

KARL RAHNER AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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DURING THE 1970s, A NEW CHURCH AND A NEW THEOLOGY arose in Latin America. This article is a personal reflection on what Karl Rahner has meant for me in that context, though I hope that what I say will apply to liberation theology more broadly. I write out of the life-experience in El Salvador that has led me to read with new eyes the theology I had previously studied, in which Rahner's work was a very important element. I am also writing out of my close personal and intellectual relationship with Ignacio Ellacuría, Rahner's student in Innsbruck between 1958 and 1962. On account of his defence of faith and justice, Ellacuría, as many will know, was murdered on 16 November 1989, along with five other Jesuits and two female workers from the university in which he taught. But we should remember that Ellacuría was not just Rahner's pupil. He took forward important ideas in Rahner's theology, as he sought to express them in his own historical situation and in a way appropriate for the world of the poor.

This article begins with an account of Rahner's attitude towards the new things that were happening ecclesially and theologically in Latin America during the last years of his life. Then I shall try to explore Rahner's influence on liberation theology.

The Demands of a New Situation

In an interview he gave to a Spanish magazine shortly before his death, Rahner was asked what he thought about the current state of the Church. Rahner replied in terms that have proved themselves only too true: 'in general, we are living through a "wintry season"'.¹ People still

¹ *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of his Life*, edited by Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, translation edited by Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 39. As the interview was originally published in Spanish, we follow the Spanish version here.



Jon Sobrino, preaching at a memorial Mass for Maryknoll missionaries martyred in El Salvador

quote these words today as a kind of lament or protest. But Rahner added something that has, unfortunately, been forgotten: 'however, there are some parts of the Church where there is a very animated, charismatic life, one that yields hope'. He was referring to the creative new developments happening in Churches like those of Latin America: their witness, their praxis, their theology and above all their martyrs. When he used the word 'charismatic', he was not implying any similarity with

Pentecostalism. Rather he was indicating that in these Churches discipleship of Jesus was flourishing, along with a genuine life of mutuality and a gospel freedom far more Christian than anything offered by the Enlightenment. It is worth asking why these words of Rahner, full as they were of hope and of a sense of new growth, have remained unknown among Christians in rich countries, and why people have quoted just the phrase about the wintry season. This does not do justice to Rahner, and it is quite unfair to the reality of Latin American Christianity.

When I met Rahner in Milwaukee in 1979, he asked me with great interest and solicitude what the effect had been of the recent assembly of bishops at Puebla in Mexico. Had it maintained the momentum of its prophetic predecessor in 1968 at Medellín, or had it rather strengthened the retrenchment that was already being promoted in various official circles? And it is well known that two weeks before his death, on 16 March 1984, he wrote a letter to the Cardinal Archbishop of Lima defending Gustavo Gutiérrez' theology against the charge of being unorthodox. This theology, Rahner said, was in many ways very original, because it was 'at the service of evangelization in a

specific situation'.² There was something in the churches of Latin America that attracted Rahner both as a human being and as a Christian. He admired such bishops as Hélder Câmara,³ he recognised Oscar Romero as a martyr.⁴ I do not know how much Rahner knew or intuited about the Base Ecclesial Communities, but I think he would have understood what was most important about them: their rootedness in lived reality. Rahner struggled mightily against docetism in Christology—the idea that Jesus was really a divine being who just appeared to be human—and these communities represented the overcoming of what we can call ecclesial docetism. I think Rahner would have applauded what Ellacuría used to say about what makes the Church's institution Christian:

The Church is both mother and teacher, but for different reasons. Moreover, her maternal character is more fundamental than her teaching role. Her mission of giving and transmitting life is more important than that of sanctioning specific teachings with her authority.⁵

An important part of the new reality emerging from Latin America was its theology: liberation theology. I do not think that Rahner had any detailed knowledge of it, but he was certainly aware intuitively of the fundamental issues at stake and he supported it. This was by no means something to be taken for granted; other great figures of his generation, such as Jacques Maritain, Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar had no idea of how to respond to this emergent reality. Liberation theology was stammering out its insights without much conceptual profundity. It was coming from distant, unknown places, and its future was uncertain. It nevertheless represented a searchingly critical question to European theology, including its more enlightened, post-Conciliar versions.

