
THE THEOLOGY OF KARL RAHNER: AN OVERVIEW WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CHRISTOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

- Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904–1984) was one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the twentieth century.
 - He was born in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany and was raised in a Catholic home. In 1922, he entered the Society of Jesus. As part of his Jesuit training, Rahner studied philosophy at Feldkirch, Austria and Pullach, Germany and then theology in Valkenburg, Holland. In 1936, he received his doctorate in theology from the University of Innsbruck in Austria.
 - Rahner’s academic and ecclesiastical life had its highs and lows. Before the Second Vatican Council he was censored by the magisterium only to become a theological expert (*peritus*) and one of the most influential figures there. He held several teaching posts, lectured widely, and wrote until his death just twenty-five days after his eightieth birthday.¹
 - Several decades after his death, Rahner’s legacy is still taking shape.
- Rahner wrote extensively on a wide range of subjects. A large portion of his bibliography is comprised of occasional works, and so he is not a systematic theologian in the conventional sense.
 - He did not develop a “system” of theology to address each traditional theological *loci*, nor did he write a proper systematic theology.
 - Still, you can trace the foundational elements of Rahner’s theology throughout his works.
 - He developed a generally cohesive and organic theology, which makes it suitable for comprehensive study. While unconventional from one perspective, his particular approach did not constrain his theological influence.
 - In fact, Rahner is well known for several controversial theological articulations, the chief of which is his trinitarian axiom.
 - This formulation has influenced a significant cross-section of Catholic and Evangelical theologians.
 - You may be familiar with his “rule” which states that the “‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”²

¹ Harvey Egan has compiled a chronology to accompany his brief biography of Rahner. Much of this information has been taken from, Harvey Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1998), 14–27. For an extensive biography of both Karl and Hugo Rahner, see Karl H. Neufeld, *Die Brüder Rahner: Eine Biographie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994).

² Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 22.

- Using different features of his theology, Rahner fashions *a comprehensive understanding of divine self-communication*. That's the heart of everything he does.

TRINITARIAN PERSONALITY

- Rahner develops his theology of trinitarian personality from the basic concern of his trinitarian axiom.
 - He is wary of how the “person” concept can be used in relation to God, and therefore he distinguishes between personhood as it relates to God and personhood as it relates to finite subjects.
 - In terms of the divine essence, God has no “other.” However, in terms of a philosophical definition of personhood, which involves self-consciousness and free agency, God is the absolute “person.”
- Rahner identifies the Father with the divine essence and argues that the Son and Spirit flow from this essence. This is similar to the Eastern trinitarian tradition.
 - But Rahner casts this generation or procession specifically as *self-communication*.
 - The Father is the “unoriginated God” who nevertheless communicates himself in two ways.³
 - It's important to realize then that the divine economic self-communication that humanity experiences in history has its foundation in an eternal self-communication from the Father.
 - This is precisely why Rahner identifies the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. The economic Trinity should be understood as a new concrete expression of the immanent Trinity. That is to say the experience of the Trinity in history is an expression of an eternal reality—the Father's eternal self-communication of Son and Spirit.
- So for our concerns here in *Doctrine of Christ*, the eternal Son of God is one aspect or instance of God's eternal self-communication. He is a “person,” eternally insofar as he is a *hypostasis*. But he is not a person in a philosophical sense.

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

- Rahner believes man possesses a twofold nature (spirit and historical), which corresponds to God's twofold self-communication (Holy Spirit and Son).
 - These twin aspects underscore and orient the dynamism of human existence, because man, as spirit in the world, is the capable recipient of God's gift of self.
 - This relationship between the divine giver and his intended recipient is thoroughly personal.
 - It is characterized by thought, emotion, and freedom.
 - God freely chooses whether to communicate himself, and human beings freely choose whether to accept that communication.
- But seeing that the acceptance of such a gift would have significant effects upon humanity, Rahner must ensure that the gift is both given and received. He does so via Christology.

³ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 118.

