressive globalizing of contemporary world and the related multi-cultural and multi-religious

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 236-245.

<sup>150</sup> ‘The anonymous Christian and Christology,’ 40-41.

<sup>151</sup> ‘Rahner and religious diversity,’ 246.

characteristics of most contemporary societies' a focus on a universal soteriological idea is not only unrealistic but unhelpful.

It is not just about who can be saved and under which conditions. The theological discussion about non-Christian religions has been overloaded and preoccupied with this particular soteriological concern for several decades, unfortunately<sup>152</sup>.

Hosek critically assesses the three broadly identifiable, soteriological worldviews: exclusivism—the primary Protestant and pre-Vat II Catholic position; inclusivism—the Rahner-influenced, post Vat II Catholic view; pluralism—the contemporary, interfaith eclectic position. Hosek concludes that, despite the varying exegetical strengths and weaknesses within this spectrum of thinking, all three worldviews share one common problem.

Unfortunately they don't really take seriously the other religions themselves, in their particularities and differences. All three paradigms are essentially aprioristic, their proponents have no reason to study what the other religions actually teach and how they understand themselves<sup>153</sup>.

In place of an attempt to construct a universal soteriology as a basis for shared spiritual conversation, Hosek proposes a triad of alternatives. He advocates a dialogue of spiritual worship practices in which people of differing faiths offer mutual witness to each other through the practice of their spiritual disciplines in proximity without attempting an eclectic homogenising. He proposes ongoing dialogue at the level of intellectual, theological discourse whilst noting that the influence of differing linguistics in the construction of actual theological ideas means that such dialogue will be limited and 'our expectations concerning its success should be rather modest'. Hosek believes that the most authentic and genuine opportunity for interfaith dialogue is

social-ethical dialogue...[because] its goal is not to establish a common platform for all religions, to undermine differences, to create a common meta-language or to move towards a syncretistic unity of religious believers. Its goal is to join forces to work for peace and justice on local, national and international levels, broadly in terms of Niebur's famous notion of 'Christ transforming culture'<sup>154</sup>.

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<sup>152</sup> *European Journal of Theology*, 14, 1 (2005): 29.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 32-33.

Hosek shifts the soteriological focus from the implausibility of a universal theological systematic to the opportunity for positive Christian witness within a triad of possibilities, particularly advocating the social–ethical alternative, which he also describes as ‘eschatological, rego-centric (Kingdom centred)’<sup>155</sup>.

It is very hard to imagine an article of the scope of Hosek’s making it into the mainstream of Christian theological dialogue had not the field of dialogue first been conditioned and influenced by Rahner’s reflections on his universal spiritual vision. Likewise, it is hard to imagine that anyone with a mono-view exclusivist soteriological worldview could comfortably make the leap into what Hosek proposes. Christians who view the world outside the church as inevitably condemned to eternal damnation, and the ideologies of other faiths and worldviews as essentially flawed and based in deception, are hardly ready to pray and work alongside Muslims, nor find common ideological ground with secular humanists. This highlights Rahner’s primary focus in his construct of the anonymous Christian: it is not a gospel for the world but a way to enable Christians to engage with the world in their witnessing to the gospel.

### **The sacramental vision of the anonymous Christian as a spirituality of silence: an aesthetic view**

Looked at aesthetically, Rahner’s sacramental vision reveals God freely entering the world of humans—not as a duty-bound crisis-manager, but as the eternal lover of creation and the genesis of all that is truly human; all creation is silently, unconsciously lifted into the dignity of his embrace. Rahner’s vision shows Jesus living the fullness of human worship in and through all that is common to the everyday life, even the bitterness of death. Although unaware, the world is nevertheless affected and included in the cosmic impact of these seismic events; in Rahner’s sacramental vision, Jesus has come; the sacrament of God has entered the creation and it cannot be the same henceforth. In Rahner’s view, the yeast of divinity is woven into the very fibre and fabric of the human family: the Incarnation of the ‘second Adam’ counteracts the viral infection that has influenced creation through the ‘first Adam’.

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

In Rahner's sacramental vision, this all happens silently as far as the vast majority of the human family is concerned; only a few are mystically initiated into a conscious awareness that the ultimate spiritual transformation has occurred. These few gather, and grow, and become the community that acts as the ongoing possibility of a recurring mystical initiation in future generations and broader cultures. Nevertheless, the very closeness of God to the whole of creation, through the Incarnation and by Spirit, means that even those who have no cognition of the historical event and significance of Christ's coming are unconsciously caught up into the reality God has constructed.

As the church grows in its awareness of the truly cosmic and global significance of the triumphant life, death and resurrection of Jesus, it rejoices in its discovery of the 'Spirit poured out on all flesh'. God is silently and permanently in the world, and the church interprets the life of the global, human society through the lenses of its pneuma-Christological vision. Its witness is positive and hopeful, confident and hospitable, believing the best rather than the worst of others, and seeing all creation as included in the universal embrace of God.

In Rahner's sacramental vision, the church engages in a servant ministry of spiritual direction through dialogue and mystical opportunity. The church knows that its words have power and meaning only in their capacity to point more truly to the non-verbal reality of the Incarnational effect. The church knows that it need not always be talking; it also needs to embrace the discipline of silence and to encounter the silent reality of the unknowable and unspeakable. The journey of the church is a perpetual pilgrimage of encountering silence and a perpetual ministry of facilitating opportunities for others to name and know more truly the silent impact of the incarnate God.

This is Rahner's dream; this is his sacramental vision of a divinised world, intrinsically linked to the holy mystery whose darkness is illuminated in the face of Christ.

Is this vision of silent spirituality wishful thinking—the overactive imagination of a desk-bound theological academic who lives vicariously a missional fantasy within the virtual reality of his writings? Could this be a vital spiritual vision for the twenty-first century, an unfolding of a revelatory piece in the fabric of the spiritual journey of the church and its vocation in the world?

## **Chapter 6: Karl Rahner as a resource—the theologian of silence in conversation with contemporary spirituality**

Is a reflective reading of Rahner as spiritual guide relevant to contemporary spirituality and the ministry of the Christian community? To answer this question I will present a systematic view of silence in Rahner by bringing together a summary of conclusions in chapters 1–5, and then bring elements of Rahner’s spirituality of silence into conversation with a range of perspectives and paradigms for understanding the process of spirituality and spiritual growth. My goal: to explore and consider points of connection in conversations between Rahner and contemporary spirituality and the meaning of Rahner as a resource for spiritual formation. Finally, I will close with a ‘parable of these times’ and my final thoughts on the meaning of this thesis.

### **Spirituality of silence in Karl Rahner**

The dimensions of silence in Rahner can be summarised under seven headings.

#### *A practice of deep and penetrating listening*

Karl Rahner models a posture of deep and penetrating listening for the Christian community. This listening attends to the voices of the theological and spiritual tradition, the words of the Holy Scriptures, and the movements of the Spirit in the deepest part of the self. This listening notices the silences between the spoken sounds<sup>1</sup>. This listening attends to the everyday human story, and is willing to go on listening to the unfolding of its drama—even when it occurs outside of the lines of the prescribed narrative of the church. There is a profound noticing of the silences between the sounds, the invisibilities in and under and around the visibilities<sup>2</sup>. This listening attends to the language, forms and structures of meaning in contemporary intellectual culture and eagerly anticipates the primordial synergies between these meanings and the essential spirituality of the Christian tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> A phrase I have adapted from Eugene Peterson’s description of the posture of the spiritual director. See K. C. Dean and R. Foster, *The Godbearing life* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

*Being in silence as a way of creating sacred space for the direct and immediate experience of God*

Karl Rahner models for the Christian community a way of doing theology that involves solitude and time spent in reflection. His spirituality of the everyday is illuminated by his experience of the silence and solitude of the Ignatian spiritual retreat. His prayerful theology and his theologising prayers emerge from the places of sacred silence where he finds the courage to openly and honestly face the mystery of his own existence. Rahner's prayer language shows that he is willing to take the time to wrestle with God in the infinite spaces where, eventually, he finds hope and salvation in the personal experience of the deeply existential 'word' of divine love. Others find spiritual meaning in Rahner's prayer language precisely because his words convey the wisdom of the desert. His words are both 'into' and 'from' the silence and beckon others also into the mystery of retreat as both an actual practice and as a way of being everyday.

*A rhythm of connection between proclamation and contemplation*

Karl Rahner models a way of offering spiritual direction inviting others into the silence. In this sense he models a spiritual leadership that doesn't always have to be in control and doesn't need to dictate the outcomes of spiritual growth. His words come from silence, beckoning others into silence, and allowing the 'creator to deal directly with the creature'<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, proclamation becomes a resource for immediate encounter with God rather than the proscription for how and what must happen.

*The mutual nature of spiritual direction*

If the essence of the spiritual life emerges from direct encounter with God that occurs at a level deeper than words, then the words that come from such an encounter will be expressed by many voices. Rahner's idea of the dynamic element in the church envisages a community engaged in a dialogue of mutual submission members speak with each other about their reflections on the immediate encounter. Tradition is involved in this conversation and maintains an authoritative but not exclusive role. The Holy Scriptures and the sacraments are involved as resources and witnesses to the broader global reality of divine presence in and through all things. From silence and into silence humans ascend

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<sup>3</sup> To use the terminology of Ignatius.

and descend, 'kneeling with our minds before the holy mystery'<sup>4</sup> and share humbly with each other their stories and the meanings of their encounters.

*The perception of a permanently present silent question and its potential transformation*

Karl Rahner believes the irony of human existence is that humans are by nature orientated to be complete in relation to the infinite and eternal. Though individuals experience this in themselves, they are powerless to reach beyond space and time; human beings live with an existential crisis: the unanswered silent question of being human. Rahner believes that God, the being of humanity's infinite existential horizon, alone answers the silent question that lives with human beings, and in human beings, and in and through all that humans do and are in time and space. God reaches into human space and transforms human experience of the silent question. As human beings discover the central truth of their humanity—that God is present in grace—they experience themselves as mysteriously found and placed. Human participation in this mystery is ultimately silent and sacramental; it is less a matter of ways of speaking about God and much more a matter of participating in the spiritual rhythms of God's life in all creation.

Words of faith and the liturgical rhythms of the Christian tradition are resources that support human participation in this central, graced reality. Words and sacraments, however, do not witness to themselves but to the deeper, silent movement of the Spirit, in and through all things, actively working to connect the human family to its true place of being in God.

*The experience of the silence of God as a 'word' that invites interpretation*

Rahner demonstrates in his writings that it is the spiritual task of the Christian to listen to the silence of God and to utilise the hermeneutic resources available to interpret God's silence in meaningful ways. The scriptures, the sacraments, individuals' experiences of God in the depth of their being and in the context of their everyday and ordinary lives, the wisdom of the church guide individuals in making meaning of God's perpetual silence. Individuals must listen to God's silence, be willing to bear with it and allow it to form its

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<sup>4</sup> H. Egan, *Karl Rahner – Mystic of everyday life* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 81.



word of life and hope within them. Thus, theological reflection on the silence of God becomes an essential spiritual discipline that at times becomes more important than seeking to hear another more literal word.