² The letter can be found in the Swiss journal *Orientierung*, 49 (1985), 54.

³ When adopting Ignatius' persona in 'Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit', Rahner alluded to Ignatius' well-known resistance to the idea of Jesuit bishops, but added, 'If it is a bishop like Hélder Câmara, then one of you can certainly be that, because he risks life and limb for the poor'. See *Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), 23.

⁴ 'Dimensions of Martyrdom: A Plea for the Broadening of a Classical Concept', *Concilium*, 163 (March 1983), 9-11, at 10.

⁵ Ignacio Ellacuría, 'Liberación', in *Revista latinoamericana de teología*, 30 (1993), 228.

That Rahner paid serious attention to this theology in his seventies, when most people are long set in their ways, demonstrates his exceptional openness. This was an openness which he shared with Pope John XXIII, who convoked the Council when he was almost eighty, and with figures such as Oscar Romero, who in his sixties underwent a profound personal conversion and transformed his local church in a way quite without parallel in recent times.

Rahner both saw and defended the novelty of this theology. He recognised that more was at stake than a radical approach to social and ethical problems; liberation theology was *theology*. He saw the ground for such novelty in the pluralism which he regarded as essential to theology—a conviction which he repeated regularly in his final years. And the need for such a theology impressed itself upon him all the more as he came to recognise the reality of injustice and oppression as a scandal confronting so-called Enlightenment rationality and democratic freedom.

Rahner was thus open-minded, both ecclesiastically and intellectually. And this open-mindedness extended beyond the concerns more standard in the European academy: evolution, Christian-Marxist dialogue, ecumenism, the development of the Council's teaching. It could embrace also something that was much less familiar, much more radically new, something that was stirring in a far-off continent that many (including many theologians and others well placed in the Church) were tempted to write off as underdeveloped.

Rahner's Influence on Liberation Theology

To set out Rahner's influence on liberation theology inevitably involves oversimplification. It was Rahner's dogmatic theology, rather than his philosophy, that was crucial in this connection. And we must remember that there are many different liberation theologies, even in Latin America. His influence was probably unconscious and unintentional, enabling liberation theologians to develop approaches that were new, and distinctively Latin American. Of this I am convinced, though it is no easy task to specify just what form Rahner's contribution took.

For me, Rahner's contribution to liberation theology centred on the fundamental attitude with which he undertook the theological

task, the existential disposition with which he set about making theological sense of reality. Rahner had no special insight into realities central for the new theology such as the liberation of the poor, but his way of approaching God through reflection on human reality, and of approaching human reality through reflection on God, greatly benefited liberation theology at its origins. Let me simply mention some aspects of what I mean.

Theology and Reality

What struck me in Rahner's theology was how *reality itself* was its foundation. The point may seem obvious, but there are theologies that start from preconceived notions in which this principle is not often observed. Be that as it may, Rahner was outstanding in his fidelity to the real.

In his well known article on the theology of the symbol, Rahner wrote of how all realities were symbolic because they 'necessarily "express" themselves in order to attain their own nature'.⁶ Perhaps I am overstating the point, but I think that Rahner's theology can be understood as a service to this process. Rahner was able to convey a taste for lived reality. In Latin, the words for 'taste' and 'wisdom' are connected, and Rahner was, in the root sense of the word, a sapiential thinker.

A number of Rahner's formulations bear witness to this gift. He could write of how the different Christian mysteries, in the plural,

... are merely intrinsic aspects of the one Mystery with which the Christian doctrine of revelation confronts the human person.⁷

And there were other examples:

I think that to be a Christian is the most simple injunction laid upon us, the easy burden of which the Gospel speaks that is quite simple, and, as such, so weighty. When you carry it, it carries you; and the longer you live, the heavier and the lighter it will become. In the end we are left with mystery, but it is the mystery of Jesus.⁸

⁶'The Theology of the Symbol', *TI* 4, 223-252, here 224.

