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THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

VOLUME VI

CONCERNING VATICAN COUNCIL II

by

KARL RAHNER

Translated by

KARL-H. and BONIFACE KRUGER

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C. THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE CHURCH

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ANONYMOUS CHRISTIANS

It is almost two thousand years since the Church received her commission to preach the message of Christ to all nations unto the ends of the earth. In principle we have reached those ends of the earth: the limits of our world have been marked out. Yet what position does the message of Christ occupy in it?

In the ancient cultures of Asia it has never been able to gain a foothold, and in the West where it became one of the historical roots it is still steadily losing in importance and influence. The Christian faith is widely interpreted as one possible form of religious explanation of man's existence, alongside of which others are to be ranged either by an equal right or even as showing greater promise. Religion itself appears to many as only one of many forms of man's understanding of himself, which should be allowed to have its say or which should be combated as harmful.

This is the situation in which the believing Christian finds himself, and he is forced to recognise that the future will only bring this picture into sharper relief,¹ that the saying about the little flock will become still more true in spite of all the Church's pastoral and missionary efforts.

The Christian is convinced that in order to achieve salvation man must believe in God, and not merely in God but in Christ; that this faith is not merely a positive commandment from which one could be dispensed under certain conditions; that membership of the one true Church does not constitute a merely extrinsic condition from which it would be appropriate for someone to be freed by the mere fact that he does not and cannot know about it and its necessity. On the contrary, this faith is in

¹ Cf. K. Rahner, 'The Teaching of Vatican II on the Church and the Future Reality of Christian Life' in *The Christian of the Future* (Freiburg/London 1967), pp. 77-101.

itself necessary and therefore demanded absolutely, not merely as a commandment but as the only possible means, not as a condition alone but as an unavoidable way of access, for man's salvation is nothing less than the fulfilment and definitive coming to maturity of precisely *this* beginning, for which therefore nothing else can substitute. — In this sense there really is no salvation outside the Church, as the old theological formula has it. But can the Christian believe even for a moment that the overwhelming mass of his brothers, not only those before the appearance of Christ right back to the most distant past (whose horizons are being constantly extended by palaeontology) but also those of the present and of the future before us, are unquestionably and in principle excluded from the fulfilment of their lives and condemned to eternal meaninglessness? He must reject any such suggestion, and his faith is itself in agreement with his doing so. For the scriptures tell him expressly that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Tim 2:4); the covenant of peace which God made with Noah after the flood has never been abrogated: on the contrary, the Son of God himself has sealed it with the incontestable authority of his self-sacrificing love embracing all men.

But when we have to keep in mind both principles together, namely the necessity of Christian faith and the universal salvific will of God's love and omnipotence, we can only reconcile them by saying that somehow all men must be capable of being members of the Church; and this capacity must not be understood merely in the sense of an abstract and purely logical possibility, but as a real and historically concrete one. — But this means in its turn that there must be degrees of membership of the Church, not only in ascending order from being baptised, through the acceptance of the fullness of the Christian faith and the recognition of the visible head of the Church, to the living community of the Eucharist, indeed to the realisation of holiness, but also in descending order from the explicitness of baptism into a non-official and anonymous Christianity which can and should yet be called Christianity in a meaningful sense, even though it itself cannot and would not describe itself as such. If it be true that the man who is the object of the Church's missionary endeavour is or can be already prior to it a man who is on the way towards his salvation and finds it in certain circumstances without being reached by the Church's preaching, and if it be true at the same time that the salvation which he achieves is the salvation of Christ, because there is no other, then it must be possible to be not only an anonymous 'theist', but also an

anonymous *Christian*, and this (since the Church of Christ is not a purely interior reality) not in any merely intangible inner way, but also with a *certain* making visible and tangible of the anonymous relationship. – How is a relationship of this kind to be conceived?