*The silence of suspended judgment against spiritualities not explicitly Christian*

In this thesis I have demonstrated the profoundly Christian nature of Karl Rahner's spirituality, and that Rahner's spirituality also views the diverse human family through the eyes of an optimistic Christology and generous sacramental vision. Rahner has nothing to say in judgement of people whose spirituality is not yet—and perhaps never will be—explicitly Christian. He proclaims that Jesus is God incarnate and as such is the ultimate hope and fulfillment of all humanity's unconscious longings for the eternal expression of life. Rahner distinguishes between the verbal and sacramental expression of his Christian conviction and the actual, free life of the Spirit at work in Christ that transcends all theological constructs; he remains respectfully silent before the outworking of the Holy Mystery of the 'Spirit poured out all flesh'<sup>5</sup>.

**Spirituality of silence in conversation with the cultural reconceptualising of spirituality as a broad element in human existence and development**

The term 'spirituality' is a relatively recent term in Western culture:

- began with the Roman Catholic focus on 'mystical' and 'ascetical' theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries;
- developed into 'spiritual theology' and 'spirituality' in the twentieth century;
- non-Catholic Christians began adopting the term during the latter half of the twentieth century;
- Christian rediscovering and naming of 'spirituality' in the last fifty years has partly to do with the phenomena of young Western people seeking spiritual wisdom in Eastern religions<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> An allusion to both the Pentecostal interpretation of St. Peter (Acts 2:17) and to the title of a relatively recent work by Amos Yong: *The spirit poured out on all flesh: Pentecostalism and the possibility of global theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from B. Holt, *Thirsty for God: a brief history of Christian spirituality* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2005), 16-18.

The term ‘spirituality’ emerged from what used to be an almost universal cultural faith—Christianity—into a broader plural expression. Not only did young people in Western cultures begin seeking the wisdom of Eastern religions; in the last four or five decades of the twentieth century, diverse ways of constructing spiritual meaning emerged. In discussing briefly some examples of the trend away from the Christian hegemony in regard to the task of constructing morality, faith and spirituality, I will also consider the ways in which Rahner’s spirituality of silence may help Christian communities to respond fruitfully to the challenges and opportunities these trends represent.

*Moral development theory*

Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral development theory, building on Piaget’s cognitive development theory, involves five stages of moral reasoning (see table below)<sup>7</sup>. It has become the best known example of the psychological and scientific analysis of human ethical development.

Kohlberg’s focus is on the neurological capacity of individuals to develop mature patterns about the ultimate meanings of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and on the connections between reasoning and ethical behaviour. He is interested in the development of thought patterns rather than the learning of particular ethical content<sup>8</sup>. Whilst Kohlberg’s theory does not necessarily challenge the role or right of the Christian community to provide moral formation to the culture, it does inevitably offer an alternative (albeit complimentary?) authoritative source of teaching about morals and ethics. Kohlberg’s theory could be used to both critique and affirm the role of the Christian community in supporting and/or restricting the growth of mature moral reasoning.

**Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning**

Level & stage	Content of answers		
	<i>What is right?</i>	<i>Why do right?</i>	<i>Basic philosophy</i>
Level 1: <i>Premoral</i> Stage 1: Heteronomous morality	Avoid breaking laws or rules. Obey laws blindly because they are there. Avoid being punished	Authorities will get even with those who break their rules even if they do so unknowingly or for humanitarian reasons.	No coherent moral theory; can’t relate multiple viewpoints; can’t separate abstract questions of right and wrong from concrete displays of power or punishment.

<sup>7</sup> From C. Peterson, *Looking forward through the lifespan* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education, 2004), 370.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 369.

Level 1: <i>Premoral</i> Stage 2: <b>Instrumental hedonism</b>	Follow rules if you stand to gain by doing so. Allow and expect others to do the same. Keep bargains with others so they will keep theirs with you.	To serve your own interests best, you have to recognise systems which help everyone gain the most.	Right and wrong are relative to one's own immediate gain. No abstract moral values transcend 'enlightened' self-interest.
Level 2: <i>Conventional</i> Stage 3: <b>Conformity</b> (for 'good boy/good girl' focus)	'Being good' means having good motives and showing concern for others. Live up to other people's rules about how you should act, even if you don't gain materially by doing so.	The need to be liked and to be a good person in your own eyes means you have to behave according to everyone's stereotype of what 'goodness' is.	Can consider the Golden Rule ('Do unto others...') at a concrete level. Is aware that feelings and expectations of others take primacy over self-interest, but has no ability to abstract beyond the values of other unknown people to consider an abstract or impersonal ethical code.
Level 2: <i>Conventional</i> Stage 4: <b>Law and order</b> (conformity to law or rule)	The most important guide to how to act is the legal rule book. If in conflict, abide by the rule rather than own or others' individual needs.	To keep the 'system' (country, religion...) going just as it is, you must obey all laws just as they are.	Is now able to distinguish the social system from individual personal relationships, but cannot go beyond existing sets of laws or rules to choose or formulate a more just and encompassing set of moral values.
Level 3: <i>Principled</i> Stage 5: <b>Principled morality</b>	Follow universal rules like 'life and liberty for all' regardless of majority opinion.	One's 'social contract' as a human being is to make and abide by rules which serve the welfare of all people, and promote the 'greatest good for the greatest number'.	Recognises conflicts between legal and humanistic or ethical viewpoints and strives to go beyond existing rules to integrate them. Will now view rule-abiding behaviour as immoral if it interferes with basic human needs.

In an article seeking to define Australian youth spiritualities and appropriate responses from evangelical Christian ministries, Paul Tyson<sup>9</sup> highlights an intriguing irony. His analysis of youth spiritualities at a particular Australian government secondary school identifies a minority of students whom he describes as 'radical post-secular'<sup>10</sup>. Tyson notes the characteristics of these young people: they express a genuinely transcendent form of spirituality, beyond 'relationalism'<sup>11</sup>, 'relativism' and desiring a theological and metaphysical reference point. These young people

<sup>9</sup> 'Contemporary Australian youth spiritualities and Evangelical youth ministry', *Faith and Community* (e-bulletin of the Evangelical Alliance) (June 21, 2007): 1-16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> The tendency to understand God primarily as 'my best friend' and to define the meaning of Christian community primarily in terms of warm fellowship.

often have a very troubled sense of the global injustices that are the ground of a privileged way of life in the first world...[and] a genuine interest in global justice *and* mystical light<sup>12</sup>.

The kinds of young people Tyson describes here seem to align with Kohlberg's fifth and mature stage of 'principled' moral reasoning. The irony, according to Tyson, is that these

cultural non-conformists tend to find the Evangelical church too embedded in the norms of our dominant consumer culture to readily minister to their desire for a radically different quality of life<sup>13</sup>.

This suggests that 'ministry' to a large section of the contemporary Christian community actually restricts rather than enhances the higher levels of moral development.

In an article highlighting similar dynamics to Tyson's but showing a more positive development beyond irony, Rob Moll sketches an outline of a 'new monastic' phenomena in the United States<sup>14</sup>. He profiles a group of young people who, like those described in Tyson's study, demonstrate a strong orientation to challenge the base materialism of contemporary American culture and the perceived insipid response of the mainstream church. However, rather than avoiding the mainstream church, these 'new monastics' have emerged from it. This group of young adult, Evangelical Christians draws on the historical resources of the broader Christian family—the monastic tradition—to find ways of being Christian that move beyond the social and moral expressions of the embedded mainstream church. Essentially, the new monastic movement is a fledgling coalition of groups who create communities of mission and contemplative prayer amongst America's urban poor. One of the new monastics, whose story is profiled by Moll, shows a clear link between his participation in a large, mainstream Evangelical congregation and his current expression of radical, urban mission:

Willow Creek [a large Chicago-based evangelical congregation] taught me that 90 percent discipleship is 10 percent short of full devotion. I took them at their word and set out to work through giving all<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> 'The new monasticism', *Christianity Today* (September, 2005): 39-46.

<sup>15</sup> Chris Haw, leader of 'The Camden House' in ibid, 44.

These new monastics see the local church as a nurturer of earlier but necessary<sup>16</sup> stages of moral reasoning and ethical behaviour as well as providing an indirect link to the resources of the historical church that have pointed these young people towards higher stage thinking and behaviour.

In light of Kohlberg's developmental theory, this simple comparison of two emergent youth spirituality stories suggests that an alternative source of authority on issues of morality and human development is not necessarily a bad thing for either the culture or the church. Rather, a theory such as Kohlberg's may become a useful conversation partner in the mission of the church to support a greater awareness of its own ethical blind spots and possibilities, and a greater sensitivity to the moral developmental needs and processes of the individuals and society it seeks to serve. Rahner's spirituality of silence offers a position of theological safety and security from which to engage these potential dialogue partners.

This dialogue would begin by recognising that the spiritual discipline of deep listening to the intellectual culture is part of listening to the active presence of God in and through all things. The recognition of a silent, sacramental process at work in the development of human moral reasoning would be comforting. There would be no need to react defensively to a potential 'secular' rival but simply to evaluate the usefulness of moral development theory on the basis of its silent Christological merits.

To what extent does Rahner's theory help individuals live in tune with the eternal rhythms of the life of Christ? A Rahnerian approach recognises the active mystery of God in the midst of what seems on face value to be a secular theory. The task becomes discerning the activity of God in his movements towards human beings, noticing the silent activity of the Spirit between the spoken discourses of empirical, developmental psychology and what they reveal about the human existential.

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<sup>16</sup> According to Kohlberg's theory, and the principle in general of broader developmental theory, people build layers of cognitive complexity *through* the stages rather than skipping over stages.

### *Faith development theory*

Faith development theory had its genesis in James Fowler's teaching practice in Harvard divinity school and its epistemology in the integration of perspectives on human development from both theological and social scientific sources<sup>17</sup>. In dialogue with Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory and Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Fowler constructed a stage-theory of faith development based on the analysis of the 'faith development interviews'<sup>18</sup> of 359 individuals. Whilst maintaining a profound respect for the influence and content of religions in terms of individual faith development, Fowler's theory argues for a structural view of faith development that is generic rather than limited only to a specific religious worldview.

We are asking you to think of faith in a more inclusive sense than Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, or Judaic faith. Faith, in the sense used here, even extends beyond religious faith. Understood in this more inclusive sense, faith may be characterized as an integral, centering process, underlying the formation of beliefs, values and meanings that:

1. Give coherence and direction to persons' lives;
2. Link them in shared loyalties and trusts with others;
3. Ground their personal stances and communal loyalties in a sense of relatedness to a larger frame of reference; and
4. Enable them to face and deal with the challenges of human life and death, relying on that which has the quality of ultimacy in their lives<sup>19</sup>.

Fowler's theory of faith development is expressed in four stages: early development<sup>20</sup> (corresponding roughly to birth through adolescence), a stage most people experience; and three stages of later development that may or may not be achieved by individuals during their adult years. These later stages are characterised by the capacity of individuals to reflect objectively on previously held faith assumptions from increasingly broader perspectives, and to enlarge one's concern for and engagement with 'people who count'<sup>21</sup>. A person in the later stages of faith development<sup>22</sup> characteristically holds

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<sup>17</sup> J. Fowler & M. Dell, 'Stages of faith from infancy through adolescence: reflections on three decades of faith development theory', in *The handbook of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence*, Roehkepartain, E.C. et al. eds. (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 34-45.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>20</sup> Primal faith (infancy to age 2); Intuitive-projective faith (Toddlerhood and early childhood); Mythic-literal faith (middle childhood and beyond); Synthetic-conventional faith (Adolescence and beyond), *ibid*, 36-39.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 40-41.

beliefs that have been tried and tested, increasingly respects the truths inherent in a variety of faith perspectives, and cares passionately for the wellbeing of the whole of creation rather than that of a particular familial, cultural and/or religious group. According to Fowler, whilst individuals reaching this stage may have been significantly helped into the later faith stages by a particular faith community, they are not found exclusively within any particular religion.