⁷'The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology', *TI* 4, 36-73, here 36.

⁸Karl Rahner and Karl-Heinz Weger, *Our Christian Faith*, translated by Francis McDonagh (London: Search, 1980 [1980]), 178-179.

Tomorrow's devout person will either be a mystic—someone who has 'experienced' something—or else they will no longer be devout at all.⁹

...only the person pardoned knows themselves to be a sinner.

And remember, too, how his first big article reacted against the conventional tradition with the plaintive 'it *can't* be like *this*'.¹⁰ Rahner would think, ruminate, argue—but the process ended not with a conclusion arrived at through logical steps, nor with the rounding off of a rational argument, but rather with proclamation of the reality that was expressing itself.

Mutatis mutandis, I believe that the foundational moments of liberation theology were also marked by this insistence on placing reality at the centre of thinking. Liberation theology did not begin with concepts or sophisticated arguments, but with reality. In Ignatian language, it discovered its 'principle and foundation' in this reality, the in-breaking of the poor, and stayed close to this foundational reality amid all the theorizing.



Ignacio Ellacuría (1930-1989)

To put the point more graphically: liberation theology's fundamental assertion and conviction is that the poor—and God in the poor—have *broken into* history. The believer, the human person, has to respond to this reality, indeed correspond to it. We are charged to liberate the poor and, in Ellacuría's phrase, to take them down from their cross. Theology can no longer be the ideology that fosters oppression. None of these convictions is just the result of a theoretical argument; they

⁹'Christian Living Formerly and Today', *TI* 7, 3-24, here 15.

¹⁰'Remarks on the Theological Treatise *de Trinitate*', *TI* 4, 77-102, here 87.

come from an honest and hopeful option to let lived reality be central, to let it speak, to hear its word, to let it guide us and call forth our response.

A further scandalous and novel step—though one seen more in liberation theology than in Rahner—is the recognition that salvation lies precisely in these poor people. They are sustaining us; they are enlightening us about God and about ourselves; in some undeserved and unexpected way, they are keeping our hope alive. Liberation theology does not *conclude* all this from the ideas it had before (though it was certainly schooled in older theologies); rather it *discovers* and *extends* what it *finds* as it engages *lived reality*. ‘The glory of God is the poor person who is alive.’ ‘You—who are poor and who are victims—are the suffering servant of God for today, the crucified people.’ ‘The poor are evangelizing us.’ These pithy phrases, from Archbishop Romero, from Ellacuría, from the Puebla assembly, *proclaim what is actually happening*. They match Rahner for radicality and frankness.

Reality as Mystery

This reality has a mystery at its heart. God is the mystery *par excellence*, and the human person is the being confronted with mystery. Rahner insists that God is the *Holy Mystery* who, without ceasing to be mystery, is essentially salvific—no longer is there any question of God’s either saving or condemning us. This conviction runs right into the details of Rahner’s Christology and ecclesiology. Thus the Church of this God, by virtue of its affinity with God, can *canonize*, pronounce where absolute *salvation* can be found. But it cannot *condemn*; it cannot make a similar pronouncement about damnation.

Rahner has a deeper sense of God’s mystery than other standard progressive theologians, one that is matched in liberation theology. Gutiérrez places mystery, God’s mystery, at the centre. Without being artificial, I believe the liberation theology understands the poor person as mystery: not just a particular case that makes ethical demands, nor even just as a person who might be saved, but rather as a *reality freighted with the Mystery*.

