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FOUNT CHRISTIAN THINKERS

KARL RAHNER

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philosophical arguments he offers to support his claims. There are several reasons for this. The arguments he develops are technical, difficult and out of place in a brief introduction. Furthermore, in spite of what one might think, they are not very important. Obviously, they would be extremely important if they were really persuasive. Anyone who could give a water-tight, knock-down argument showing that everyone really, on some level, believes in God would have done something very significant indeed. Anyone who could in this way prove that proofs of God's existence were unnecessary would completely revolutionize the worlds of philosophy and theology. But not many people are persuaded that Rahner has done this. Not many people, moreover, are interested in Rahner's thought because of these sorts of arguments. It is the picture he develops, and the *uses* to which he puts it, which are interesting. In fact this picture turns out to be a highly versatile tool, one which allows Rahner to approach a variety of issues in new and provocative ways. For instance, Rahner rethinks the whole concept of revelation by developing his distinction between the transcendental and the categorial realms of experience. Who Christ is, what grace is, what happens to non-Christians – all these questions, as we shall see in chapters to come, can be approached afresh with the help of this one idea. Rahner's conception of the human being is best judged, then, not by the questionable arguments he offers for it, or not mainly by these, but by its fruit in the whole of his thought.

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Christ and Grace

It is characteristic of Christianity to make claims of absolute uniqueness for Jesus Christ, and it is characteristic of modern people to feel uneasy about this. It would not be a problem, perhaps, to say that Jesus was one among many good people, one among many prophets, one among many heroes who have been willing to go even to the point of death for the sake of others. It would not be a problem to put Jesus on a list of the world's great saintly figures, to speak in one breath of Gautama Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, St Francis, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. It might not even be a problem to think of Jesus as an incarnation of God – provided it was precisely *an* incarnation, one among many, as some strands of Hinduism envisage. But to say of this one ancient Near-Eastern carpenter that he is *the* incarnation of God, the *only* one, that in him and him alone we can find our salvation, this is troublesome. The world shows a certain regularity, and we are inclined to meet with suspicion any claims to have found an absolute break in its regularity.

One way to understand Rahner's writings on Christ is to see them as efforts to deal with this problem. Rahner is sufficiently committed to traditional Christianity so that there is for him no option but to speak of Christ with phrases beginning 'the absolute...', 'the unique...', 'the sole...', and so on. Simply throwing away the bits that cause us difficulties is not a possibility. But at the same time he is sufficiently concerned about what is and what is not credible to modern people to feel the need to mitigate

the difficulties this creates. A certain pattern emerges in Rahner's writings in response to these two commitments: while Christ is assumed to be absolutely unique, he must nevertheless be shown to be very much a part of the fabric of things. Christ is unique and yet not discontinuous with the rest, unique and yet integrated into a broader picture. In one case which we shall consider – Rahner's attempted solution to the classical problem of the two natures (divine and human) of Christ – what is most distinctive about Christ is understood within the context of a wider picture of what it is to be human. In another case – Rahner's treatment of Christ's role in our salvation – Christ is integrated into a broader vision of God's single, overarching movement towards the world in grace.

Fully human and fully divine

Rahner affirms, with the Christian tradition, the full divinity as well as the full humanity of Jesus Christ. Jesus, and he alone of all the people who have walked the earth, is divine. In this sense, he is what the rest of us are not – he stands alone, utterly different. And yet Rahner proposes a way of *interpreting* the divinity and the humanity of Jesus so that one can say, not only 'he is what the rest of us are not', but also, 'he is what the rest of us *are*, only more so'. We can think about Christ, Rahner wants to persuade us, in such a way that our understanding of who he is can be thoroughly integrated into our understanding of who we are.

It is typical of Rahner that he nowhere tries to *prove* Christ's divinity, or even to argue that if one weighs up the probabilities it is more likely than not that he was divine. He simply takes as his starting point what has been accepted in most Christian churches since the Council of Chalcedon in 431, namely that Christ is 'truly God and truly man ... two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation'. Rahner's question is then not 'Is this true?' but instead 'What does it mean?'

