

# MOVING MYSTICISM TO THE CENTRE

**Karl Rahner (1904-1984)**

*Patricia Carroll*

IN A 1977 LECTURE on ‘the spirituality of the Church of the future’, Karl Rahner spoke of the new cultural context in which tomorrow’s Christians would find themselves. Spirituality would always be a relationship with the living God,

... who has revealed Himself in the history of humanity, who has placed Himself within the innermost heart of His world created by Him and within humanity—Himself as sustaining ground, most central dynamic, and ultimate goal.<sup>1</sup>

But there would be far fewer external supports for Christianity; ecumenism would increase in importance; spirituality would be more focused on the essentials of Christianity than on particular devotions, and it would be marked by a new sense of solidarity. In this context, Rahner recalled what he had first written a decade earlier: ‘the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not be a Christian any more’. By ‘mystic’, he meant a person who has had a ‘genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence’.<sup>2</sup>

Rahner is here moving mysticism from the margins of Christian life to the centre; this version of mysticism is not a mark of the privileged soul, but rather a feature of people’s everyday experience as they struggle to live the Christian way of life.

<sup>1</sup> ‘The Spirituality of the Church of the Future’, *TI* 20, 143-153, here 145. Throughout this issue, *TI* refers to Rahner’s essays as collected in 23 English volumes, and translated by various hands: *Theological Investigations* (London/New York: Darton, Longman and Todd/Crossroad: 1961-1992). Translations have sometimes been corrected.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Spirituality of the Church of the Future’, 149.

### ***Ignatian Roots***

Rahner's account of mysticism is strikingly contemporary, and often formulated in terms of the future's needs. Nevertheless, Rahner arrived at his vision through his study of the Christian past, in particular through his reading of Ignatius Loyola. With his brother Hugo, Rahner was a major contributor to the rediscovery of Ignatian sources in the years before World War II.<sup>3</sup> It was in the sixteenth-century Ignatius, living as he did at the dawn of modernity, that Rahner found a prototype for contemporary spirituality. Ignatius was strikingly creative in his emphasis on the subject, on interiority, and on the subjective striving for self-reflection and self-responsibility. Furthermore, Rahner clearly stated on many occasions that his own theological thinking sprang from the practice of the Ignatian Exercises.

For Rahner, Ignatius was a mystic, one in whom God's creative grace had shone through, and whose encounter with God in Christ had led him to be an agent of service and transformation in the world. The experience of Ignatius the mystic modelled a spirituality of world-involvement.

### ***God in All Things***

Rahner insisted throughout his life and work that God is the Holy Mystery who pervades *the whole* of reality, the incomprehensible ground of *all* being. God is not one mystery among others, but *the* Mystery, one who can never be known or grasped:

... the concept of God is not a grasp of God by which a person masters the mystery, but it is letting oneself be grasped by the mystery which is present and yet always withdrawing itself.<sup>4</sup>

The human person is fundamentally orientated towards this mystery, an orientation manifest in the questioning spirit of human beings, in the human search for meaning and fulfilment.

<sup>3</sup> See Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), especially 68-98.

<sup>4</sup> *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated by William V. Dych (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978 [1976]), 54. The German words for 'concept' and 'grasp' are closely related, and Rahner is playing on them here.

*Human Questioning*

The range of questions which human beings ask is limitless:

Every supposable goal of knowledge and action has always already been made relative again: it has become provisional, a step. Every answer is always just the emergence of a new question. One experiences oneself as the infinite possibility, because, of necessity, one is constantly placing, both in practice and in theory, every sought-after result in question again, constantly setting it again within a broader horizon that arises before one in ways that cannot be foreseen.<sup>5</sup>

This questioning restlessness is at the heart of what it means to be human. We are dynamic beings, always in process, always *en route*.

To evoke God's presence to this movement, Rahner uses two different images. He speaks firstly of light: we do not see the light when we look at things but rather the light is that by which we see. Similarly the God whom no one has ever seen nevertheless enables our every perception and act. He also speaks of God as a horizon. Human beings know particular objects through and within an infinite horizon. God at once contains and transcends our questing selves, the movement that we are. All human awareness of this-worldly things is accompanied by an awareness of what is beyond the world, and should by rights recognise itself as dependent on that transcendent source. And the point applies also to human action: in all our doings we are in touch with God:

Whether one says so expressly or not, whether one lets this truth emerge or represses it, the human person is always in their mental life orientated towards a Holy Mystery as the ground of their being. This mystery, which as inexplicit and therefore unexpressed horizon is always encircling and sustaining the tiny circle of our everyday experience of knowing and acting, is what is most primordial, but as such also what is most hidden and least noticed. It speaks by being silent; it is present by pointing us, in its absence, towards our limits.<sup>6</sup>

The spirituality which emerges from this vision is radically optimistic and all-inclusive. All human experience, conscious or unconscious, is pregnant with God's presence.