The inbreaking of the poor person, and of God within them, recalls much of Rahner’s account of mystery. The poor person is the Other who is distant, who cannot be manipulated; because they have been oppressed, they are different and demanding. But at the same time they are the Other who is close, saving, the Holy Mystery. Thus

Ellacuría could write of the crucified people as the presence of the mystery of God, and regard this presence as itself saving. As is too little known, he spoke of a *soteriology of history*.¹¹

Reality and the Sacramental

One point on which Rahner was insistent was that reality is intrinsically symbolic: it seeks to express itself. It is well known that Rahner, along with others such as Otto Semmelroth, developed an understanding of the Church as itself sacramental, and of the seven



Guatemala: The Feast of All Saints

sacraments as an expression of this primordial sacramentality.¹² But all this is grounded in the sacramentality of Jesus. Let it suffice to recall Rahner's brilliant interpretation of the Incarnation: when God became human, Christ's flesh (*sarx*) was not a mere livery; it was, simply and radically, the manifestation of the divine in our world.¹³ On this basis, Rahner could speak of the eternal significance of Jesus' humanity for our relationship with God.¹⁴ Ellacuría used to add, by way of commentary, that this world was a world of sin: becoming flesh was not just a metaphysical descent, but rather an immersion in a deathly historical reality.

¹¹ Ignacio Ellacuría, 'The Crucified People', in *Mysterium liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, edited by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 580-603.

¹² See *The Church and the Sacraments*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1963 [1961]).

¹³ 'The Theology of the Symbol', 237-240.

¹⁴ The title of an important essay in *TI 3*, 35-47.

Though liberation theology has not developed a theory of the sacraments, the idea of the Church as primordial sacrament is certainly present within it. The central conviction of liberation theology is that of *God's presence in the poor*. This implies that mysticism and politics, the transcendent and the historical, can and must converge. Thus liberation theology takes human history with absolute seriousness—it may be distinguishable from the reality of God, but it may not be separated from the reality of God, still less set in opposition to it. The vulgar criticisms of liberation theology, to the effect that it is sociology rather than theology, simply miss the point that history expresses God, is sacramentally charged with God. And as the crucified people represent the second Isaiah's Servant, they too are a sacrament of God.

***Transcendence
is not beyond
history, but
within it***

Transcendence here is not something *beyond* history but *within* it. The history of God and of humanity becomes one single 'great history of God'. Rahner had begun to deal with this theme in an important article, 'History of the World and Salvation History',¹⁵ and his idea of grace present in all human existence, the so-called supernatural existential, also contributed. What we call the problem of nature and grace is in reality the question of there being one single history, always graced by God, but with a grace that human freedom can reject. Liberation theology insists that there is only one history, with two dimensions that we need to see as a *history* of grace and a *history* of sin—abstract distinctions like 'nature and grace' or 'sacred and secular' will not do.

The Logic of Lived Experience

If we move now to the quality of Rahner's *engagement* with reality, we can begin with Rahner's conviction that God, God's own self and God's will, can be and is given to us in what simply happens, in ways that nothing else can specify or predict. Moreover, such happenings can be recognised as coming from God. The conventional theology Rahner inherited did not take sufficiently seriously the fact that some things happen quite freely and unpredictably, nor that those things can

¹⁵TI 5, 97-114.

be of God.¹⁶ Fidelity thus involves something other than an adaptation of established theology to particular circumstances. We need to respond to the specific happenings, needs and desires that are 'true signs of God's presence and purpose'.¹⁷

This sense of God's active presence in history to be discerned through the signs of the times, and of the will of God not being reducible to universal principles, is also central to the theology of liberation. From the beginning, Gutiérrez' fundamental conviction has been that the poor are not just objects of our consideration and benevolent options. Rather the poor, with their sufferings and hopes, have 'broken into' history, irrupted into it.¹⁸ Moreover, God has broken in with the poor, and people have been able to receive that inbreaking in a way that does not amount simply to a deduction from what they already knew. Once it has occurred, the inbreaking can and must be compared with what earlier texts in Scripture, tradition and theology have to say; it can also be clarified with the help of philosophy and the human sciences. But the basic reception of the irruption is something else. It emerges from the dependence on experience that is characteristic of human ('the poor have broken in') and religious ('and God within them') logic. Within conventional theology prior to Rahner, these statements of liberation theology would have been quite impossible, but Rahner's own theology both grounds and echoes them.