It has to be said that this second question is by no means an easy one. One might suppose that at the very least the people at the Council of Chalcedon who came up with this 'two natures' formulation knew what they meant by it, but this is not necessarily so. The Council of Chalcedon came at the end of a period of extraordinarily bitter theological, ecclesiastical and political struggle, and its definition is formulated more as a compromise acceptable to most of the parties involved than as a description of a definite vision of how the divine and the human meet in Jesus. Those on each side of the struggle may well have had reasonably well-worked-out visions, but they were different visions, and each side was highly suspicious of what was promoted by the other. The formula quoted above was acceptable, then, because it ruled out to the satisfaction of each what each considered to be the most heretical tendencies of the other, and not because it proposed a new vision of Jesus' divinity and humanity with which all sides could be happy. The Council of Chalcedon, one could say, decided upon a formula, and left it to the future to work out what that formula meant.

So how can this formula be understood? It has to be said again that this is no easy matter. Chalcedon seems to block off all the obvious routes to an explanation of how Jesus is both divine and human. One cannot, for instance, say that since Jesus had God as his father and Mary as his mother he was some sort of half-and-half mixture, divine in some respects and human in others. The Chalcedonian formula insists that he was wholly the one *and* wholly the other, not any kind of hybrid. Or again, what options are left to us if we are told that the two natures are *neither* confused (i.e. mixed) *nor* separated?

At this point most Christians might be content to acknowledge that there is a paradox at the heart of the gospel. That Jesus is both human and divine is simply a truth of faith to be believed but not comprehended. They do not understand it, but then they do not *expect* to understand it, and do not *need* to understand it.

There is a certain danger associated with such a complacent acceptance of paradox, however. It may be that one cannot help but have some picture of what is meant by saying that Jesus is both divine and human. Perhaps it is not possible to affirm a paradox and also keep one's mind entirely empty of any idea about what it means. After all, if a Christian talks about Jesus, meditates on the life of Jesus and prays to Jesus, she will inevitably be working from *some* sort of idea of who Jesus is. The danger is, then, that one does in fact have an understanding of what the Chalcedonian formula means – a picture of the way in which Jesus is human and divine – but because this understanding is not consciously acknowledged one cannot evaluate it or take responsibility for it.

As Rahner reads the situation, most ordinary Christians do indeed have some picture of how divine and human meet in Christ. Not only that, but this picture is heretical. Rahner suggests that most Christians today are closet *docetists*. Docetism was a tendency firmly rejected by the early Church to deny the full humanity of Jesus, to see Christ as only apparently human. Contemporary Christians may be verbally orthodox, Rahner suggests, and toe the Chalcedonian line, but in practice they think of Christ simply as God in human clothing, as God having dressed himself up in a human exterior in order to make himself visible to the world. And it is because of this misunderstanding, Rahner suggests, that many people find the Church's teaching about Christ unworthy of belief. It takes on the ring of mythology: God had to come to earth in a human livery because there was a problem he could not solve from heaven.

The solution that Rahner tries to develop draws on the kinds of ideas described in the previous chapter. He thinks, in other words, that if one starts with the right sort of picture of the human being then the apparent paradox of the two natures of Christ can be resolved. What has to be rejected is the idea that human nature is something clearly defined and limited, something that one can set within boundaries and specify exactly. If this were human nature

then the Chalcedonian problem would probably be insuperable, because it is not at all clear how God could become something thus circumscribed and delimited and yet still in any sense be God. But in fact human nature cannot be defined in this way – it is not thus closed in on itself:

> *one can only say what man is by expressing what he is concerned with and what is concerned with him. But that is the boundless, the nameless.* (TI IV 108)

Here, then, the ideas of the previous chapter begin to make their reappearance. It is in the nature of the human being to be a kind of infinite openness. Always in the encounter with the finite we are striving beyond it towards the infinite, always at our very centre we are directed towards that which lies beyond the world, towards God:

> *When we have said everything about ourselves that can be described and defined, we have still said nothing about ourselves, unless we have included or implied the fact that we are beings who are referred to the incomprehensible God.* (TI IV 108)

Now, if this is what it is to be human in general, if this is of the *essence* of being human, then the normally paradoxical Chalcedonian doctrine comes to seem not quite so difficult. Christ can be seen, on Rahner's account, as the radicalization, the supreme case, of what is true of us all. If to be oriented towards God is what makes us human, then the one who is so oriented towards God that he is utterly given over to God, and utterly taken over by God, is actually the one who is at the same time the most fully human. So the divinity of Christ can be conceived not as the contradiction of Christ's humanity, but as its ultimate fulfilment. To be human is to transcend all things, to 'go beyond' all things towards God: when this transcendence, this 'going beyond', is carried to its single, highest and most radical instance, then in that case to be

human simply is to be God: 'The incarnation of God is ... the unique, *supreme*, case of the total actualization of human reality.'

What Rahner wants to persuade us of, then, is that we can think of Christ, not as an incomprehensible oddity, and not as God in a human disguise, and not as simply a paradox, but as the extreme case of what it is to be human, as like us only more so, as what we are if you take it all the way to its limit. Christ's divinity, he wants to say, is something which on the one hand belongs only to Christ – something unique and absolute – but which on the other hand can be situated within the much broader phenomenon of the common humanity of us all.

One might ask whether this actually works. Is the difference between Jesus and us just a matter of degree, and if so can it really make sense to talk about Christ as absolutely unique? And what stops the rest of us from also being God if this is a possibility built into human nature? We are in a rather murky territory here, and it is not clear whether Rahner's position is defensible, but before too quickly dismissing him it might be worth exploring a little further the way these slippery notions of 'difference of degree' and 'possibility built into human nature' work. Consider for instance the people – often so-called *idiots savants* – capable of extraordinary arithmetical feats, such as multiplying huge numbers almost instantaneously. They are human beings and not, presumably, employing magical means to solve problems, and so it must be said of them that they are fulfilling some possibility built into human nature. And it can also be said that the difference between them and the rest of us is 'only' one of degree: we can multiply one- or perhaps two-digit numbers almost instantaneously, they can manage twelve. And yet we are not on a continuum with them: there is for some reason a really drastic difference between them and us. It is quite possible, in other words, to talk about a difference of degree which is nevertheless a radical difference, and one can talk about the fulfilment of a possibility built into human nature without automatically

suggesting that any of us could achieve this fulfilment if only we tried a little harder.[1]

Christ and grace

Just as Rahner believes that who Christ is can be integrated into a broader picture, so also, he thinks, can what Christ *does*, Christ's role in the history of salvation. In particular, Rahner places Christ within an overarching account of how God 'gives himself' to the world in grace. In Rahner's view grace is not to be seen as something which is first offered to humanity as a consequence of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection. Instead the notion of grace is the broader context within which we can make sense of Christ's life and death. The incarnation is not as Rahner presents it the trigger for God's *becoming* gracious to us, but the peak of God's *being* gracious to us.

To fill out this picture we need to begin by looking a little more closely at the notion of grace. In particular it is worth mentioning three features of Rahner's understanding of grace, or to be more precise, three features of Rahner's later understanding of grace. (Grace is one of those topics to which Rahner returns again and again, and about which he did not always say exactly the same thing.)

First of all, according to Rahner grace is, most fundamentally, God's 'self-communication'. What Rahner means by this can most easily be seen by way of contrast. Much of the time people use the word 'grace' in connection with some particular help or particular gift from God. With the help of God's grace, someone might say, I was able to give up this or that bad habit, this or that sin. One may hope that if a difficult situation arises one will be given the grace to know how to respond properly. One may hope that God will be gracious and forgive one's sins. Rahner would say that all these are legitimate ways to speak about grace, but that they all stem from something more basic and more profound. The most

important thing that God gives in grace is not this or that particular gift, but God's very *self*, and Rahner describes this gift of himself as God's 'self-communication'.[2] From this one central gift flow the other more particular things which can also, in a secondary sense, be described by the word grace. A result of the fact that God gives himself to people and dwells in them, in other words, is that they are gradually transformed, so that they may over time overcome bad habits and particular sins, and so on.