<sup>5</sup> *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> 'The Need for a "Short Formula" of Christian Faith', *TI* 9, 117-126, here 122.



*Rahner Hearing the Word*

*Knowledge and Love*

It must be stressed that the Holy Mystery can never be fully grasped by us as if it were an object, one among others. This Holy Mystery at the centre of all things remains concealed, and in one sense permanently unknown; it can never really be the direct object of our knowledge. Our knowing is contained in unknowing:

The moment we become aware of ourselves precisely *as* the limited being that we radically and in so many ways are, we have already overstepped these boundaries .... We have experienced ourselves as beings who are constantly passing beyond themselves towards that which cannot be circumscribed, towards that which, precisely

as having this radical status, must be called infinite, towards that which is sheer mystery.<sup>7</sup>

Thus our relationship to this Mystery is not a matter of comprehending knowledge but responsive love. In one of his early prayers, Rahner muses ruefully:

... most of what I have learnt, I have learnt in order to forget it again and to experience in the area of knowledge too my poverty, narrowness, and limitation.<sup>8</sup>

'Mere knowledge' does not satisfy. How, then, can human beings draw near to the heart of all things, the true heart of reality? Like many of the mystics before him, Rahner answers unequivocally, 'not by knowledge alone, but by the full flower of knowledge, love'. And this loving, experiential knowledge is transformative:

It is only the knowledge gained through experience, through living and suffering, that does not in the end disappoint and turn into boredom and oblivion, but instead fills the heart with the knowing wisdom of experienced love. It is not what I have thought out, but what I have lived through and suffered through that should fill my mind and my heart. It fills the heart with the wisdom of love, instead of crushing it with the disappointment of boredom and final oblivion. It is not the result of our own speculation, but the golden harvest of what we have lived through and suffered through, that has power to enrich the heart and nourish the spirit.<sup>9</sup>

### *Freedom*

Yet love implies freedom; our love for God's infinity is a matter of choice. The capacity for this kind of choice is an inescapable characteristic of human existence; even the refusal to make such a choice nevertheless amounts to one. To choose to be a teacher or a musician or an industrialist involves a whole set of directions and actions expressive of a response, whether positive or negative, deep or shallow, to the invitation of Holy Mystery. We are responsible for our

<sup>7</sup> 'The Experience of God Today', *TI* 11, 149-165, here 155-156.

<sup>8</sup> 'God of Knowledge', in *Encounters with Silence*, translated by James M. Demske (London: Burns and Oates, 1975 [1937]), 27.

<sup>9</sup> 'God of Knowledge', 30.

choices, and at some point we shall be called to give account.<sup>10</sup> To the extent that we are conscious of our freedom as existing within the infinite horizon of being, we are compelled to make a decision for or against this mystery at the centre of all existence—a decision which we must gradually try to integrate our whole life long. We can choose to open ourselves in surrender to the mystery, or we can turn away and make an absolute, an idol, of some finite object or objects in the world.

#### *Inclusiveness*

When, therefore, we speak of human experience, we are already speaking of the divine. Moreover, the experience of God is not just for a privileged few. All human beings are *already* in relationship with God; all are touched immediately by God's self-communication, by God's gift of God's own self. Moreover, if God is at the heart of everything in our lives, God is not confined to the experiences that are joy-filled or filled with consolation. God is as much present in the darkness as in the light.

#### **Theological Transformations**

This conviction of God present in all things, in a way that could be experienced, led Rahner to develop decisively the theological tradition he inherited. Two themes are particularly important for this essay: grace, and spiritual growth.

#### *Grace*

Rahner's innovations in the theology of grace were fundamentally four.<sup>11</sup> The first was about the priority of God's self-gift in the Christian life. In conventional Catholic theology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the gift of God's own self (confusingly called uncreated grace) was seen as a *consequence* of a life of good Christian practice (created graces). Rahner reversed the order. Uncreated grace, God's own self, was the central principle of our every act. The human person is,

<sup>10</sup> See *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 37-38.

<sup>11</sup> For fuller and more technical accounts, see Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 149-162; Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, 32-67.