Fowler advocates the primary value of his stage theory as

helping to match the competencies of each stage—and the operations of mind and emotion that characterize them—with ways of teaching and with symbols, practices and contents of faith at different levels of reflective inquiry and complexity. Educators of this mind-set find faith development theory helpful; for preparing persons to teach at different age and stage levels, and to match their methods and communicative practices with the groups' probable stage or range of stages<sup>23</sup>.

Fowler also notes that the critical dividing issue in discussions about faith development theory is between those who can accept faith development as a universal element of human growth and those who define faith only within the specific paradigms of a particular religion<sup>24</sup>.

It is worth stating at this point that faith development theory, whilst advocating for a generic and increasingly inclusive view of faith, has emerged from within the Christian tradition. Fowler lists Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich as conceptual theological influences and—most interestingly for this study—the influence of Jesuit students in their tertianship year, and the personal experience of a guided Ignatian retreat as important for his spiritual development<sup>25</sup>. Nevertheless, the emergence and broad acceptance of faith development theory represents another potential challenge to the hegemony of the role of the Christian community as chaplain and spiritual guide to society at large.

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<sup>22</sup> Individuative-reflective faith; Conjunctive faith; Universalizing faith, *ibid*, 41-42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

In light of this very real challenge what does the perspective of Rahner's spirituality of silence have to offer? Perhaps it is helpful to notice that Rahner himself clearly reflects all that can be said of a person who has worked through the critical and complex latter stages of faith development theory. Rahner's is most definitely an examined faith that has led him to the most generous and inclusive of views regarding the post-resurrection spiritual state of the entire human family. Rahner is also able to hold in tension his universal vision of a graced world with the absolute conviction of the divinity of Christ and the unique saving role he has and continues to fulfill through the sacramental life of the church. Rahner models the journey through the faith development stages, demonstrating a faith that rests in a God-confidence deeper than words. Such a faith transcends the need for cultural hegemonic doctrinal affirmation whilst maintaining a vibrant witness to the spiritual essence of the Christianity from which it draws its life.

Is it possible that an insistence on faith as valid only within a particular systematic doctrinal view of Christ is less a statement of orthodoxy and more a characteristic of either the mythic-literal faith stage (middle childhood) or the synthetic-conventional stage (adolescence)? In the former stage, the world is perceived in the black and white terms of the narrative of fixed understandings of 'good' and 'bad', and the principle of cosmic justice in relation to both. In the latter stage, the beliefs of individuals are strongly influenced by the significant others in their social group and it is very important to each individual that everyone in the group believes exactly the same things. Does a spirituality of silence point toward a better way? Can the contemporary church accept the challenge of living from the truth of its existential reality in Christ even when the culture no longer accepts or affirms uncritically this reality as a universal given? Can individuals accept a spiritual direction that invites them to ground their faith in the deeply personal mystery of the 'I AM', even in the face of contradictions to their conceptualisations of cosmic justice and their anticipated faith outcomes? Of course the church will always be made up of diverse people who experience faith across the stage development process. Is it possible to demonstrate that Rahner's spirituality of silence represents a model of what higher faith stage development within a Christian framework may look like, and that this model



of mature theological reflection could guide the ongoing dialogue in ministry within a spiritually pluralised culture?

*SQ: spiritual intelligence*

At the turn of the millennium, Oxford-based academics, Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall published a book that introduced the idea of spiritual intelligence as a universal human capacity<sup>26</sup>. The authors propose that SQ relates to a tertiary neurological process that centralises a meaning-based process of decision-making, creating dialogue between the Freudian Id and Ego and the corresponding notions of IQ (intellectual quotient based on serial neural wiring) and EQ<sup>27</sup> (emotional quotient based on associative neural wiring):

SQ (based on the brain's third neural system, the synchronous neural oscillations that unify data across the whole brain) offers a viable tertiary process...[that] unifies, integrates and has the potential to transform material arising from the other two processes. It facilitates a dialogue between reason and emotion, between mind and body. It provides a fulcrum for growth and transformation. It provides the self with an active, unifying, meaning-giving centre<sup>28</sup>.

Zohar and Marshall argue that human beings are essentially spiritual creatures because of their capacity to question the meaning of their existence and to actively seek reasons for the how and why of living. The authors offer a variety of special functions and capacities which they attribute to SQ.

SQ gives us our ability to discriminate. It gives us our moral sense, an ability to temper rigid rules with understanding and compassion and an equal ability to see where compassion and understanding have their limits. We use SQ to wrestle with questions of good and evil and to envision unrealized possibilities—to dream, to aspire, to raise ourselves out of the mud...Spiritual intelligence is the soul's intelligence. It is the intelligence with which we heal ourselves and with which we make ourselves whole...We use SQ to be creative. We call upon it when we need to be flexible, visionary or creatively spontaneous...We use SQ to deal with existential problems...where we feel stuck...SQ makes us aware that we have existential problems, and it enables us to solve them—or at least to find peace about them. It gives us a 'deep' sense of what life's struggles are about. SQ is our compass 'at the edge'<sup>29</sup>.

The authors assert that their book is important for three reasons:

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<sup>26</sup> *SQ—spiritual intelligence, the ultimate intelligence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Theorised and popularised by Daniel Goleman, *Emotional intelligence* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> *SQ*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 5, 9 & 13.

- a) people in Western cultures are increasingly speaking of the need for something more than a material existence (a quest for meaning)<sup>30</sup>;
- b) neurological research (including the ‘God spot’ research by Ramachandran at the University of California) has recently developed to the point where an empirical case for SQ can be reasonably proposed<sup>31</sup>;
- c) people can learn to develop SQ and in fact must develop SQ for the benefit of society and culture<sup>32</sup>.

As with moral and faith development theories, SQ is described as a universal capacity of human functioning and growth potential and not as the product of any particular religion or ideology. According to the authors, SQ may be used ‘to become more spiritually intelligent about religion’, and indeed the following description of what this means could well apply to Rahner’s life work.

SQ takes us to the heart of things, to the unity behind difference, to the potential beyond any actual expression...A person with high SQ might practice...religion, but without the narrowness, exclusiveness, bigotry or prejudice<sup>33</sup>.

The authors note that ‘a person high in SQ could have very spiritual qualities without being religious at all<sup>34</sup>. It is interesting to note however that the SQ text is filled with references to both religious texts and mystical experiences, including many from the Christian tradition; and also that Zohar completed her graduate studies in psychology and theology at Harvard University (the birthplace of faith development theory). In this sense, the idea of SQ reads as somewhat friendly to the essential spirit of the Christian tradition alongside others, but squarely challenges the cultural hegemonic right of the Christian community to define human spirituality in purely doctrinal terms.

Reflecting on SQ from a Rahnerian perspective of spirituality of silence gives rise to the following considerations. It seems that what Zohar and Marshall recognise in their psycho–social/neurological construct of SQ has many similarities to what Rahner

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 11-12 & 39-41.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 16-17 & 225-282.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

recognised in his Christological assessment of the ‘anonymous’ faith of some atheists and practitioners of religions other than Christian. Both are observing closely the essence of what makes human beings truly human—Rahner particularly from his own deep mystical experience and the teachings of the church; Zohar and Marshall from a neurological interpretation of the human quest for meaning, in dialogue with religious text and mystical experience. However, Rahner reflects theologically on the universal experience of spirit, in dialogue with his understanding of human psychology; Zohar and Marshall reflect psychologically in dialogue with their understanding of theology and mysticism.

It would be interesting to see what Rahner would make of the tertiary process proposed in SQ, particularly given his implied reference to the Freudian unconscious as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit<sup>35</sup>. There is little doubt that Rahner would have listened deeply to the emerging neurological research and perceived cultural existential angst, proposed in SQ, whilst continuing to interpret its essential meaning in light of the silent mysticism of God in all things.

*Re-enchantment: perceptions of a spirituality revolution*

In two very thought-provoking texts, *Re-enchantment* (2000) and *The spirituality revolution* (2003)<sup>36</sup>, La Trobe University academic, David Tacey, outlines his personal interpretation of a new movement of ‘spirit’ in a culture—primarily Australian and also more broadly Western—wary and disillusioned by the failure of the secular political ideal. Tacey argues that Western culture has ‘outgrown the ideals and values of the early scientific era which viewed the individual as a sort of efficient machine’<sup>37</sup>. He further describes the re-emergence of individual and cultural interest in spirituality as a corporate re-awakening: ‘our secular society realizing that it has been running on empty, and has to restore itself at a deep, primal source, a source which is beyond humanity and yet paradoxically at the very core of our experience’<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> See *Happiness through prayer* (Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1958), 26-27.

<sup>36</sup> Both texts published by Harper Collins in Sydney.

<sup>37</sup> *Spirituality revolution*, 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Tacey bases his assessment of a renewal movement in Western culture—a return to ‘spirit’—primarily on his ongoing conversations and informal surveys with his students and on published statistics that indicate an increased interest in a ‘spirituality of meaning’ beyond the purely material and rational<sup>39</sup>. The author also notes the emergence of New Age spirituality: increased prevalence within popular culture of interest in ancient mystical practices; mystical elements and emphasis in psychology (particularly in the United States); influence of the French postmodern philosophers who, although inaugurating ‘an elite [intellectual] enterprise that few could understand’, have, from a spiritual perspective, ‘loosened the structures of rationality and provided openings for the return of mystery and spirit’<sup>40</sup>.

Tacey identifies problems and challenges in this re-emergence of spirituality. On the one hand, he sees secular governments as uninterested in engaging with the spiritual life of its citizenship and in fact, largely ignorant of the existence of a renewed spiritual yearning for meaning and mystery. Secular governments are more than happy to relegate the duty of engagement with the spiritual instincts of the culture to the established religions. The problem with this approach is that, for the most part, established religions fail to appreciate the validity of the renewed spiritual impulse, which is mainly expressed and explored in a non-creedal fashion, and usually reflects little interest in attending formal worship services. This extended statement clearly captures his concerns.

The ruling tradition in any era does not grasp the fact that if God is alive and active in the world, then God will be creative in the world, beckoning us to new transformations. The old tradition may in some ways prefer God to be ‘dead’, because then the sacred body of God can be laid out, dissected by the systematic theologians and pedants, and pinned down in precise and scientific ways. But if God is alive, our experience of the sacred is going to be uncertain, creative, imprecise and full of surprise and astonishment. If God is alive, God will always be revealed as mysterious, unknowable and unable to be contained and captured<sup>41</sup>.

The problems of secular apathy and the marginalisation of spirituality on the one hand—expressed by educational authorities, large corporations, media, governments—and the

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<sup>39</sup> See Ibid, 14-17.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 21.

inability or unwillingness of the established religions to recognise the validity of the new expressions of spiritual impulse on the other, put the culture at risk.

Tacey is particularly concerned that, without proper guidance and support, the spiritual impulse will express itself destructively when it resurfaces after long decades of repression under the ascendancy of scientific rationalism and positive secular liberalism.

Fascism, and other kinds of fanatical behaviour, including religious fundamentalism, racism and cults, are to be expected if spiritual energy is not transformed by culture, or guided into humane forms by tradition. If not recognized by culture, it will be taken by dangerous 'subcultures', who will exploit the spiritual vitality for power, corruption and domination<sup>42</sup>.