With his insistence on the centrality of the notion of self-communication Rahner is wanting to reverse the way of thinking about grace which prevailed in the neo-scholastic theology in which he had himself been trained. Neo-scholastic theology operated with a distinction between one kind of grace, by which God alters and transforms us, and a second kind of grace, in which God actually 'bestows himself' upon us and 'dwells within' us. There were various ways of working out the precise relationship between the two categories of grace, but what all agreed upon was that the first kind of grace was the preparation for, and basis of, the second: God first changes us, and then enters into a new relationship of union with us – God's 'indwelling in the soul' follows as a *consequence* of the prior (at least logically prior) transformation of the soul. These two kinds of grace were described respectively as 'created' and 'uncreated' grace, and so the standard neo-scholastic view was that uncreated grace followed upon, and was in some sense a *reward for*, the transformation which created grace brought about in a person. The more biblical view, Rahner maintains, is that created grace flows from uncreated grace. The spirit of God dwells in us, and as a result, 'as a consequence and a manifestation' of this divine self-communication, we are transformed concretely and in particular ways. God transforms us by giving himself to us, rather than giving himself to us *because* he has transformed us.

This difference in ordering corresponds to an important difference in emphasis. The tendency of neo-scholastic theology was to

see uncreated grace, God's communication of himself to the soul, as secondary and derivative, and so to concentrate its attention almost exclusively on created grace. To reverse the ordering is by contrast to place uncreated grace, God's self-communication, at the centre of the picture. What is new in Rahner's approach, then, is not the distinction between particular (created) gifts and God's giving of himself, but the *centrality* which Rahner gives to the latter. And he would say that even this is not in fact new, but a return to something closer to the outlook of St Paul and of the church Fathers.

A second distinctive feature of Rahner's understanding of grace has to do with where Rahner *locates* grace, with where he understands grace to be offered and perhaps received. God's self-communication to us occurs most fundamentally, Rahner thinks, on the level of our 'transcendental experience'. That is to say, in that region of our experience where we always go beyond all particular finite objects, on that level where we always have, whether we realize it or not, an awareness of God, there grace is offered and either accepted or rejected. Rahner is led to this position by two considerations: on the one hand he wants to say that grace is *experienced*, and on the other hand he believes that by its nature grace cannot be experienced as one experience among others.

First, then, it is important for Rahner to be able to insist that grace actually is *experienced*. Rahner was unhappy with the understanding prevalent in the Catholicism of the first half of the twentieth century, according to which grace occurred, one might say, behind the believer's back. Grace was something in which a good Catholic believed but which had nothing to do with anything she could be aware of. One might trust that in, say, going to mass one was receiving grace, but this was not something that could actually be *felt*. Having received grace would make a big difference when one died, but very little in the meantime. It too easily became, therefore, a very theoretical matter, something which in the day-to-day living of life made no impact whatsoever.

So grace must be able to be experienced – it must really affect us in the here and now. But on the other hand, if grace is actually God's giving of *himself*, it cannot be experienced as one thing among many others, as a particular experience we might have amongst, and on the same level as, all our other experiences, for God is not one object among others, a 'member of the larger household of all reality'. So grace must enter into our experience, but it cannot do so as one experience on a par with others. The only alternative, then, is that it must be experienced on the transcendental level, never directly but always in all our other experiences, always in the background, always part of the general texture of our experience rather than the outstanding features of it.