... the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God .... The word 'self-communication' really is intended to mean that God, in God's most proper reality and activity, is making Himself the innermost constitutive element of the human person.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, and consequently, grace was not to be understood as a superstructure or an appendage to human reality, imposed from outside upon human beings by some divine decree. The human person lives within grace from the outset, at least in principle, and is called to share God's own life. God's creation has as its innermost purpose God's loving gift of self to what is not God. That means that there is a supernatural capacity in us for God's gratuitously self-giving love from the beginning. Rahner resolves the paradoxes here by talking of humanity as being endowed with a 'supernatural existential'. Our whole being (our 'existential') is ordered, and therefore receptive, to a sheer gift of God, over and beyond the gift of creation ('supernatural').<sup>13</sup>

**The human person lives within grace from the outset**

Thirdly, Rahner stressed the universality of God's salvific will. Less generous religious imaginations regard grace as a scarce commodity, and they may hold that there is no salvation outside explicit Christianity. Rahner posited that God's grace must be universal. God is not finite, and does not act episodically; therefore no area of human life is excluded from the gracious presence of God. This optimistic view was reflected in Vatican II's two major documents on the Church, *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Rahner challenged the view, standard in Tridentine scholasticism, that grace, being supernatural, was necessarily beyond human experience. It may be dim and indistinct, but if it is a human reality, it is an experiential one. Both Scripture and Church tradition point towards a consciously experienced graced relationship:

Grace, the Holy Spirit, the working of the Spirit in the proper sense of a divinising grace that really contains within it the Spirit of God

<sup>12</sup> *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116.

<sup>13</sup> See 'Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace', *TI* 1, 297-317, especially 305; *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 123-124, 126-133.

<sup>14</sup> *Lumen gentium*, n. 16; *Gaudium et spes*, n. 22.

as such, is, I believe, something which (let me be careful) has its effects as such also within human consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

From these innovations in the theology of grace, it follows that mysticism is a universal phenomenon. If God's self-communication in grace is always present to consciousness, it follows that human beings may experience God in any sphere of life, from the mundane to the sublime, since all in the end is sublime. Thus Rahner can speak of everyday mysticism, situated within so-called ordinary Christian living:

It seems to me ... to be the task of Christian theology as a whole and of the Christian theology of mysticism in particular to show and to render intelligible the fact that what is really the fundamental manifestation of a mystical transcendence-experience is also already present, even if unreflectively, in the simple act of Christian living in faith, hope and love, present as that act's sustaining ground—and that such unreflective (let us say) transcendence given out of grace towards the nameless mystery we call God is already there in this faith, hope and love.<sup>16</sup>

### *Mysticism*

What, then, are we to make of growth in grace? How can we have a mystical 'ascent' if God's grace is present to *all* human experience from the beginning? In a very important early essay, written in 1944, Rahner both criticizes and reinterprets the traditional languages of Christian perfection and mystical ascent. Almost inevitably, such language leads us to think of the spiritual life quantitatively, in terms of divisions and stages, with increasingly 'more' grace at 'higher' stages. Rahner's smear-phrase for this way of thinking was "ontic" sanctity.<sup>17</sup> Before we know where we are, we are speaking of continual 'increases' of grace, of people becoming 'more perfect' or 'holier', of spiritual progress being dependent on certain tasks being accomplished, of those on the lower 'rungs' of the 'ladder' being somehow 'further' from God, and therefore 'less perfect'.

<sup>15</sup> 'Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace', *TI* 16, 35-51, here 39.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Experience of Transcendence from the Standpoint of Christian Dogmatics', *TI* 18, 173-188, here 176.

<sup>17</sup> 'Reflections on the Problem of the Gradual Ascent to Christian Perfection', *TI* 3, 3-23, here 11.



Rahner subverts these vulgar ideas. The talk of growth and ascent in the tradition has to be understood strictly in terms of our *response* to God's grace, not as making a statement about God's initiative as such. Some may indeed have reached exceptional levels of maturity in their relationship with God, and been drawn into passive, non-conceptual forms of prayer. This is because our response may change developmentally. Hence empirical psychology becomes important for the study of spirituality; hence too we may legitimately speculate that the mystics exhibit the dynamics of high psychic development. Moreover, we can make the same point in more 'lay' terms by suggesting that human consent to God's grace can deepen existentially. The quality of the graced encounter can always be enhanced. But it is wrong to see them as having entered a fundamentally different sphere of existence where the ordinary norms of Christian living no longer apply. It is equally wrong to see everyday Christian living as merely a preparation for a 'mystical union' that is somehow different in kind. Still less are such mystics—in the conventional sense—to be understood as privy to 'more' grace. It is just that they experience in an extraordinary way the grace which, we may trust, all Christians experience in a more hidden, and perhaps less developed, way.<sup>18</sup>

### **Everyday Mysticism**

Rahner may be an important theologian, but he generally evokes the Holy Mystery in simple, everyday terms. He invites people to remember some quite normal human experiences. He evokes, for example,

- a state of sudden aloneness when everything is called into question ...
- a moment when the silence resounds more penetratingly than the accustomed din of everyday life ...
- a point when one is brought face to face with one's own freedom and responsibility ...
- a sudden experience of being absolutely and unconditionally accepted in love.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> 'The Experience of Transcendence from the Standpoint of Christian Dogmatics', 175-176.