It cannot be simply given already by the mere fact of being human. The attempt to account for the grace of redemption and nearness to God in such a way would merely negate it *as* grace. Grace, as the free self-communication of God to his creature, does presuppose the creature, and this in such possession of its being and its capacities that it can stand in and on itself and bear witness to the glory of that almighty creative power and goodness which was able to say of its works that they were good. At the same time such a creature must be given the possibility of hearing and accepting as beyond itself the incalculable new turning of God towards it in his revelation. That is to say, it must be, to begin with, a being of unlimited openness for the limitless being of God, therefore that being we call spirit. Spirit signifies that immaterial being prior to and going beyond every individual thing that can be known and grasped, that openness which is always already opened by the creative call of infinite mystery which is and must be the ultimate and the first, the all-inclusive and the fathomless ground of all that can be grasped, of all that is real and all that is possible. In order to know something of this mystery which we call God there is also required some knowledge of his superiority over the world and of his personality, knowledge therefore of the fact that the fathomlessness of this ground is that of a freedom which man has to thank for his own awakening and of which he knows at the same time that it has not yet opened itself utterly and bound itself completely by this its first still open call. Awakened by its creative word, he now awaits more profound communication. Does the divine liberty banish him into the distance of its silence or has it given him these ears that he may now hear for the first time its real word?

Man therefore is not only *capable* of hearing a possible word from his hidden God, but in the sense we have explained is also positively expecting it, little as he has the least right to demand it. Every denial of this fact of his being ordered to the unsurpassably Absolute would implicitly merely affirm it once more, for it too would speak with the claim of absolute truth, would be subject to the demand of an indisputable good, would derive its force from the desire for a final and definitive meaning. Now, how does this tendency towards God, which is on occasion

quite implicit and incoherent and yet always completely permeates man's being and existence, include a reference to the incarnate God, to Jesus Christ? – Much as the fact of Christ is the freest and in this sense (although only in this sense) the most contingent fact of reality, it is equally the most decisive and important and moreover the fact which has the most obvious relevance to man. If one takes it seriously that God has become man, then – it must be said – man is that which happens when God expresses and divests himself. Man is accordingly in the most basic definition that which God becomes if he sets out to show himself in the region of the extra-divine.² And conversely, formulating it from the point of view of man: man is he who realises himself when he gives himself away into the incomprehensible mystery of God. Seen in this way, the incarnation of God is the uniquely supreme case of the actualisation of man's nature in general.

It is true that before Christ no philosopher ever recognised in man's self-interpretation these depths of the human reality, but as a historical being man is one who in the concrete comes to be and to know what he is only in the unfolding of his history. Now that his thinking is illuminated by the light of the revelation which has in fact been made in the historically accomplished reality of Christ, he can recognise this unapproachable height as that perfection of his own being which can be effected by God, not in order that in a rationalistic fashion man may have it under his control but in order that he may more fully recognise the fact that he is ordained to this mystery. Bestowal of grace and incarnation as the two basic modes of God's self-communication can therefore be conceived as the most radical modes of man's spiritual being, beyond his powers to compel and yet precisely as such eminently fulfilling the transcendence of his being.

The believer will then also grasp that this absolute eminence is not an optional adjunct to his reality; that it is not given to him as the juridical and external demand of God's will for him, but that this self-communication by God offered to all and fulfilled in the highest way in Christ rather constitutes the goal of all creation and – since God's word and will *effect* what they say – that, even before he freely takes up an attitude to it, it stamps and determines man's nature and lends it a character which we may call a 'supernatural existential'. A refusal of this offer would therefore

² Cf. the more detailed reasoning given in our essay, 'On the Theology of the Incarnation' in *Theological Investigations* IV (London & Baltimore 1966), pp. 105–120.

not leave man in a state of pure unimpaired nature, but would bring him into contradiction with himself even in the sphere of his own being. This means positively that man in experiencing his transcendence, his limitless openness – no matter how implicit and incomprehensible it always is – also already experiences the offer of grace – not necessarily expressly *as* grace, as a distinctly supernatural calling, but experiences the reality of its content. But this means that the express revelation of the word in Christ is not something which comes to us from without as entirely strange, but only the explicitation of what we already are by grace and what we experience at least incoherently in the limitlessness of our transcendence. The expressly Christian revelation becomes the explicit statement of the revelation of grace which man always experiences implicitly in the depths of his being.