Essentially, Tacey is calling for the culture as a whole to recognise the re-emergent spiritual impulse, to care about its meaning, to make a place for it at the centre, and to rediscover a new public language to express the relationship to the sacred. He is also calling the Christian community (of which he himself is a member) and other faith communities to get on board, sharing the resources of their respective traditions and expertise rather than judging a spirituality that does not fit their pre-determined theological constructs from a distance.

More recently, Tacey's view of a 'spirituality revolution' has been criticised by the research team who conducted the 'spirituality of generation Y' project (2003–07)<sup>43</sup> as being overly optimistic about young people's interest in spirituality. However, comparing the findings of the research<sup>44</sup> and the questionnaire designs<sup>45</sup> with Tacey's own critique of general religious survey questioning techniques<sup>46</sup> suggests the issue is more one of approach and interpretation than of actual differences in substance. The Gen Y researchers tend to conclude that the spiritual impulse is over-rated by Tacey because their own findings show that very few Australian young people are actually involved in

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>43</sup> See P. Hughes, *Putting life together—findings from Australian youth spirituality Research* (Fairfield, Vic: Fairfield Press, 2007) and M. Mason, A. Singleton & R. Webber, *The spirit of generation Y—young people's spirituality in a changing Australia*, (Melbourne : John Garratt Publishing, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> See <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/sppub/sppub.htm> for a summary of the key findings (link valid at time of writing, 6.01.09).

<sup>45</sup> See list of tables in Mason et al.

<sup>46</sup> See *Spirituality revolution*, 13-14.

any particular New Age or Eastern spirituality practice on a regular basis. In light of Tacey's broader cultural commentary, this seems a fairly limited basis upon which to dismiss his conclusions and perhaps represents a misunderstanding of his terms of reference.

Despite differing opinions regarding the validity of Tacey's level of 'optimism' about a 'spirituality revolution', his perceptions are articulate and reflect a close and careful cultural engagement and an academic reflection on important sources that matter. At the very least his is another intelligent voice joining the growing chorus of those who identify a spirituality broader than creedal, and ecclesial constructs and in need of validation and nurture. Tacey admits his personal admiration for Rahner and for his idea that spiritual formation is a process that emerges from within rather than something imposed from without<sup>47</sup>. Certainly Rahner models respectful silence in the face of the shifting and changing public understandings and expressions of spirituality. Rahner's willingness to 'kneel with the mind before the holy mystery'<sup>48</sup> may be particularly important for the Christian community during this time of cultural transition. The landscape is shifting in terms of public language and practice regarding spirituality and issues of meaning—and no one knows the final shape of things to come. Rahner's spirituality invites individuals to rest in the safe spiritual place of unknowing in which they find themselves despite never fully grasping the situation—but nevertheless knowing that they are held safely within it. From this place of rest and security, individuals find the grace to participate freely and lovingly in the reconstruction of spiritual form and meaning. Living in the time between times, not being able to see the whole future picture, but sensing they can only move forward and not back, individuals make their small contributions to a larger tapestry: the work of the Spirit in the re-enchantment of their culture, involving also the inevitable revision and renewal of Christian thinking and practice.

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<sup>47</sup> See *David Tacey: falling in love with the sacred other*, May 2003. Retrieved June 7, 2004, from <http://www.media.anglican.com/au/tma/2003/05/tacey.html>, the content of which was discussed towards the end of the first chapter of this thesis.

<sup>48</sup> See the fourth note in this chapter for original reference.

*Kanyini—an Australian Aboriginal spiritual voice and sacramental way*

Premiering at the Sydney film festival in June 2006, *Kanyini* is described as a

film of great beauty and wisdom, offering an accessible account of what has happened to Indigenous Australians since the arrival of the white man. The story is told without bitterness and invites all Australians to work together to understand, acknowledge and redress the wrongs of the past so that we all learn from each other in developing respect and understanding for our different cultures<sup>49</sup>.

The film combines stunning cinematography, weaving together beautiful images of past and present Uluru<sup>50</sup> landscapes and Australian Aboriginal social scenes, with a commanding and engaging narrative from Bob Randall, a member of the Yankunytjatjara people, and one of the traditional owners of Uluru. Two things in particular are striking about Bob Randall's narrative in this beautiful film:

- a) he relates the tragic drama of the 'before' and 'after' story of his people without bitterness yet with a full and confronting honesty and, at times, biting irony;
- b) he provides a spiritual analysis of the plight of his people which is expressed through his unfolding explanation of the meaning of 'Kanyini'.

The term 'Kanyini' is from the Pitjantjatjara<sup>51</sup> language group and means 'connection'. Bob Randall describes the sense of Kanyini in which his people lived before European occupation:

1. We lived in connection to the *land*—everything in creation is part of my family, the earth is our mother, we live with the environment in a sustainable way;
2. we lived in connection to our *family*—the people to whom we most belong;
3. we lived in connection to our *beliefs*—our philosophy of living, our world view, our values were reflected in everything we said and did;
4. we lived in connection to our *Spirituality*—our way of living and expressing the sense of the sacred, the inner life, our commitment and responsibility to creation, to each other<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> M. O'Hara, *Kanyini – a study guide* (Australian Teachers of Media Inc., 2006). Retrieved November 20, 2008, [www.kanyini.com](http://www.kanyini.com)

<sup>50</sup> The world's largest sandstone monolith, located in the central Australian desert, referred to for many years by white Australians as 'Ayers Rock'.

<sup>51</sup> An aboriginal tribal group living across the broad desert area of Kata-Tjuta, *ibid*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Adapted from the narrative of *Kanyini*, directed by Melanie Hogan (Hopscotch Entertainment, 2006).

Randall describes the way of life of his people in their original state as something that sounds and looks (through very early film footage) like life in the garden of Eden. His 'before' narrative asserts that his people's

Kanyini made us feel confident because we felt connected to the big things and lived in a way that was both compassionate and sustainable...we were healthy and happy. We lived in the moment, not anxious for tomorrow. We lived freely and we lived with a sense of the sacred in our relationship to each other and all of creation<sup>53</sup>.

Randall describes the process of disconnection that occurred following the arrival of the Europeans. First, the European occupiers disrupted connection to land by destroying food sources, erecting fences, introducing cattle, and shooting and imprisoning the indigenous population for hunting the introduced species. Secondly, the European occupiers went about imposing a worldview and belief system that was contradictory to the wisdom of Kanyini, which was ridiculed and disregarded as 'uncivilised'. Thirdly, the Europeans imposed a new system of Christian spirituality that Australian Aboriginal people noticed was disconnected entirely from the way the Europeans acted and lived. 'You told me about Jesus whose teaching about loving your neighbor sounded just like what we used to have *before* you came!'<sup>54</sup>. Finally, the Europeans disrupted the essential connection to family through the policy of removing Australian Aboriginal children from their family of origin to be re-enculturated in remote mission stations and/or with European families.

Randall describes the state of his people following the disconnection and disruption to their Kanyini.

After European occupation we began to 'shrink', we got smaller; we diminished because our connection to the things that made us 'big' was disrupted and suppressed. All of my connections are now cut. My Kanyini is gone and I am like a corpse, adrift and floating in space. Now you throw me a lifeline, you call it 'welfare' and you think that it's good. But it's not nearly as good as what I already had before you came<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Adapted from *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



The film *Kanyini* demonstrates the contrasting desolate scenes of Australian Aboriginal communities ravaged by the effects of hopelessness, petrol-sniffing and alcohol abuse. Paradise is lost; Eden is forever disrupted.

Randall draws his narrative to a close by suggesting that it's time for the two cultures to learn from each other in a mutuality of giving and receiving. He notes the reality that there is no going back for his people. They need specific help from the Europeans to learn the ways in which the new system works so that they can begin to make it work for their benefit. He also suggests that there is so much that Europeans could learn from his people about living closely to the things that really matter and about sustainable lifestyles. One of the statements on the back cover of the DVD version of the film provides the most fitting footnote summary of the essential meaning of this story: a 'tale of Indigenous wisdom clashing against materialist notions of progress. *Kanyini* is not only a story of one man and his people but of the human race'<sup>56</sup>.

The *Kanyini* study guide produced by the Australian Teachers of Media seems to have completely missed this final point. The weight of the focus of the study questions seems to be on understanding the historical context and thinking about the plight of the Australian Aboriginal people, rather than focusing on what the mainstream culture may learn from the story in terms of its own beliefs and practices. This seems typical of the inability, described by Tacey, of the secular educational authorities to lead the culture in exploring and expressing spiritual meanings of existence. The study guide, for example, asks students to discuss how the loss of the four pillars of belief system, spirituality, land and family 'has resulted in the situation many Indigenous Australians are in today'<sup>57</sup>.

The focus of this question raises concerns about the situation of the young mainstream Australian population today: research suggests that between 20% and 30% percent are

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> *Kanyini study guide*, 7.

suffering significant psychological stress at any one time<sup>58</sup>. With so much literature on risk and resilience and positive youth development relating to the presence or absence of meaningful relational connections<sup>59</sup>, isn't there an urgency to learn from a spirituality that defines itself through connectedness? Shouldn't students from the majority population be encouraged to reflect on the meaning of the four pillars for their own lives and culture? The elephant in the room is the economic machine that continues to dominate and drive notions of progress and productivity in Western cultures—a great, looming, rarely named god of destruction, a sacred holy cow whose authority can never be seriously and directly challenged by the mainstream systems that are embedded in its largesse.

The main point of *Kanyini*, however, in the context of this thesis is that yet again it confronts Western Christianity with a message of a spirituality that, despite emerging from outside of the recognised Christian community, resonates with meanings suggestive of an 'anonymous' Christian faith. The following material is an excerpt from a keynote address given by me to a conference of chaplains in South Australian government schools<sup>60</sup>. It offers a theological reflection on the meaning of the film *Kanyini* and is significantly influenced by Karl Rahner's sacramental theology and the Ignatian idea of God in all things.

### The sacramental way

There is a way of walking through this life and this world that tramples on the creation, that rides roughshod over human dignity, and exploits the resources of the many to enlarge the profits of the few. There is a way of walking through this life that is driven by status anxiety that pits each person in competition with the other and views people and natural resources as a means towards a productivity and status goal. There is a way of walking through this life that is prayerless,

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<sup>58</sup> See Richard Eckersley, 'Never better – or getting worse? The health and wellbeing of young Australians' (Australia 21, 2008). Retrieved, November 16, 2008, from <http://www.australia21.org.au/pdf/Youth%20Health%20Text%202008.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> See for example: L Martin, *The invisible table* (South Melbourne: Thomson/Dunmore Press, 2002); A. Fuller, *From surviving to thriving – promoting mental health in young people* (Camberwell, Vic: ACER, 1998); P. Benson, 'Developmental assets and asset-building community: conceptual and empirical foundations', in Lerner, R. & Benson, P. eds., *Developmental assets and asset-building communities* (New York: Kluwer Academic, 2003), 19-43.

<sup>60</sup> Annual state chaplains conference hosted and facilitated by the Schools Ministry Group of South Australia, Hahndorf Resort, Hahndorf, SA, May 2008.

restless and always in a hurry to get to the next place, and never being at any one time in this place and this moment. There is a way of walking through this life that prizes accomplishment over beauty, winning over being, accumulation over sharing, and being seen to be always right over humility and reciprocal learning.