How, then, does this work? How exactly can grace be experienced on a transcendental level? As we saw in chapter 1, on Rahner's account it is part of our basic structure always to be related to God in all our dealings with the things of the world. This basic structure cannot itself be described as grace, for this is built into our very nature as human beings, and grace must be a gift, something which is not owed to us, something which goes *beyond* our basic nature. So Rahner describes grace as a 'modification of our transcendence': even without grace we would have been aware of God, but not in the same way. God's self-communication to us has the effect of altering our relationship to our horizon, to the 'mystery' which surrounds us. *How* precisely is it altered? Here Rahner becomes elusive, and his language rather slippery: God becomes for us, he says, not just the infinitely distant goal of all our striving, but the goal which 'draws near' and 'gives itself'. Whatever these phrases might mean, they do *not*, Rahner insists, mean that God becomes another object in the world which we can control. The God who gives himself in grace remains a mystery: grace is

> *the grace of the* nearness *of the* abiding *mystery: it makes God accessible in the form of the holy mystery and presents him thus as the incomprehensible.* (TI IV 56)

Without ceasing to be God, in other words, and therefore ungraspable and incomprehensible, God somehow draws near and offers himself to us.

Grace, then, is to be understood as God's self-communication to us, and it is to be understood as occurring at the level of our transcendental experience. The third important feature of Rahner's account of grace is its *universality*. According to Rahner, grace is not offered to some of us some of the time, but to all of us all of the time. The alteration in our relationship to our horizon, the drawing near of the goal of all our striving, this is not something that sometimes happens and sometimes does not, so that on good days God draws near and on others remains aloof. And it is not something which is given to some and withheld from others. It is a constant feature of all human beings' experience, though it is a feature which can be resisted:

> *grace ... always surrounds man, even the sinner and the unbeliever, as the inescapable setting of his existence.* (TI IV 181)

The distinction, then, between what we are like by nature and what we are like by grace is only a theoretical one, for one never finds a human being in a state of pure nature. Our experience is always already, on Rahner's account, affected by grace. We have a tendency to assume that to be special grace must somehow also be limited, but Rahner thinks there is no really good reason for this assumption:

> *... it is quite conceivable that the whole spiritual life of man is constantly affected by grace. It is not a rare and sporadic event just because grace is unmerited. Theology has been too long and too often bedevilled by the unavowed supposition that grace would be no longer grace if it were too generously distributed by the love of God!* (TI IV 180)

Grace, then, always surrounds us and always affects us. But this is not to say that we all stand in exactly the same situation with

regard to grace, for there remains the question of the response we make to the offer of grace. We have a fundamental freedom either to accept God's self-communication or to reject it. If we reject it, however, we do not make it go away, but instead live in permanent contradiction with it. We are all always surrounded by grace, then, but we may not all be equally in what is traditionally called a 'state of grace'.

Our response to grace, our acceptance or rejection of it, is something that goes on at a very deep level. It is not one deliberate decision we make among others, but our most fundamental decision which shapes all else that we do. And it is a decision that we may be unaware of, and that we may make without even having heard of the concept of grace.

So far we have been describing grace in terms of God's self-communication to *individuals*, but it can also be described as God's self-communication to the world as a whole. We can think of God as taking millions upon millions of separate decisions to bestow grace on individuals, but we can also think of a single decision to communicate himself to the world which is worked out through the human race as a whole and each individual separately. And if we think of grace as the result of God's one decision to communicate himself, then we begin to be in a position to see how Christ comes into the picture. God's single movement towards the world reaches its *peak*, Rahner says, in Jesus Christ. In his incarnation the self-communication which is always on offer to all people at all times reaches its high point.

Why does it need to have a high point? In Christ, Rahner maintains, God's self-communication becomes definitive, and it becomes irreversible. If we were to look only to our own experience of grace, we could never be absolutely sure – we could never be sure that we had really accepted the offer, or that God had really completely committed himself. God could always remain free to change his mind, to repent of his graciousness. Rahner sometimes speaks of an 'ongoing dialogue' with freedom on both

sides. With Christ the dialogue has not reached an end, but it has reached a point where there is no going back. In him 'the success, the victory and the irreversibility of this process [of God's self-communication] has become manifest in and in spite of this ongoing dialogue of freedom' (FCF 194). In Christ we see God absolutely committing himself to us, and in Christ we also see a human being, one of us, definitively and absolutely *accepting* God's self-gift.