If man accepts the revelation, he posits by that fact the act of supernatural faith. But he also already accepts this revelation whenever he really accepts *himself completely*, for it already speaks *in* him. Prior to the explicitness of official ecclesiastical faith this acceptance can be present in an implicit form whereby a person undertakes and lives the duty of each day in the quiet sincerity of patience, in devotion to his material duties and the demands made upon him by the persons under his care. What he is then taking upon himself is therefore not merely his basic relationship with the silent mystery of the Creator-God. Accordingly, no matter how he wants to understand and express this in his own reflective self-understanding, he is becoming thereby not merely an anonymous 'theist', but rather takes upon himself in that Yes to himself the grace of the mystery which has radically approached us. 'God has given himself to man in direct proximity': perhaps the essence of Christianity can be reduced to this formula.

In the acceptance of himself man is accepting Christ as the absolute perfection and guarantee of his own anonymous movement towards God by grace, and the acceptance of this belief is again not an act of man alone but the work of God's grace which is the grace of Christ, and this means in its turn the grace of his Church which is only the continuation of the mystery of Christ, his permanent visible presence in our history.

It is true that it would be wrong to go so far as to declare every man, whether he accepts the grace or not, an 'anonymous Christian'. Anyone who in his basic decision were really to deny and to reject his being ordered to God, who were to place himself decisively in opposition to

his own concrete being, should not be designated a 'theist', even an anonymous 'theist'; only someone who gives – even if it be ever so confusedly – the glory to God should be thus designated. Therefore no matter what a man states in his conceptual, theoretical and religious reflection, anyone who does not say in his *heart*, 'there is no God' (like the 'fool' in the palm) but testifies to him by the radical acceptance of his being, is a believer. But if in this way he believes in deed and in truth in the holy mystery of God, if he does not suppress this truth but leaves it free play, then the grace of this truth by which he allows himself to be led is always already the grace of the Father in his Son. And anyone who has let himself be taken hold of by this grace can be called with every right an 'anonymous Christian'.

This name implicitly signifies that this fundamental actuation of a man, like all actuations, cannot and does not want to stop in its anonymous state but strives towards an explicit expression, towards its full name. An unfavourable historical environment may impose limitations on the explicitness of this expression so that this actuation may not exceed the explicit appearance of a loving humaneness, but it will not act against this tendency whenever a new and higher stage of explicitness is presented to it right up to the ultimate perfection of a consciously accepted profession of Church membership. Here alone does this belief find not merely its greatest support and source of confidence but also its proper reality and that peace which St Augustine likened to repose in being: peace and repose which do not mean stagnation and flight but the capacity of casting oneself all the more resolutely into the inexorable will of the mystery of God, since now, as St Paul says, one knows whom one believes and to whom one fearlessly submits in radical trust.

To anyone who thinks that he cannot or dare not believe (perhaps because he fails to appreciate to what an immeasurable experience of relentless love the acceptance of its human nearness can call us – from a great distance, as though its mystery and its sublimity might thereby be destroyed), or to anyone who is quite certain that he does not believe, these reflections may mean very little, and they are not in the first place directed to him, although they could make even him attentive to the voice inside him. What is said about the 'anonymous Christian' would therefore be completely misunderstood if it were thought that it represents merely a last desperate attempt in a world where Christian faith is fast disappearing to 'rescue' in its ultimate significance all that is good and

human for the Church – against every freedom of the spirit. But the Christian who finds himself in a diaspora situation³ which is becoming increasingly acute, the believer who finds his faith and his hope sorely tried at the sight of his unbelieving brothers,⁴ can derive from it comfort and the strength of objectivity. Knowledge about the anonymous Christian does not in any way dispense him from caring and troubling about those who do not yet know the one necessary truth in its explicit affirmation in the gospel message. But this knowledge will keep him from panic and will give him the strength to practice that patience which – according to the Lord's saying – brings salvation to life, his own as much as that of his brother.