**Through the
poor, God
has broken
into history**

Theology Leading into Mystery

For Rahner, the fact that God is Mystery leads to a conception of theology as leading into mystery. All theological realities can and should be referred to God, the one and only Mystery, from whom they derive their significance and intelligibility.

Personally, I believe that in liberation theology, the place of the poor is similar. Though facile parallels must be avoided, it nevertheless follows that if God is present in the poor person, then we must be able to use the same logic in talking about the poor that we use regarding God. With all due caution, I do believe that liberation theology can

¹⁶ 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', in *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), 89-114.

¹⁷ *Gaudium et spes*, n. 11

¹⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983).

legitimately speak of the poor person as an *ultimate*, and of the option for the poor as defining my identity—what I can know, what I have to do, what I can rightly hope for and celebrate. Theology can amount to a *reductio in pauperes*, a process of leading us into the mystery which is the poor.

It follows that theology can talk of the Church—without doing violence to the faith or manipulating the poor—as essentially a Church *of the poor*. It can speak of how the poor have a potential for evangelization; it can develop theological formulae such as ‘apart from the poor, no salvation’. And obviously it can see the poor person as presenting the reality which decides whether our lives are human or inhuman, whether we are eternally to be saved or condemned. In the face of the poor, then salvation just means working for their liberation, working—in Ellacuría’s phrase—to take the crucified people down from their cross. And on the last day, they will be our judges. John Paul II put the point sharply in Canada in 1985: ‘the poor countries will judge the rich ones’. But, in my experience in El Salvador, one often has to add that the poor will also pardon us, an experience which brings home to me the truth of Rahner’s saying that you know you are a sinner only if you are pardoned. Whether this point about the poor being the ultimate can be justified metaphysically, I do not know. But existentially it is true: there is nothing more ultimate than ‘the authority of those who suffer’, says Johannes Baptist Metz; there is no task more crucial than the reaction of mercy towards victims.¹⁹

Theology and Spirituality

For Rahner, theology is not just a matter of knowledge and practice but also of spirituality:

In my theology what is of fundamental significance for me is the givenness of a genuine, primordial experience of God and of God’s Spirit. This is logically (though not necessarily chronologically) prior to reflection and to theological verbalisation, and it can never be fully appropriated by reflection.²⁰

¹⁹ ‘Die Autorität der Leidenden’ in *Prinzip Mitgefühl*, edited by Leonardo Boff (Freiburg: Herder, 1999), here 43.

²⁰ *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews 1965-1982*, edited by Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, translated by Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 328.

Rahner is making not only a personal claim but also a methodological one. The experience of God is both the source and the goal of his theology. His use of a particular intellectual tool, transcendental thought, is secondary.

Liberation theology, too, takes commitment and experience as foundational. From the very beginning, liberation theologians have insisted that their theology is a secondary outgrowth, and that what is primary is an experience of faith and a praxis of liberation; our theology is our spirituality.²¹ Sometimes it has been said that liberation theology abounds in good faith and in spirituality, but not in knowledge—here and there, perhaps, with some justification. But I believe that the best theologians let their spiritual experience, their experience of God, shape their *academic activity as theologians*.

Differences

I have been noting the fundamental influence of Rahner on liberation theology. This is rarely an influence at the level of content, even though liberation theologians accepted many of Rahner's ideas. Nor did Rahner have any direct influence on what was most specific to the theology of liberation: the idea of liberation coming from the poor, and the impact this would have on our ways of conceiving God, Christ and the Church. Rahner's contribution was a significant one, but it was indirect.

As liberation theology came to birth, it found inspiration and theological legitimation in Rahner's general *approach* to theology, even though he did not speak of liberation, and in his handling of the theologies with which he took issue. The influence operated principally at the level of what I would call 'theological attitude'. It encouraged creativity, freedom, responsibility both to history and to the contemporary world, and gospel-centredness. By this last I mean taking Jesus as the unconditional norm for interpreting important realities and not the other way round. At this attitudinal level, there was certainly a convergence between Rahner and the liberation theologians.