Rahner is not trying to suggest that God remains uncertain about whether he will carry through with his self-communication until he sees what Christ does. The idea is rather that *because* God means to carry through, to communicate himself fully to the world, his self-communication reaches a point of absolute commitment in Christ. Jesus does not change God's mind. Jesus does not turn God's wrath to mercy. Christ's death does not *persuade* God to be gracious, but is itself an expression, or rather *the* definitive expression, of God's graciousness. The incarnation is a high point in the history of salvation rather than a turning point.

An interesting question is whether on this account one can speak of Christ as in any way the *cause* of God's graciousness to us and therefore of our salvation. To be unable to do so would be to find oneself in a rather awkward position as a Christian theologian. Rahner's answer would be that it depends on what precisely one means by the word 'cause'. Christ is not the trigger for our salvation. He is not what first *persuades* God to be gracious to us. And so in the most ordinary sense of the word he is not its cause. On the other hand, if Christ is the peak, the high point, even the *goal* of God's self-communication to the world, it is possible to speak of this whole self-communication as *aiming* at Christ, as occurring for the sake of the incarnation. In so far as Christ is the goal of the one divine movement that brings about our salvation, then he can indeed be thought of as the cause of this salvation. Christ is, in technical (Aristotelian) terms, not the 'efficient' but the 'final cause' of our salvation.

Rahner in fact carries this idea one step – one large step – further. It is possible to think of creation itself, of the whole world and all that is in it, as existing for the sake of Christ. God wills, or so the story goes, to communicate himself to that which is not God, and this self-communication to the other is achieved definitively in the incarnation, when in a particular human being God and the world become one, without ceasing to be what they each are. But in order to communicate himself to that which is not-God, God first has to bring this not-God, i.e. the world, into existence. So God does not first create the world and then, as a kind of after-thought, in response to what goes on in the world, decide to become incarnate. Instead God from the beginning creates what is other than himself in order to give himself to it. This is all highly speculative, of course, and Rahner does not pretend to offer any definitive arguments. He simply suggests that it is a possible approach:

> *we are perfectly entitled to think of the creation and of the incarnation, not as two disparate, adjacent acts of God ... but as two moments and phases in the real world of the unique, even though internally differentiated, process of God's self-renunciation and self-expression into what is other than himself.* (TI V 177–78)

We began this chapter with the notion that Rahner's inclination is to integrate Christ into a broader picture. With the suggestion that the whole world was created for the sake of the incarnation that tendency is taken to its extreme, but it is also in a certain sense reversed – now it is everything else that is to be integrated into our understanding of Christ.

There is an interesting point of convergence here between Rahner and the greatest of twentieth-century Protestant thinkers, Karl Barth. For the most part the two theologians seem to go in opposite directions. While Rahner locates an experience of God at the very heart of our human nature, and thinks it vitally

important to link theology to this experience, Barth vehemently rejects modern anthropocentrism: 'one cannot,' insists Barth, 'speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice' (*The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 195). Yet in suggesting that the world itself was brought into being for the sake of the incarnation, Rahner is proposing very much what Barth does with his notion that 'creation is for the sake of the covenant'.

An interesting feature of Rahner's approach to the incarnation is the role that sin plays – or rather the role that sin does not play – in the story. God's becoming incarnate in the world is not first and foremost a response to the problem posed by sin. It is instead a climactic moment in a *positive* movement towards the world, a movement which would have taken place even had there been no such thing as sin. Had Adam not fallen, to put it in traditional language, Christ would still have come into the world, would still have died, and would still have risen again. Rahner does not deny the reality or the gravity of sin and evil, nor does he deny that, in fact, the incarnation, cross and resurrection have something to do with the forgiveness of sin. But this is not all that they are; Christ is not *just* the remedy for our sins. Sin, as Rahner sees it, cannot be allowed to be the driving motor of the story of God's involvement with the world.