CHRISTOLOGY

- Rahner sees Christ as the *Realsymbol* between God and man, not simply representing and symbolizing the relationship but actualizing and intensifying it.
 - This understanding of the hypostatic union is in accord with his theological anthropology, specifically since Rahner understands that God desires to communicate himself to mankind in a free offer of grace.
 - The union of the human and divine natures in Christ becomes the means by which this self-communication happens, and it solidifies God's saving purpose.⁴
 - **God does in the person of Christ what he intends to do for all who open themselves in freedom.**
- Rahner finds no difficulty in the so-called "textbook" formulation of Christology you find in Aquinas insofar as it goes.
 - According to Rahner, this type of doctrine had a time and a place, but it is insufficient for the contemporary world. Language about *hypostases*, substances, and natures was appropriate for the patristic and medieval ages, but it is insufficient for expressing a contemporary Christology.
 - In his landmark essay, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World," Rahner attempted to remedy this situation by bringing Christology into the present day.⁵
 - In that work, he identifies two types of Christologies, which are differentiated initially by their respective starting points.
 - A Christology from below begins with humanity. Rahner calls this a "saving history" type of Christology.⁶
 - Alternately, a Christology from above, a "metaphysical" type, begins with Christ's divinity.⁷
 - These different approaches are not mutually exclusive, and both types of Christology have a place in Christian theology.
- But Rahner was reconceiving a Christology within an evolutionary view of the world. Vatican II's program of *aggiornamento* is then mirrored on a smaller, but no less significant, scale as Rahner transforms Aquinas's classic Christology.
 - For him, the hypostatic union accomplishes something much different. It is the climax of God's offer of self-communication and its acceptance by mankind.⁸
 - In his person, Christ became the climax of both offer and acceptance in history, and since it cannot be reversed, the offer is irrevocable.

⁴ Karl Rahner, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World," in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger, vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 183–184.

⁵ Rahner, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World."

⁶ Karl Rahner, "The Two Basic Types of Christology," in *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Bourke, vol. 13 (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 213.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁸ "And this is precisely what is meant by hypostatic union. It means this and, properly speaking, nothing else: in the human reality of Jesus, God's absolute saving purpose (the absolute event of God's self-communication to us) is simply, absolutely and irrevocably present; in it is present both the declaration made to us and its acceptance—something effected by God himself, a reality of God himself, unmixed and yet inseparable and hence irrevocable. This declaration, however, is the pledge of grace to us." Rahner, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World," 182–183.

- In Rahner’s theology, the hypostatic union must be situated within salvation history for this offer to be a meaningful personal exchange—not merely individually, but also universally or cosmically.
 - In a sense, the hypostatic union is a universal goal of human existence. Indeed, what occurs interior to the human nature in Christ’s hypostatic union is the same for all people who accept the free offer of grace given in Christ: “[T]he Hypostatic Union takes effect interiorly *for* the human nature of the Logos precisely in what, and really only in what, the same theology prescribes *for all* men as their goal and consummation, viz. the direct vision of God enjoyed by Christ’s created human soul. This same theology emphasizes the fact that the Incarnation occurred ‘for the sake of our salvation’, that it does not give any real increase in reality and life to the divine nature of the Logos, and that the prerogatives which accrued interiorly to the human reality of Jesus on account of the Hypostatic Union are of the same essential kind as those intended by grace also for other spiritual subjects.”⁹
- For Rahner, Jesus Christ is the New Humanity, and the hypostatic union in Christ is an advance upon what will happen for all humans who accept God’s free offer of grace.¹⁰
 - Rahner further relates the hypostatic union in Christ with that of the rest of humanity: “Whenever God—by his absolute self-communication—brings about man’s self-transcendence into God, in such a way that both these factors form the irrevocable promise made to all men which has already reached its consummation in this man, there we have a hypostatic union . . . In Christ, God’s self-communication takes place basically for all men, and there is ‘hypostatic union’ precisely in so far as this *unsurpassable* self-communication of God ‘is there’ irrevocably in a historically tangible and self-conscious manner.”¹¹
 - Whenever God’s self-communication “is there,” there is a “hypostatic union,” since God gives *himself* (a person, i.e. “*hypostasis*”) to *other people*.
- Only in Christ’s hypostatic union is a specific human nature united to the Logos. Yet Rahner intends to allow that singular hypostatic union to have significance for all of humanity.
 - In order to maintain mankind’s constitution in Christ, Rahner distinguishes between *union* and *assumption* at this point. Rahner identifies a difference between
 - (1) incarnational union with Christ (hypostatic union broadly conceived), which occurs for all people by virtue of Christ uniting himself to human nature in general, and
 - (2) the hypostatic union (narrowly conceived) between the Son of God and his individual human nature.¹²

⁹ Ibid., 180–181.

¹⁰ “Hence the thesis towards which we are working purports to show that, even though the Hypostatic Union is in its proper nature a unique event and—when seen in itself—is certainly the highest conceivable event, it is nevertheless an intrinsic factor of the whole process of the bestowal of grace on the spiritual creature in general.” Ibid., 181.

¹¹ Ibid., 182.