<sup>19</sup> 'The Experience of God Today', 157.

It is everyday life, rather than explicit prayer or meditation, that leads us to the Mystery: experiences of aloneness, of freedom and responsibility, of judgment, of receiving love, of facing death, of the peace which comes from giving up attachments. It is in ordinary life that the Mystery breaks in upon our awareness:

... grace has its particular history in human beings' day-to-day life with its splendours and breakdowns, and is really experienced there.<sup>20</sup>

Rahner is here developing a more inclusive, less elitist model of mysticism and of Christianity. He is distinguishing between the *reality* of grace and *conventional constructions* of grace. The remarkable phenomena often referred to in the literature about the mystics are secondary, as are the monastic connotations of much spiritual writing. The crucial consequence is that there is no necessity for Christians to extract themselves from the world in order to experience something of the divine. Rather the presence of Holy Mystery is to be discovered in the midst of the world.

### ***Positive and Negative Experiences of God***

In his reflection 'Experience of the Holy Spirit', Rahner invites the reader to consider how the experience of the mystics could possibly have anything to do with those who see themselves as ordinary everyday Christians. He insists that the experiences of which the mystics speak,

... are certainly not events that are absolutely outside the experience of an ordinary Christian ... the witness of the mystics regarding their experiences gives testimony to an experience that every Christian, indeed every human being, can have and can ask for, but which they can also easily overlook or repress.<sup>21</sup>

It is wrong to see the mystics as merely giving us 'an account of a country that we ourselves have never entered'.<sup>22</sup> The spiritual tradition speaks of both the positive and the negative ways, of experiences where there is a positive sense that God is encountered, and of the encounter with God's Mystery in situations of seeming negativity.

<sup>20</sup> 'On the Theology of Worship', *TI* 19, 141-149, here 147.

<sup>21</sup> 'Experience of the Holy Spirit', *TI* 18, 189-210, here 193.

<sup>22</sup> 'Experience of the Holy Spirit', 195.

For some, then,

... the greatness and glory, goodness, beauty, and transparency of the particular realities of our experience point as a promise towards the eternal light and the eternal life.

But perhaps, Rahner suggests, it is negative situations where the experience of God is clearer:

... when the definable limits of everyday realities break down and dissolve, when we experience such realities going under, when the lights which illuminate the tiny island of our everyday go out, and the questions becomes inescapable: is the night that surrounds us the emptiness of absurdity and death, or the blessed Christmas which, already lit from within, is promising eternal day.<sup>23</sup>

Rahner lists twelve examples of such moments, hoping to spark off the memory of similar events in the lives of his readers. These include choosing to trust and hope in a hopeless situation, forgiving without acknowledgement, bearing pain patiently, and taking up the burden of responsibility. Precisely at such moments, 'God is there', and 'liberating grace'.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps we can end by highlighting what is important and creative in Rahner's vision. Firstly, by claiming that the subject-matter of theology, God's grace, is a matter of human experience, Rahner broke down the barriers between theology and spirituality that had become increasingly rigid from the late



*A cartoon of Rahner drawn by an anonymous student in about 1938*

<sup>23</sup> 'Experience of the Holy Spirit', 199-200.

<sup>24</sup> Rahner, 'Experience of the Holy Spirit', 203.

middle ages onwards. In particular, the spiritual and mystical had become detached from everyday Christian life, and had come to appear as the preserve of an elite. Rahner re-establishes the continuities between so-called 'extraordinary' mystical experience and the everyday life of Christian faith, hope and love.

Secondly, Rahner sees the experience of God as open to all, including those who are outside Christianity. Though people remain free to accept or reject God's call, everyone is invited to the immediacy of God's presence.

Thirdly, Rahner's version of mysticism is not one of interiority alone. Every human activity has a mystical dimension, and everyday mysticism involves self-emptying, not in pure interiority but in service of others and in the trustful endurance of seeming emptiness.

Fourthly, and above all, Rahner moves mysticism back from the margins of Christian self-understanding to a more authentic, central place within everyday Christian life. If Christianity is to survive in a post-Christian culture, mystical awareness understood in these terms is, as Rahner asserted, vital. Moreover, the loss of cultural supports for Christianity is not simply to be lamented, and perhaps not to be lamented at all. It may be that this very loss is the means through which the Holy Mystery has called us to a deeper, more authentic, and more inclusive union.

*Patricia Carroll* was born in Scotland, and now works in London, both in a parish and as Course Director in Education for Parish Service. She holds an MA in Christian Spirituality from Heythrop College, University of London, and has a keen interest in Karl Rahner.