Our topic with all its urgency cannot be avoided or dismissed as unimportant either by a theology of grace and of the Church which has a true understanding of itself, or by an honest pastoral theology which looks at our times dispassionately. The exact word may not have any importance, but the matter we are contemplating is undeniably of central importance for the relations of the contemporary Christian to the world around him. *Theologically* we should not make any mistake in assigning its proper 'place' to the doctrine of 'anonymous Christianity': this is not a hermeneutic *principle* critically to reduce the whole corpus of traditional theology and dogmatics (in the same way as an existentialist interpretation or the theses of the Anglican Bishop Robinson) and thereby to make Christianity in this form more acceptable; from a dogmatic point of view, this doctrine is perhaps even a *peripheral* phenomenon whose necessity, lawfulness and correctness derive from many other individual data of ecclesiastical teaching or are at least demanded by them.⁵ As again this dogmatic-theoretical position, a theology which proceeds in a more historical-existential-practical way can certainly assign to these statements about 'anonymous Christianity' a more central position,⁶ yet without coming into conflict with other fundamental dogmatic certainties. It

³ Cf. also K. Rahner, 'Der Christ und seine Umwelt', *Stimmen der Zeit* XC (1965), pp. 481–489.

⁴ Cf. K. Rahner, *Im Heute glauben*, Theol. Meditationen 9 (Einsiedeln 1965).

⁵ This difference from Bultmann's demythologisation is perhaps too little stressed in the otherwise good article by H. Ott, 'Existenziale Interpretation und anonyme Christlichkeit' in *Zeit und Geschichte: Festschrift R. Bultmann* edited by E. Dinkler (Tübingen 1964), pp. 367–379.

⁶ Cf. in a wider context K. Rahner, *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* II (Freiburg 1966), Kap. VII, §3, §4 no. 6, etc.

would be quite foolish to think that this talk about 'anonymous Christianity' must lessen the importance of mission, preaching, the Word of God, baptising, and so on.⁷ Anyone who wants to interpret our remarks about anonymous Christianity in this way, has not merely fundamentally misunderstood them, but has not read our exposition of them with sufficient attention.⁸ I think that only two things are necessary in order to understand correctly what is intended by this phrase: some really thorough *thinking* about various fundamental data of the traditional theology of the Schools, data which often are left lying together in sterile proximity, and at the same time an unbiased contemplation of the *real* situation of mankind, of Christianity and of the Church today.⁹

What is meant by this thesis of the anonymous Christian is actually also taught materially in the Constitution on the Church of Vatican II (no. 16). According to this document those who have not yet received the gospel and this *without any fault* of their own (and this possibility is clearly presupposed as a real one) are given the possibility of eternal salvation ('*aeterna salus*'), which can only be understood of supernatural salvation). The only condition is, from the point of view of God, '*gravia influxus*' (or '*divina gratia*' as it is also called), and from the point of view of man, '*Deum sincero corde quaerere eiusque voluntatem per conscientiae dictamen agnitam operibus adimplere*'. This fulfilment of the duty of conscience is explicitly supposed as possible also in the case of those '*qui sine culpa ad expressam agnitionem Dei nondum pervenerunt*'. That an inculpable atheism of this kind can last a long time whether individually or collectively is not stated, but not excluded either. Since this atheism is seen only in opposition to '*expressa agnitio Dei*', there is a clear indication that beneath such an atheism there may very well lie an unreflected, merely existentially actualised theism (precisely by a radical obedience to the dictates of conscience). But an incoherent theism of this kind can in

⁷ Cf. e.g. L. Elders, 'Die Taufe der Weltreligionen. Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie Karl Rahners' in *Theologie und Glaube* LV (1965), pp. 124–131.