¹² It is helpful to note that Rahner distinguishes between the Hypostatic Union proper (capitalized in the English translation) and the ‘hypostatic union’ of God’s grace to each individual human nature (as in the broad sense mentioned above). There is no such distinction in capitalization in the German. Rahner makes a distinction between Christ’s hypostatic union and “hypostatic union” as it happens in each individual human by using Latin with reference to the latter. “Denn eben in uns ist diese Mitteilung möglich und bewirkt durch diese Einigung und Annahme, wie sie in der **hypostatischen Union** geschieht. Und es steht theologisch auf jeden Fall der Annahme nichts im Wege, daß Gnade und **unio hypostatica** nur zusammen gedacht werden können und al seine *Einheit* den einen *freien* Entschluß Gottes zur

- Therefore, the assumption of our human natures is directly involved with the union of Christ's human nature to the *hypostasis* of the Logos.
 - But the individual human natures of spiritual subjects are not *hypostatically* united to the Logos in the narrow sense of “hypostatic union.”
 - When the Son of God takes to himself a human nature, he not only is united to an individual human nature, but also to humanity in a general sense. Again, Jesus Christ is the New Humanity.
 - This assumption of a human nature is then the means by which union with humanity occurs: “This ‘assumption’ and ‘unification’ has the nature of a self-communication; there is ‘assumption’ so that God’s reality may be communicated to what is assumed, viz. the human nature (and in the first place the human nature of Christ). But this very communication which is aimed at by this ‘assumption’ is *the* communication by what we call grace and glory—and the latter are intended for all.”¹³
- For Rahner, God’s self-communication occurs precisely *through* the assumption of human nature.
 - It is the means by which divine self-communication happens—initially in Christ’s specific human nature, and subsequently, for all people as Christ assumes human nature generally.¹⁴
 - Hypostatic union in the narrow sense makes possible hypostatic union in the broad sense. The gift of God’s self-communication must always be wrapped in the union of divine and human natures, “For in us this communication is possible and effected precisely by this union and acceptance as it occurs in the Hypostatic Union.”¹⁵
 - He continues: “Hence, if we may put it this way, the Hypostatic Union does not differ from our grace by what is pledged in it, for this is grace in both cases (even in the case of Jesus). But it differs from our grace by the fact that Jesus is our pledge, and we ourselves are not the pledge but the recipients of God’s pledge to us.”¹⁶
 - The similarity between Christ’s hypostatic union and our own lies in the grace that is given: communion with God himself.

übernatürlichen Heilsordnung bedeuten. In Christus geschieht die Selbstmitteilung Gottes grundsätzlich an alle Menschen, und eben insofern diese *unüberbietbare* Selbstmitteilung Gottes in einer unwiderruflichen Weise geschichtlich greifbar und zu sich selbst gekommen ‘da ist’, ist **unio hypostatica** (italic emphasis original; bold mine).” Karl Rahner, “Die Christologie innerhalb evolutiver Weltanschauung,” in *Sämtliche Werke Band 15: Verantwortung der Theologie*, ed. Karl Kardinal Lehmann et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 238. There are other lower case references in the English when Rahner refers to the idea of a ‘hypostatic union’ in general. It appears the translator has simply used the context to distinguish these uses from the specific reference to the hypostatic union as it occurs in Christ.

¹³ Rahner, “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” 182.

¹⁴ “But this very communication which is aimed at by this ‘assumption’ is *the* communication by what we call grace and glory – and the latter are intended for all. It must not be objected that *this* (latter) communication is possible even without a hypostatic union, since it does in fact occur without it in our own case. For in us this communication is possible and effected precisely by this union and acceptance as it occurs in the Hypostatic Union. And, theologically speaking at least, there is nothing against the assumption that grace and hypostatic union can only be thought of together and that, as a unity, they signify one and the same *free* decision of God to institute the supernatural order of salvation.” Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 183. By ‘grace’ Rahner is referring to ‘uncreated grace,’ that is, God’s gift of himself.

- Christ in his human nature does not receive a different grace than the rest of humanity. It is simply that for him it is original.
 - The uniqueness of Christ’s hypostatic union lies particularly in the presence of the person of the Logos when the gift of grace is given to Christ’s specific human nature.
 - For Christ, pledge and recipient are identical; the union is an *auto*-union. In individual “hypostatic unions,” the uncreated grace is not united to the one who offers, but to those who are strictly recipients.¹⁷
- Rahner is never content with any one creedal formulation. This is not to say that he believes the ecumenical creeds (Chalcedon in particular) are incorrect, but that he views them as far from exhaustive.¹⁸ For Rahner, the contemporary theologian must recognize the significance as well as the provisionality of classical formulations.¹⁹