And then there is the sacramental way.

Yesterday you were exposed to an Australian aboriginal vision of a sacramental way of living. In the film *Kanyini*, Bob Randall speaks to us of a way of walking through the land and a way of being in creation and human community that ‘lives in the moment’, that ‘recognises the sacred in all things,’ ‘that shapes action within a vision of beauty rather than productivity and accumulation’. Bob Randall speaks to us of the intrinsic relationship between spirituality and health and wellbeing. When people are connected to a belief system, a spirituality, a land and a family, they are confident; they are strong, and they live in a way that is beautiful.

I experienced the message of *Kanyini* as a proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Whenever the Kingdom is proclaimed we are made sad because the Kingdom strips away the social and cultural masks of our corporate sins and our individual participation in systems that destroy and kill. The proclamation of the Kingdom also brings us hope because it brings us back to our senses and restores our vision of what makes us truly human. Remorse and confession are necessary responses that lead us beyond sadness and into the joy of repentance that has to do with the construction of a new way of being.

There is so much in our Christian tradition that speaks to us of a sacramental way:

- our theology of Incarnation proclaims to us that ‘God so loved the world that he came for an extended visit’—the ‘Word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us’ (John 1:14a);
- the gospel parables show us that Jesus was involved in a ministry of helping people to see that the kingdom of God is near—its images, its nuances, its values, its mysticism is reflected in the stuff of everyday life; if you want a parable that vividly connects the ideas of the Kingdom of God with the very concrete human realities of health and wellbeing, go no further than Luke’s story of the ‘good Samaritan’;
- our theology of creation shows us a vision of the Spirit of God sustaining and recreating each and every element of our natural world. The same theology also reveals the ultimate dignity and beauty of all humanity in the *Imago Dei*—the image of God.

My view is that it is not only Aboriginal Australians who are experiencing a sense of disconnect from their belief system, spirituality, land, and place. The Spirituality of Generation Y research project tells us that, whilst most young people experience positive connections to family and friends, their sense of connection to the whole village and to a spiritual way of being is far more fragile and unconstructed [disconstructed?]. We've lost our connection to our culture's historic belief system; this may be in part due to the fact that the purveyors of the belief system lost connection to the spirituality that makes a faith alive. Spirituality in our culture, if valued and constructed at all, is fragmented and compartmentalised. People pick and choose fragments of belief systems and spiritual practices—and restrict a spiritual way of being to certain activities and times and places rather than as way of being.

We desperately need to rediscover—both inside and outside the church—a sacramental way. We need to rediscover a mysticism of everyday life—a way of being in this world that centres our fragments and reconstructs them as a whole, enabling us to live together in ways that are more fully and truly human. It is my view that Jesus' idea of the Kingdom of God and the human ideas about health and wellbeing are actually two sides of the one whole, each pointing ultimately towards the other. It is my view that the extent to which we participate in a sacramental way of living is the extent to which we are able to operate as spiritual directors to our culture.

May God bless as you continue to enter his silence, as you practice the disciplines of experiencing each moment as a possibility of mystical encounter, and as you find the language and the ways to help others also to recognise that the Kingdom of God is near.

This theological reflection offers an example of how Rahner's spirituality of silence is helpful as a way of approaching and interpreting emergent spirituality in dialogue with Christian tradition in order to remain faithful to the Christian element and be respectful of the alternative voice. As a consequence, the potential threat of a rival perspective becomes a friend and partner in dialogue with the shared goal of offering spiritual direction to the culture.

*Reflections on spirituality of silence in conversation with the cultural reconceptualising of spirituality*

The excursus above, briefly exploring some of the voices in contemporary culture that are speaking with authority on issues of morality, faith, and spirituality, demonstrates that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Christian community is no longer

considered the sole and ultimate authority on these aspects of human existence and development. The Christian community continues to struggle with this reality and to respond in a variety of ways. Every individual who claims the name 'Christian' and each community of faith to which individual Christians belong must inevitably face this struggle: to relocate the basis of their understanding of what it means to be spiritual guides to their cultures. Some Christians choose the fundamentalist way that tends to dismiss spiritual knowledge and expression that does not operate within their inherited understanding of the biblical and ecclesial frameworks in which *they* do faith. Some Christians choose to express their spiritual influence primarily through acts of service and social justice, choosing not to dialogue with emergent spiritualities or wrestle with related theologies, or to offer spiritual direction leading to personal formation in the divine. Other Christians manage to combine private fundamentalism *and* a public ministry of service. It is my conviction that Karl Rahner's spirituality of silence points Christians to an alternative way.

In light of Rahner's spirituality of silence, an exploration of alternative spiritual voices reveals significant themes. Firstly, it is necessary for those who aspire to engage in spiritual dialogue to do so from a place of safety in God. This implies entering deeply into the actual living silence and discovering themselves secure in the presence of the person of God rather than seeking security in holding more tightly onto certain theological conceptualisations. Secondly, Christians need to learn how to live and bear with the mystery of God's unfolding life in human time and culture, and in their personal existence. Individuals cannot conceive the divine plan and how it works—humans must live from the centre of an existential faith that worships wordlessly and is characterised by the connection of love rather than of always needing to know what is happening and going to happen. Thirdly, individual Christians can learn to recognise the movements of the holy mystery in the graced world of God's activity in and through—as well as beyond and despite the church. Only then can individuals listen freely and deeply to the experiences and traditions of others whilst maintaining a confident yet respectful witness to their personal faith and resonant traditions. Every Christian's deep experience of silence, nurtured by the life of Christ and their sacramental experience of scripture and

Christian community, allows them to speak confidently and graciously of the things they have seen and heard.

### **Spirituality of silence and recent findings regarding the spirituality of Australian young people**

Researchers from Australian Catholic University (ACU), Monash University (MU), and the Christian Research Association (CRA) conducted a national study of the spirituality of Australian young people in their teens and early twenties: the ‘Spirit of Generation Y project’ (2003–07). The project surveyed nationally representative samples of ‘Generation Y’ (born 1981–95), ‘Generation X’ (born 1966–80), and the ‘Baby-Boomers’ (born 1946–65), and focused on Generation Y’s worldviews and values; their sense of meaning and purpose in life; the ways in which they find peace and happiness; their involvement in traditional religions and alternative spiritualities; how they relate to the society around them; and the influences which shape their outlook and lifestyle. Extended face-to-face interviews supplemented the survey information.

Although focusing on similar themes and issues, two publications presenting overviews of the findings and interpretations<sup>61</sup> reflect differences in the approach to the data and data analysis. Mason et al. have taken the approach of defining a spirituality category within which to place the orientation of what they perceive as the ‘three main strands’ of Australian young people’s spiritualities. Hughes prefers to think about what young people are saying about ‘how they are putting life together’, and to then use a relational grid to evaluate the extent to which something like spirituality may be recognised in relation to various life domains. Findings from both publications are relevant to the ideas of Karl Rahner explored in this thesis.

The research team from ACU and MU (Mason et al.) used predetermined categorising descriptors in their publication.

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<sup>61</sup> See P. Hughes, *Putting life together—findings from Australian youth spirituality Research* (Fairfield, Vic: Fairfield Press, 2007); M. Mason, A. Singleton & R. Webber, *The spirit of generation Y – young people’s spirituality in a changing Australia*, (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2007) and <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/sppub/sppub.htm> for a summary of the key findings (link valid at time of writing, 6.01.09).

We define spirituality as a *conscious way of life based on a transcendent referent* ... 'Way of life', firstly means a worldview and ethos. A worldview is a way of understanding 'my' world and my place in that world, and provides a frame of reference within which I can assign meaning to my experiences... 'Transcendent referent' means here a reality which is beyond the individual, either something supernatural/religious/otherworldly, or an ethical ideal towards which a person strives to shape their conduct<sup>62</sup>.

Using a grid based on their definition of spirituality, Mason et al. identify three recognisable 'spiritualities' within the Australian youth demographic:

- 'traditional spirituality' (46% Christian, 6% 'other');
- 'New Age spirituality' (17%);
- 'secular spirituality' (28%)<sup>63</sup>.

Salient findings identified by Mason et al. include the identification within the whole demographic of a conceptual orientation that the researchers refer to as 'spiritualities', but that only 41% of the whole actually engages practically with their 'beliefs'. For example, though 31% of the demographic state they have a 'definite' belief in reincarnation, they have no connection to the religions (such as Hinduism and Buddhism) holding this belief. The researchers conclude that participation in religious practices and spirituality are of relatively low importance to the general youth population in Australia, and that they tend to cherry-pick their beliefs from a variety of sources in a 'consumerist fashion'. The significant gap between conceptual orientation and actual practice—particularly with regard to the 'New Age' spiritualities—led researchers to downplay views of an emergent spirituality revolution<sup>64</sup> (such as those expressed by Tacey).

Researchers found that the majority of generation Y agree that 'morals are relative and that there are no definite rights and wrongs for everybody'. Most young people associated

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<sup>62</sup> *The spirit of Generation Y*, 39 & 40.

<sup>63</sup> The remaining 3% are those young people who say that they believe in God but do not identify in *any* way with a recognisable faith tradition; see the summary of ACU and MU findings at <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/sppub/sppub.htm>

<sup>64</sup> See *ibid* and also the interview with the research team broadcast on SBS as part of the 'Y God' documentary ('My Generation' series) which may be viewed at: <http://programs.sbs.com.au/mygeneration/#/ygod/watch>, aired originally, July 16, 2008.

with a religious denomination agree that it is ‘okay to pick and choose your religious beliefs’. Only 13% of the entire demographic believe that only one religion is true<sup>65</sup>.

The researchers did however find a resilient core of Christian young people, committed and engaged in both private and corporate acts of worship and faith. They particularly note the ‘signs of strength and continued growth in conservative Protestant denominations’, and that ‘each tradition within Christianity has its nucleus of Committed and Regular members’. They identify the fact that ‘[y]outhful spirituality in its traditional forms derives its support principally from families who share it, and it seems rarely to survive without support from this source’<sup>66</sup>. Also notable are the findings that Gen Y’s from conservative Protestant denominations manifest much higher levels of religious belief and practice than Catholics or Anglicans, and also higher levels than their parents’ generation within the same denominations. Young people with a Christian upbringing showed a greater aptitude for social justice and community service—particularly those actively involved in conservative Protestant congregations<sup>67</sup>.

The researchers note that despite enduring signs of life and hope, there is a cultural drift away from Christianity.

In between [the polarities of those young people who are very involved in traditional spirituality and those with little or no interest in spirituality and religion] are a large proportion of young people moving between alternatives, especially during their teenage years. Most of this movement appears to be away from traditional spirituality, either towards eclectic blends of mainstream and New Age spiritualities, or more frequently in the direction of secular indifference<sup>68</sup>.

It would seem that despite pockets of spiritual resilience within the Christian community, enabling some children of Christian families to continue on in the faith, the youth culture at large are not experiencing spiritual direction of any real substance or meaning. This kind of conclusion tends to reinforce Tacey’s perception that the spiritual apathy of the secular powers, together with the reluctance of recognised religions to engage in genuine

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<sup>65</sup> See summary of ACU and MU findings <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/sppub/sppub.htm>

<sup>66</sup> *The spirit of generation Y*, 173-174.