⁸ Let me refer the reader merely to *Theological Investigations* V (London & Baltimore 1966), p. 131 sq. Regarding the dispute with L. Elders let me draw attention to the account by F. Ricken, '"Ecclesia ... universale salutis sacramentum": Theologische Erwägungen zur Lehre der Dogmatischen Konstitution "De Ecclesia" über die Kirchenzugehörigkeit', *Scholastik* XL (1965), pp. 352–388, esp. pp. 382–385 (note 147).

⁹ For a further presentation cf. the abundant documentation given by Kl. Riesenhuber, 'Der anonyme Christ, nach Karl Rahner' *ZKT* LXXXVI (1964), pp. 286–303.

certain circumstances surely last a long time, without it becoming at any time during this period impossible to say any longer 'aeternam salutem consequi possunt'. In its statements the Constitution on the Church is in no way implying that here in these cases salvation is achieved as it were in a substitute fashion by means of a purely natural morality. This would indeed contradict scripture and the magisterium.¹⁰ It is also excluded by the words of the Constitution itself: salvation is reached 'non sine divina gratia', 'sub influxu gratiae'.

There is no justification for regarding this grace as being supernatural in a merely ontic, pre-conscious sense, such as would be required for the positing of any moral act which, as far as consciousness was concerned, was purely natural. Rather must we conceive this grace as more than merely ontic, as also entering consciousness and therefore as engendering true faith in the theological sense, even though this is not yet reflective.¹¹ The lesser interpretation is also excluded by a remark in the same Council's decree on the Missions (no. 7), in which it is explicitly said that God 'in the unknown ways' of his grace can give the *faith* without which there is no salvation even to those who have not yet heard the preaching of the gospel. Although in the face of this theological optimism of the Council regarding salvation it remains the task of theology to show why the necessity of the gospel, of the Church and the sacraments are not thereby devalued, it is quite impossible to doubt that what is *meant* by the 'anonymous Christian' (the name itself is unimportant) is compatible with the Council's teaching, indeed is explicitly stated by it. Neither is this the place to demonstrate that such a theory in no way cripples the missionary impulse of the Church but rather puts before it the person to whom it addresses itself in his true hopeful condition so that it can approach him with confidence.

¹⁰ Cf. *DS* 3867 sqq.

¹¹ These two sentences are an amplification of the original German text made in the light of explanations furnished by the author himself. [Translator's note.]

LIST OF SOURCES¹

1 THE MAN OF TODAY AND RELIGION

The first version of this was published under the title 'Der Unternehmer und die Religion' in a publication of the consortium E. V. Bonn (Bonn 1962), pp. 26-42 (the lecture given on 26 October 1962). A revised version was given in a lecture in the German Library in Rome and published after renewed revision and expansion in *Der Seelsorger* XXXV (1965), pp. 18-30.

2 A SMALL QUESTION REGARDING THE CONTEMPORARY PLURALISM IN THE INTELLECTUAL SITUATION OF CATHOLICS AND THE CHURCH

First published in *Sinners der Zeit* XC (1965), pp. 191-199.

3 REFLECTIONS ON DIALOGUE WITHIN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

The speech of thanks at the celebration in connection with the bestowal of the Reuchlin Prize by the town of Pforzheim on 26 June 1965. The speech was printed in a revised form by the authorities of Pforzheim as a booklet under the same title. Cf. also *Sinners der Zeit* XC (1965), pp. 321-330.

4 IDEOLOGY AND CHRISTIANITY

A talk to Catholic students of the University of Erlangen on 15 July 1964, published in *Concilium* I (1965), pp. 475-483 (German edition). [This has appeared in another translation in the English edition of *Concilium* Vol. 6, No. 1 (June 1965), pp. 23-31.]

¹ We obviously cannot list here the numerous reprints in German or any of the translations which have appeared, apart from a few cases where there is some special justification for doing so.