GRACE

- We’ve established the metaphysical means for a divine self-communication through theological anthropology and Christology. The next thing Rahner does in his comprehensive theology of divine self-communication is detail the effects of grace upon its recipients.
- He calls this gift of self an ontological self-communication that results in an entitative change in the recipient.
 - In the hypostatic union, all of humanity is represented, when Christ is *first*, the potentiality of transcendence and reception of God’s self-communication and *second*, the consummate acceptance of this gift of self in his own personal and existential experience.
 - Jesus Christ was the first absolute “yes” to the offer of the divine gift of self, and therefore, the hypostatic union became the axis upon which God’s gracious plan for humanity turns. ***Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, actualizes simultaneously the gift and reception of divine self-communication.***

CRITICISMS

- Internal inconsistencies render Rahner’s program implausible, and consequently, Rahner cannot deliver what he initially promises.
 - For example, the thoroughly personal context of Rahner’s concept of self-communication causes problems for his doctrine of trinitarian personality.
 - Rahner insists that man is the divinely created, appointed, and equipped recipient of divine self-communication.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Anyone who takes seriously the ‘historicity’ of human truth . . . must see that neither the abandonment of a formula nor its preservation in a petrified form does justice to human understanding . . . This holds good of the Chalcedonian formulation of the mystery of Jesus too. For this formula is—a formula. Thus we have not only the right but the duty to look at it as end *and* as beginning.” Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 150.

¹⁹ “Anyone who thinks that he is able to express what is meant in the classical Christology of the Incarnation in another way without doing violence to what is meant, he may express it differently. This presupposes that he respects the official teaching of the church as a critical norm for his own way of expressing it, and that he knows that this teaching has to be an indispensable norm for him when he enters into the public discourse of the church.” Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 289.

- This communication is twofold: it's given as both Son and Spirit.
 - Since the Godhead knows no genuinely personal “other” within the Trinity, Rahner is unable to identify a personal recipient of intra-trinitarian self-communication.
 - And therefore, since the Son and Spirit are fundamentally self-communications of the Father, Rahner directs his trinitarian theology externally by connecting his conceptions of *hypostasis* and divine self-communication to humanity through his Christology.
 - In practice Rahner employs an anthropocentric theological methodology that begins with human experience, because Rahner must go to humanity in order to complete his doctrine of the Trinity.
 - But Rahner's error is deeper than a misplaced methodological choice.
 - It is a function of internal tensions and inconsistencies that arise primarily within his trinitarian theology, and specifically, with his definitions of *hypostasis*, *perichoresis*, and hypostatic consciousness.
 - These are deep-seated and systemic issues that, in spite of their common cause and relation, force his overall theological program into internal inconsistency.
 - If you're interested in these criticisms, I develop them in my dissertation. I'll have a link for you.
- To remedy these ills, I propose two principal alternative formulations: first, a definition of perichoretic personality and second, a model of covenantal image conformity.
 - Rahner's desire to explicate the personal union and communion offered at creation and then consummated in salvation is sound, but his theological formulations prevent him from explaining how God gives the gift of *himself* if indeed he is essentially trinitarian.
 - Leaning upon the work of Cornelius Van Til, I offer a definition of perichoretic personality that sustains the equal ultimacy of trinitarian unity and diversity.
 - Rahner's model of the “unoriginate” Father who communicates himself arises largely from a deficient methodological starting point. He starts with human experience. It also arises out of a deficient understanding of trinitarian personality that subordinates the Son and Spirit to the Father.
 - As a result, ***Rahner's theology is trinitarian in delivery only and unitarian or patrimonial in content.***
 - In response to Rahner's ontological model of self-communication that leads to entitative effects, I offer a covenantal framework for understanding the beatific vision.
 - This model advocates a program of covenantal image conformity as the means by which the triune God replicates his glory analogously in his people through the resurrected Christ (cf. Gen 1:26–27; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18).
 - Only by sharing in his image can God's people truly experience consummated union and communion with the *triune* God.

A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SECONDARY LITERATURE ON KARL RAHNER

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OTHER RESOURCES

- Dissertation links
 - <http://camden.bucey.org/dissertation>
 - https://www.academia.edu/9840681/The_Triune_Gift_of_Self_A_Reformed_Critique_of_Karl_Rahners_Theology_of_Divine_Self-Communication
- Reformed Forum resources on Karl Rahner
 - Trinitarian Personality in the Theologies of Barth and Rahner <<http://reformedforum.org/ctc230/>>
 - Vatican II Inclusivism <<http://reformedforum.org/ctc285/>>
 - Approaches to Christology <<http://reformedforum.org/ctc279/>>
 - Modern Roman Catholicism <<http://reformedforum.org/ctc144/>>
 - Are We Together? A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism <<http://reformedforum.org/rmr52/>>