<sup>67</sup> See summary of ACU and MU findings <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/sppub/sppub.htm>

<sup>68</sup> *The spirit of generation Y*, 174.



supportive conversation with expressions of spirituality outside of creedal constructs, leaves the majority population without clear direction in terms of authentic spiritual formation.

Philip Hughes' publication<sup>69</sup> reflects his particular pastoral concern and perspective as an ordained Uniting church minister. Hughes thinks about Australian youth spiritualities in a holistic, relational sense. He is reluctant to define all Australian young people as identifying with a particular spirituality and more interested in hearing from them the ways in which they put their lives together. To analyse the stories of young people, Hughes uses a scale to identify a holistic sense of spirituality that is less ideologically fixed.

Table 3<sup>70</sup> (see page following) shows Hughes' basic analytical tool which he explains<sup>71</sup> is influenced significantly by the work of Australian educator, John Fischer<sup>72</sup>, Soren Kierkegaard's 'Stages on Life's Way', and includes hints of influence from Rudolf Otto's 'mysterium tremendum'<sup>73</sup> and Marisa Crawford and Graham Rossiter's recent text on educating for spirituality<sup>74</sup>. Hughes' way of discerning spirituality tends to align more closely with the generic emphases in theories such as Kohlberg et al.'s spiritual intelligence.

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<sup>69</sup> *Putting life together*

<sup>70</sup> *Putting life together*, 35.

<sup>71</sup> See *ibid*, 26-38.

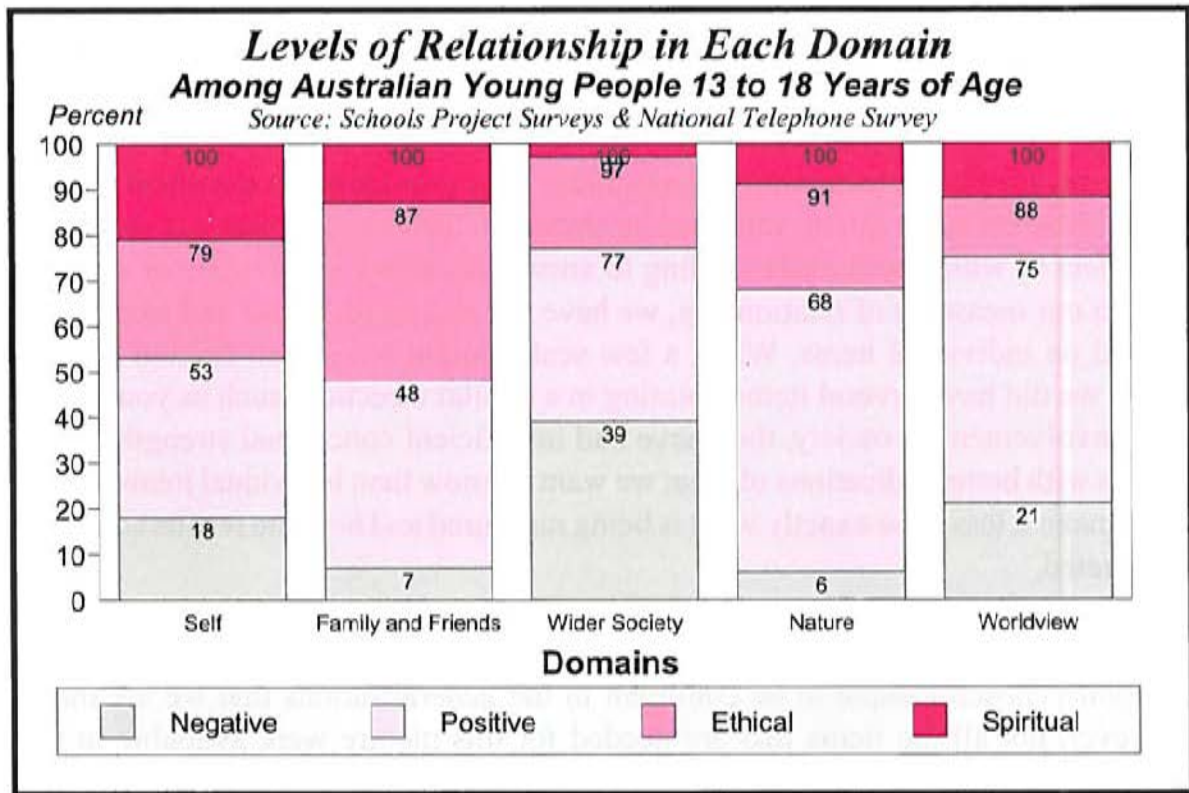
<sup>72</sup> Particularly his 1998 thesis explaining four domains of spiritual wellbeing from an educator's perspective.

<sup>73</sup> See *The idea of the holy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

<sup>74</sup> *Reasons for living – education and young people's search for meaning, identity and spirituality* (Camberwell, Vic: ACER Press, 2006).

Table 3. Levels of relationship in the various domains of the individual

<i>Levels of relationship</i>	<i>Relationship domains</i>				
	<i>Self</i>	<i>Family and friends</i>	<i>Society</i>	<i>Natural environment</i>	<i>Views of the world and ways of life</i>
<b>Negative</b> - dissatisfaction or lack of interest	Hurting inside, dislike of self.	Distrust or lack of relationships with family and friends.	Distrust of or lack of interest in society.	Use of natural world for own interests or lack of interest.	Use of religion for own interests, not know what to believe.
<b>Positive</b> - interest and enjoyment	Feel good about self, enjoy life.	Enjoy family and friends.	Interest in society and enjoy its culture.	Interest in and enjoy natural world.	Enjoy religion and/or philosophy.
<b>Ethical</b> - care and responsibility	Purpose in life, responsibility for self. Value integrity.	Responsibility and care for family and friends.	Responsibility for society. Participate voluntary for good of society.	Responsibility for natural world. Involved in protecting environment.	Seek to live by religious faith or principles of life.
<b>Spiritual</b> - commitment and love	Commitment to personal growth and excellence.	Commitment to and love for family and friends.	Commitment to wellbeing of society.	Commitment to nature, sense of unity with natural world.	Commitment to God or philosophy of life.



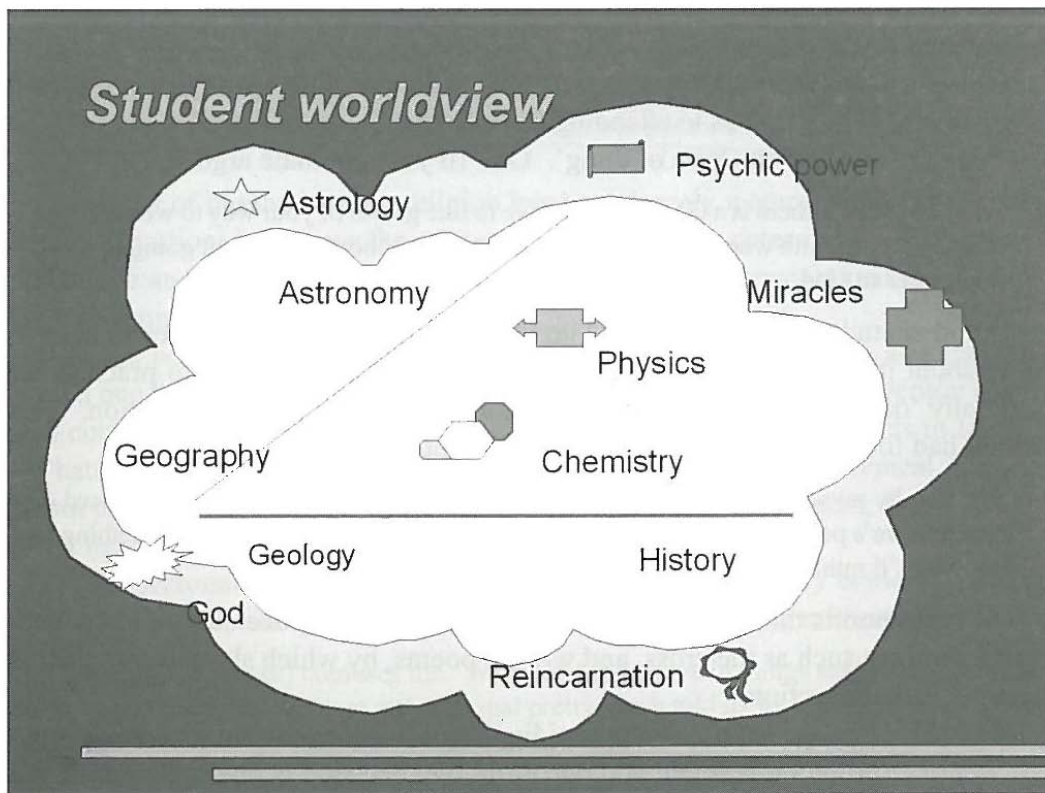
A glance at table 4<sup>75</sup> (above), Hughes’ ‘report card’ on observable spirituality amongst Australian young people, indicates that Australian young people are most spiritual in terms of their relationship with themselves and their family and friends, and least spiritual in terms of their relationship to wider society and a religious/ideological worldview. The latter finding makes sense of Mason et al.’s conclusion that ongoing participation in traditional spirituality is primarily influenced by family connections. Hughes’ framing of his findings is a potentially useful indicator of a way of moving forward in spiritual direction to the culture. He seems less concerned about ‘getting people back to church’ and more concerned about promoting an authentic spiritual way of being within the culture, and in seeing the Christian community making a vital contribution to this process<sup>76</sup>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>76</sup> See *ibid*, 36, in which Hughes explains the four purposes of his book.

Of particular interest is Hughes explanation of ‘fixed’ and ‘fluid’ understandings of knowledge within contemporary Australian society. He contends that whilst postmodernist ambiguity is an influence within the culture, in relation to some areas of knowing and unknowing, the modernist scientific knowledge paradigm is primary. For example, young people accept that knowledge in physics, chemistry, geography and history—in relation to dates, times and places rather than interpretations of social meanings—is fixed, concrete and accepted as given. On the other hand, as Mason et al. demonstrate, young people perceive knowledge in relation to religion, spirituality, moral behaviours and political ideologies is ambiguous and a matter of personal choice or perspective. Figure 32<sup>77</sup> shows that, in a student worldview, scientific, rational knowledge is the fixed concrete centre and spiritual and philosophical knowledge is the gray periphery.

Figure 32.



<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 125.

In the worldview of contemporary Australian youth—reflective of the broader culture—Hughes notes that young people understand the process of forming a philosophical/spiritual perspective on life as an *individual* task<sup>78</sup>. This individuation of spiritual meaning and life philosophy is a part of the broader cultural hyper-individualism that sociologists focusing on young people identify as one of the main burdens and challenges in the general construction of the social identity of modern young people<sup>79</sup>. The self and social understanding of young people in contemporary Australian society is that they must explore for themselves their SQ: the values, ideologies and philosophies of meaning by which they make their choices and which guide their behaviours. There is no longer an agreed spiritual/religious public knowledge base from which young people can draw, and thus they are left to sift through the predominant cultural premises of secular consumerism<sup>80</sup> and mitigating alternatives. Young people are not necessarily resistant to the views of religions, particularly those espoused by family and friends; they see these as potential resources that may or may not be personally appropriated according to ‘fit and size’.

In light of the above, and listening deeply to young people’s stories of what has and hasn’t helped them grow towards a spiritual relationship in their life domains, Hughes<sup>81</sup> notes the following:

- young people are most open to learning about spirituality and beliefs in the context of conversation and relationship, involving peer interaction as well as mentoring input;
- young people want to personally test the validity of a particular idea or practice experientially before being willing to incorporate such within their own structures of meaning;

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<sup>78</sup> See *ibid*, 126–30.