Obviously there were some significant differences. Rahner engaged the Enlightenment as represented by Kant; liberation theology engaged

²¹ See, for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'Speaking about God', *Concilium*, 171 (February 1984), 27-31.

the Enlightenment as represented by Marx. What they shared was a concern to take the challenges utterly seriously.

Moreover, liberation theology would now see important gaps in Rahner's theology. He did not offer any analysis of praxis as a dimension of human knowledge; he did not present salvation as a liberative reality in history. More surprisingly, his brilliant retrieval of the humanity of Christ did not explore the cross fully. In his final period he may have become more sensitive to the realities of the world, but he did not develop a theological method appropriate to them. We could not call Rahner's theology *prophetic*, even if, right up to the end of his life, his theology did express the *utopian* vision of Christianity. Metz tells us that he would reproach Rahner for theologizing without reckoning with Auschwitz. And I do not think Rahner ever came to understand Ellacuría's utopian conception of a 'civilisation of poverty' in contrast to the 'civilisation of wealth' that has never given life or dignity to its minorities.²² Yet this vision has deep gospel roots, and also, in the meditation on Two Standards, Ignatian ones.

Rahner could have dealt with themes of this kind, but they came too late for him. Nevertheless, we should not forget his support for the Church and the way of Christian life that was emerging in Latin America in his last years. As a human being and a theologian, Rahner was moving in his last years towards what was best in liberation theology, and he would have made his own contribution towards it, at once critical and stimulating.

Lost in the Mystery of God

Let me end more personally. My own first encounter with Rahner was through his little book *On the Theology of Death*, which I came across by chance when I was a student in St Louis in the 1960s. I later read and studied many other things that he wrote, but I never forgot this remarkable book on death. Let me recall two points from this book that are fundamentals here in El Salvador, points on which, to use a classic term, the Church stands or falls.

²² Ignacio Ellacuría, 'Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America', in *Mysterium liberationis*, 289-328.

Firstly, Rahner says that martyrdom is ‘the Christian death *par excellence*’.²³ How often that phrase has come back to me in El Salvador! Whether something from Rahner’s personal experience lies in the background, or whether this is just another of his profound dogmatic statements, I do not know. Perhaps his affection and veneration for Alfred Delp suggests that there was something personal behind it.

Secondly, there was Rahner’s vision of death. As he put it in the interview quoted at the very beginning of this article:

The true summit of my life has yet to arrive. I mean the abyss which is the mystery of God, into which we hurl ourselves with the hope of being accepted by His love and His mercy.²⁴

‘Summit’, ‘yet to arrive’, ‘mystery of God’, ‘to be accepted by His love and His mercy’. Is there a liberation theology here? The answer to that question is not so important. But I like what Pedro Casaldáliga, Christian, bishop and poet of liberation, wrote after Rahner’s death:

‘What are you doing now?’
the Pope used to ask him (inquisitorially? kindly?).
The theologian used to reply (evasively? magisterially?),
‘I am preparing to live the great Encounter’.
And with eighty Aprils, well-pondered,
a hearer of the Mystery in the Word,²⁵
he plunged into the absolute future.

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²³ *On the Theology of Death*, translated by Charles H. Henkey (London: Burns and Oates, 1961 [1958]), 109.

²⁴ *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 38.

²⁵ ‘Salmo de abril en São Paulo’, in *El tiempo y la espera* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1986), 39, available also on <http://servicioskoiononia.org/pedro/poesia/tiempoespera.htm>: ‘—¿Qué estas haciendo ahora?/le preguntaba el papa (inquisidor? ibenévolo?)/Respondía el teólogo (evasivo? imastro?):—Me preparo a vivir el gran Encuentro./Y a sus ochenta abrils, bien pensados,/oyente del Misterio en la Palabra,/se ha zambullido en el total Futuro.’