<sup>79</sup> See for example, Eckersley, ‘Never better – or getting worse? The health and wellbeing of young Australians’; R. White & J. Wyn, *Youth and society- exploring the social dynamics of youth experience*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2008); J. Wyn, ‘The changing context of Australian youth and its implications for social inclusion’, *Youth Studies Australia*, 28 (1) (2009), 46-50.

<sup>80</sup> See *Reasons for living*, 129–70, for an extended discussion of the place of the secular market in effecting young people’s sense of identity and meaning.

<sup>81</sup> It’s difficult to pin point exact page references for these thematic conclusions, elements of which are spread through the text though pages 75–88 and 136–61 are particularly reflective of these views.

- young people identify experiential learning opportunities with associated spaces for reflection and debriefing as being the most helpful for their spiritual growth.

From young people's responses, Hughes and Mason et al.<sup>82</sup> identify what helps them feel most personally centered and de-stressed: listening to music rates highly as do work and study (seen as keys to achieving a happy life), and to a lesser extent, spending time in nature. Both texts also identify the highest common value for Generation Y as relationships with family and friends. Both publications note the fact that meditation and prayer scarcely rate as deliberate centering activities for young people—hardly surprising given the disconnect between young people and the religious groups who teach these practices.

Does Rahner's spirituality of silence have any relevance to the issues facing Australian young people? Does it present opportunities and challenges to the Christian community in relation to their role as offering spiritual guidance to Western cultures. Here the concepts of 'rhythm of connection between proclamation and contemplation' and 'the mutual nature of spiritual direction' seem incredibly important. Could Rahner's 'dynamic element' in the church apply in a broader sense to the dynamic possibilities of the broader population's encounters with God's Spirit? Is it possible to conceive a ministry of the church that creates culturally appropriate sacred spaces that allow young people the opportunity to explore and experience the spiritual essence of Christian proclamation, sacred spaces where their reflections on personal spiritual encounters are listened to rather than corrected? Is the church willing to risk practising mutual spiritual direction that operates on risky, experiential and conversational lines rather than the safer didactic authoritative process of creedal insistence and/or popular persuasive preaching? Is the church be willing to adopt the role of midwife to the new birth, supporting the unique incarnations of the Spirit in immediate encounter with individuals who have not been enculturated into the mindset of mainstream Christianity? Is it possible that the Spirit may have something new to say to human beings through such a living and dynamic process?

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<sup>82</sup> See *Putting life together*, 40-55 and *The spirit of Generation Y*, 256-265.

It certainly seems somewhat disingenuous for the church, in light of the research findings, to simply preach theology as fixed meaning (eg ‘four spiritual laws’), accessible only through participation in unfamiliar rituals, at inconvenient times, and requiring a willingness to abandon experiential choice processes for uncritical acceptance of a worldview someone else has prepared previously. To extend the metaphor, the research findings suggest that contemporary young people would rather learn to cook for themselves and be given the freedom and support to be involved in the ongoing creation and construction of new tastes, flavours and innovations in the kitchen!

Ironically in light of the above, the comparative ‘success’ of the conservative Protestant churches is notable—as is the correlation between committed participation in such congregations and commitment to social justice and community service<sup>83</sup>. Conservative Protestant congregations tend to take seriously personal spiritual growth, offer meaningful opportunities for interaction with family and friends, and practical opportunities for various kinds of service. Some, but not all, young people whose family upbringing reflects the worldview of traditional Christian theology do find spiritual enlightenment, a sense of communal belonging and motivation for action within such faith communities. Will young people sustain conservative theological worldviews over their lifespan? Factors, such as the contradictions of life’s circumstances, further education, and the potential for growth through adult years along the lines of faith development theory, require a different kind of spiritual direction to enable young people to maintain their faith. It also seems fairly clear that the spirituality of the conservative churches remains almost exclusively accessible only to those who have been orientated into its tenets by accident of birth. Is there a place in such churches for a little less persuasive talk and a little more silent adoration of the holy mystery of transcendence? Could some small movement towards a theological posture of unknowing allow for a subsequent theological discourse that is somewhat more fluid, imaginative and open to ongoing surprises, wonder and conceptual development? Could such a movement result

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<sup>83</sup> A correlation also emphasised in more general terms from an international perspective by T. Donnelly et al., ‘The relationship between spiritual development and civic development’, in *The handbook of spiritual development in child and adolescence*, Roehlkepartain, E.C. et al. eds. (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 239–51.

in a more sustainable and much broader ministry of ongoing spiritual formation throughout every individual's lifespan and across diverse cultures?

Young people's disassociation with prayer and meditation and their stated enjoyment of music, work, study and the value they place on relationships connects to Rahner's sacramental theology as 'the permanently present silent question and potential for its transformation'. Rahner's concept allows meditation and prayer to permeate each individual's appreciation of music, work, study, the environment, and relationships. Are the contemplative traditions flexible enough to enable young people to develop a meditative and prayerful way of being in relation to the areas of life that are already identified as meaningful and peaceful? Rahner's spirituality of silence is a spirituality of the everyday in which the ordinary is sacramentally enriched as the individual lives from a deep centre of silent worship in the midst of all kinds of activity and recreation.

### **Spirituality of silence as emergent trend of 'ancient–future faith' and the contemplative way**

The late Robert E. Webber used the phrase 'ancient–future faith' to summarise his emergent evangelical vision of the way forward for the church to be a spiritual director to a postmodern culture<sup>84</sup>. The basic idea implicit in 'ancient–future faith' is that all strands of the global Christian community have a common heritage in the practice and theology of the first six centuries of Christianity, and that much that is meaningful in this 'premodern' heritage may be fruitfully re-imagined for a 'postmodern' culture. Webber observes that the 'younger evangelicals' whom he identifies as developing ministries in the post-9/11 world are characterised in part by an interest in drawing from the resources of the ancient church in dialogue with Catholic and Orthodox faiths<sup>85</sup>. Webber's phrase represents a somewhat marginal but not insignificant movement within contemporary Christianity, particularly evangelicalism, that looks back to the ancient and medieval church for resources in order to move forward into the 'late-modern' or postmodern world.

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<sup>84</sup> *Ancient-future faith: rethinking Evangelicalism for a postmodern world* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999).

<sup>85</sup> See *The younger evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 43-54 & 71-82.



A good starting point for examining the literature reflecting this movement, and discerning its relevance to a spirituality of silence, and for a way forward into postmodern Western cultures, is the narrative of Eugene Peterson: spiritual author, North American pastor, and later spirituality professor at Regent College<sup>86</sup>. Peterson entered local church ministry with a strong sense of idealism about helping everyday people to grow in faith and to have a sense of the Kingdom of God. He found instead that the culture and structure of his congregation was designed to employ a pastor to ‘run the church’ and act as a chaplain to the existing culture, and uncritically offering religious endorsement to the American way. He notes that he became determined to disentangle himself from this structural/cultural situation in order to remain true to his sense of vocation. He found that the conceptual help and guidance to support his conviction was not to be found in any of the contemporary literature on church leadership. He notes that he had to go back some centuries to find the support he needed—and found—in the vocational concept, ‘cure of souls’.

The primary sense of *cura* in Latin is ‘care,’ with undertones of ‘cure.’ The soul is the essence of the human personality. The cure of souls, then, is the Scripture-directed, prayer-shaped care that is devoted to persons singly or in groups, in settings sacred or profane. It is a determination to work at the centre, to concentrate on the essential<sup>87</sup>.

Points of connection with Peterson’s reflections on working from the centre are immediately recognisable in SQ and contemporary commentary around spirituality as values-based meaning-making. Peterson observed that pastors *used* to do ‘cure of souls’ in-between Sundays before they became consumed with the ‘busy-ness’ of ‘running a church’. Strengthened by his understanding of the essential pastoral model of the tradition, Peterson determined to re-order his own priorities in order to

- attend to his own spiritual growth;
- facilitate worship gathering;
- be with individuals and groups to fulfill his role as spiritual mentor.

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<sup>86</sup> As described and theorized by Peterson in *The contemplative pastor- returning to the art of spiritual direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) and ‘The business of making saints,’ *Leadership* 18 (2) (Spring, 1997): 20-28.

<sup>87</sup> *The contemplative pastor*, 57.

Peterson discusses his determination to disentangle himself from the business of ‘running a church’ and its associated self-survival questions: ‘What do we do? How can we get things going again?’ Instead, Peterson began to orientate his vocation around ‘cure-of-souls’ questions.

What has God been doing here? What traces of grace can I discern in this life? What history of love can I read in this group? What has God set in motion that I can get in on?<sup>88</sup>

Eugene Peterson’s ‘ancient–future faith’ reconstruction of the mainstream evangelical pastoral vocation is mirrored for youth ministry practitioners by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster. Their seminal text *The Godbearing life—the art of soul tending for youth ministry*<sup>89</sup> leads youth workers away from a programmed, hyperactivity and consumerist approach to ‘keeping young people in the church’ towards a practice of spiritual mentoring that draws significantly from the Christian spirituality tradition and exemplifies an intergenerational approach.

Texts like Dean and Foster’s are early representations of a growing trend, usually identified with the concept of ‘emergent’<sup>90</sup>; this trend looks in part to the classic spiritual traditions of the past as a way of responding meaningfully to the present. Another recent example is Brian McLaren’s *Finding our way again—the return of ancient practices*<sup>91</sup>. McLaren acknowledges both contemplative influences (Foster, Willard and Chittister) and his debt to socially-active integrators (Campolo, Wallis and Sider)<sup>92</sup>. From the beginning, the text sets the tone of ‘active–contemplative’ in the spirituality tradition. The ‘New Monastics’ movement<sup>93</sup> (see the discussion focusing on moral development) is one of the more radical embodiments of the ‘new’ evangelical active–contemplative spirituality. Moya Ratnayake has encouraged youth workers in the UK to embrace the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>89</sup> (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998).

<sup>90</sup> Usually describing people of conservative Evangelical heritage attempting to honour elements of their heritage at the same time as exploring and experimenting spiritually, ecclesially and theologically across the diversity of Christian traditions and in dialogue with the broader culture and in particular, the postmodern suggestion of mystery and multiplicity of meaning.

<sup>91</sup> (Nashville: Tomas Nelson, 2008).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, vii.

<sup>93</sup> See R. Moll, ‘The new monasticism,’ *Christianity Today* (Sept 2005): 38-46; S. Claiborne, *The irresistible revolution : living as an ordinary radical* ( Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,, 2006).

Christian contemplative–prayer tradition in their work with both young people and with their youth work colleagues. She argues that the contemplative tradition contributes to general mental health and psycho–social identity development in addition to nurturing spiritual growth<sup>94</sup>. In his novel *Meeting Emma*<sup>95</sup>, Australian Michael Spyker offers a hypothetical model of informal spiritual direction (or mentoring) in contemporary Australia: a twenty-something arts student discovers the spiritual meaning of her neglected childhood faith by exploring ancient contemplative practices taught to her by ‘Joe’, a lecturer in spiritual theology.

The spirituality reflected in these texts emphasises an affective, mystical process of spiritual growth, exploration, and a possible ongoing conversion to Christianity; the approach and methodology point to a more dialogical and experiential way of working that suggests benefits for ministry with people both inside and outside the church. Processes of informal spiritual direction that draw from the tradition and are embodied in the contemporary format of fluid and non-hierarchical mentoring conversations, seem to connect closely to what young people are saying they find most helpful in exploring their life’s meaning.

It seems obvious to me that Karl Rahner embodied for the Roman Catholic community much of what Webber’s ‘younger evangelicals’ are trying to accomplish today. Rahner is in many ways the penultimate ancient–future spiritual theologian of the twentieth century: the deep listener to the culture, the deep listener to the ancients, with a deep commitment to experience the spiritual essence of the ancient faith. He writes about his experiences to enable others to be drawn into the ancient mysteries ‘made new’. Younger evangelicals could learn from this older Roman Catholic, particularly in relation to his embodiment of experiences of God in silence—in particular, the idea of listening to the silence of God, rather than being in silence always with the hope of hearing a word from God. This dimension is not obvious in many of the younger evangelical/emergent texts. If ‘Silence is God’s first language’—a contemporary interpretation of St. John of the

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<sup>94</sup> See, *Tune-in, Chill-out - using contemplative prayer in youth work* (Birmingham: Christian education Publishers, 2004): 9-19.

<sup>95</sup> (Adelaide, SA: Openbook, 2004).

Cross<sup>96</sup>—God’s silence is a language about which the contemporary Christian mainstream has much to learn—and share with Western postmodern culture.

### **The parable of the angry shoemaker and final reflections**

This parable summarises much of my understanding about the spiritual needs of Western postmodern culture, and how Karl Rahner’s ideas provide a valuable resource for contemporary people searching for a meaningful spirituality.

#### **The parable of the angry shoemaker**

There was once a shoemaker who operated in a small village, servicing the needs of the villagers with regard to their footwear. The relationship between the shoemaker and his customers was functional and comfortable without being particularly warm or dynamic. Business always continued at a steady pace because his was the only footwear outlet in town, and everybody wore shoes.

One fateful day, however, things began to change. Some remarkable visitors arrived at the village, remarkable because they were not wearing shoes. The villagers had never seen anyone go barefoot before. The shoemaker was immediately suspicious of the barefoot itinerants. His suspicion turned to rage when he realised that the visitors were not only going barefoot themselves, but actively encouraging the villagers to do the same by extolling the sensate virtues of shoeless freedom.

Many of the villagers were fascinated by the radical suggestion of the barefoot visitors, but they were also afraid, because the shoemaker filled their heads with dire warnings about what might happen to people who wore no shoes! ‘Your toes will fall off!’; ‘Your skin will burn!’; ‘Your feet will completely lose their shape!’ The visitors, however, laughed at the shoemaker’s ranting and pointed out to the villagers the simple fact that none of these predictions of doom had come true in their case.

Many of the people began to experiment with taking off their shoes, just for short periods at first, then for longer periods, until eventually many people would only put on their shoes once or twice a year—just for special occasions. Some abandoned the practice of shoe-wearing all together, revelling in the new sensations of grass and sand and water against their bare flesh and deciding that never again would they allow their feet to be constricted by heavy leather casings.

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<sup>96</sup> Adapted from ‘The Father spoke one word from all eternity and he spoke it in silence, and it is in silence that we hear it’, C. Bourgeault *Centering prayer and awakening* (Plymouth, UK: Cowley Publications, 2004), see 5, and accompanying endnote.

Of course, a small number of the villagers remained loyal to the shoemaker, and to the practice of almost constantly wearing shoes—some for genuine love of the footwear; some for fear of shoeless consequences; others a mixture of both.

The problem for the shoemaker was that, as his client base was now too small to provide a proper livelihood, he began to diversify. He tried making hats, and belts, and pants and shirts. He even opened up an eatery and servery area in a small annex to his workshop.

The thing was, as a hatmaker, tailor and chef, he was okay—but he was a pretty good shoemaker. No matter how hard he tried, other craftspeople in the village seemed to do each of these other things so much better. So the shoemaker's business didn't thrive. However, it did survive: between a continuing small constituency and the occasional sale of hats, clothing and take-aways, he managed to eke out a basic living.

And then things changed again—not suddenly, but gradually, almost imperceptibly at first, until it became obvious even to the most unobservant, that people were wearing shoes again! It seems that many of the villagers had discovered that, despite the pleasures of barefoot activity, in certain times and in different places, there were other things that they wished to do with their feet. And these activities required various forms of support and protection. The public image of shoes improved, and a process of redemption for the practice of shoe-wearing gained momentum. People realised that wearing shoes was not necessarily always a restrictive experience; in fact, in some contexts, it could be positively liberating!

Now, you would think that this change would cause the shoemaker to rejoice! But it didn't, because, whilst more and more of the villagers were again wearing shoes, they weren't the kind of shoes that came from the shoemaker's shop. The revival in shoe-wearing turned out to be a bit of a grassroots, do-it-yourself kind of movement with lots of backyard operators and individual experimentation.

The shoemaker became very angry with the direction the revival in shoe-wearing was taking. He denounced the new shoemakers to his small loyal constituency, and warned them in graphic terms of the dangers of buying and wearing any kind of shoe that didn't come from his shop, and that hadn't been made in the traditional way. The shoemaker also posted some very public warnings to the new shoe-wearers and invited them to visit his shop to experience the feel of the genuine product on their feet. But, very, very few even bothered to visit, and those who did rarely went more than once—people are not naturally drawn towards grumpy old men.

The other reason that the shoemaker failed to attract new business in the midst of a significant shoe-wearing revival was that, during the years he had diversified his business, he gradually lost the cutting edge of his shoemaking skills. The shoes that the shoemaker now produced were poorly crafted—and were largely unsuited to the contemporary needs of a new generation of shoe-wearers.

The shoemaker's shop still stands in the village, and there are still those few who regularly do business there. For most villagers, however, it has become little more than a quaint, familiar feature on the village landscape. People occasionally visit out of curiosity, or to purchase a traditional item for a ceremonial occasion. For their everyday footwear needs, most of the villagers go to the backyard operators, some of whom are beginning to look more and more like established businesses. Some villagers have become more than basically competent in crafting their own footwear.

There are a few within the village who sometimes wonder what would happen if the shoemaker became a little less angry, suspicious, critical and defensive about his craft. There are some who wonder what might occur if the shoemaker could be a little more honest about the pleasurable experience of barefoot freedom while at the same time remaining as passionate about the relevance of footwear in a whole variety of different contexts. There are some who wonder how the village could be served if the shoemaker was to re-engage with his primary craft at the same time as becoming involved in dialogue with the new generation of shoemakers.

There is a growing sense within the village that the new wave of footwear suffers from the lack of experience and traditional knowledge among those who have only just begun to dabble in the footwear industry. There are those who believe that an experienced footwear craftsman could play an important role as friend and guide and mentor to the new generation. Some wonder about the diverse ways in which the village could benefit if the shoemaker were willing to be a mentor and guide, instead of choosing to remain a rigid, grumpy old man.

It is my conviction that Western postmodern cultures are rediscovering the validity and necessity of spirituality, finding meaning for their lives, and a belief in something greater than themselves. It is certainly true that this process of rediscovery continues to be hampered, repressed and often contaminated by the dominant powers of secular consumerism. The church finds itself on the margins of the culture—particularly in a very secular Australia—yet postmodern culture desperately needs the church!

For better or for worse, and despite the influences of globalism and multiculturalism, the church remains the best hope Western postmodern culture has for finding genuine spiritual direction. But what kind of church does this culture need? Certainly not the church of the angry shoemaker! And this is precisely what Karl Rahner perceived.

The goal of this thesis has been to introduce Rahner as the alternative to the angry shoemaker. No one really knows what the future form and shape of faith and spirituality will be within Western culture. One of the latest ‘emergent’ texts from the United States offers what sounds like a robust argument for something like a new reformation. In *The great emergence*<sup>97</sup> Phyllis Tickle suggests that Western Christianity is currently experiencing the latest in a series of five-hundred-year upheavals, or ‘rummage sales’<sup>98</sup>. Over the next fifty years or so, according to Tickle, there will be an inevitable shift away from an intellectually unsustainable biblical literalism to a bible-listening posture, celebrating theological beauty. The ultimate authority for Protestant Christianity—having shifted in Luther’s time from Pope to *sola scriptura, scriptura sola*—will shift to a global network of theological conversations in which Christians of all traditions will participate in a dialogical mutuality of sacred listening and speaking<sup>99</sup>. The outcome of this shift will transform the nature of the church and its capacity to engage with culture.

If...the Great Emergence really does what most of its observers think it will, it will rewrite Christian theology...into something far more Jewish, more paradoxical, more narrative, and more mystical than anything the Church has seen for the last seventeen or eighteen hundred years<sup>100</sup>.

As attractive as Tickle’s vision sounds, no one can know for sure if this is what will actually happen. The place of the church as spiritual guide was radically challenged by the enlightenment; in the late-modern or postmodern era, its reputation has declined even more. The church has struggled to adapt to the shift and has often retreated into a defensive ‘silo’ posture. This posture has perpetually diminished the church’s capacity to engage Western culture and even to effectively mentor children of Christian families into

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<sup>97</sup> *The great emergence – how Christianity is changing and why*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

<sup>98</sup> She lists the previous upheavals as Gregory the great and the ‘monasticizing’ of the Church (sixth century), the great schism (eleventh century), and the reformation (sixteenth century), *ibid*, 19-31.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 147-162.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

meaningful adult lives as believers. The church can't keep on functioning in exactly the same way and realistically hope for a different result. The church needs to find the way of wisdom to ensure its ongoing self-awareness and effective responses to the cultural situation. This must be a wisdom deeper and more profound than simply ramping up the rhetoric, adjusting the orders of service, printing some more flyers, replacing the organ with rock music or hip-hop, and serving good espresso after the morning worship. The church needs the wisdom that can only emerge from entering the deep silence of God.

It is my conviction that Rahner models this wisdom. Rahner models the antithesis of the church as angry old man. Rahner models the deep spirituality from which the security and confidence to listen and to engage rather than defend and win arguments emerges. Rahner models a vision of the holy mystery that sees not only the church but the whole of creation and human society as enfolded and supported by grace. The vastness of this view changes the way human beings live and move in relation to the church and society.

From the depths of silence comes a renewed theological vision and way of supporting others in spiritual formation. Rahner demonstrates that this renewed theological vision doesn't come from a conference or a book. It comes from a lifetime of prayer, theological reflection and everyday engagement with the world as it is rather than the way Christians hope or insist it is.

This thesis does not hold up Rahner's thinking as the ultimate and perfect interpretation of the Christian faith. This thesis draws attention to Rahner's life, a life that points meaningfully in the direction of what will be required of future Christians. Rahner's legacy is substantial; his life and work achieved significant reform, culminating formally in Vatican II's radical reformation of Catholic Christian understanding. However, his experiences of disappointment and his references to 'faith in a wintry season' reveal that he had hoped for much more. Individuals may not see in their lifetimes the coming to fruition of the beautiful visions of reform and renewal for which they long and hope. Human beings are invited to be part of the process that points and leads in a better direction. Rahner's spirituality of silence frees believers to offer the very best of their



energy, intellect, prayer, love and service as a spiritual sacrifice. In this sacrifice, individuals, like Jesus, ultimately abandon themselves to the divine providence of the holy mystery: not knowing but being known, secure in God's never-ending love.

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