

# THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY OF KARL RAHNER

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**K**ARL RAHNER, of all the significant theologians of the twentieth century, stands alone in calling for a new mystical theology. His own views on what he terms ‘the mysticism of daily life’, ‘the mysticism of the masses’ and the ‘mysticism of the classical masters’—to be explained later—play a major role in stressing the importance of mysticism in theology and Christian life. However, he emphasizes the difficulty of defining the word ‘mysticism’, the absence of a generally accepted theology of mysticism and the appalling lack of interest in a contemporary mystical theology. He also criticizes some earlier mystical theology for simply repeating the teachings of the Spanish classical mystics, for smoothing out the distinctions among them and for naively interpreting them in accordance with an extrinsic understanding of grace ‘according to which direct divine intervention is thought of in the case of mystical phenomena’.<sup>1</sup>

## **Rahner’s Theology of Grace**

Rahner is the twentieth century’s pre-eminent theologian of grace. In his view, grace is primarily God’s universal *self*-communication, not the sporadic bestowal of certain divine gifts, and *all* human beings are the addressees of this communication. Therefore, all truly human activity is a free, positive or negative, response to God’s offer of self—the grace at the heart of human existence.<sup>2</sup> Because God offers nothing less than God’s very own self to everyone, the human person is, to Rahner’s way of thinking, *homo mysticus*, mystical man. This relationship stamps all

This article is based on a longer treatment in chapter three of Harvey D. Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology’, in *Theological Investigations*, volume 17, translated by Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 90–91.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘Gnade als Mitte menschlicher Existenz. Ein Gespräch mit und über Karl Rahner aus Anlaß seines 70. Geburtstages’, in *Herausforderung des Christen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1975), 117–153.

personal experiences with at least an implicit, yet primordial, experience of God.

Because ‘we do have an immediate, preconceptual experience of God through the experience of the limitless breadth of our consciousness’, Rahner writes, ‘there is such a thing as a mystical component to Christianity’.<sup>3</sup> In fact, he holds the theological position that,

... in every human person ... there is something like an anonymous, unthematic, perhaps repressed, basic experience of being oriented to God ... which can be repressed but not destroyed, which is ‘mystical’ or (if you prefer a more cautious terminology) has its climax in what the classical masters called infused contemplation.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, all human experiences tend towards ‘an intensification which is directed towards something which one could in fact call mystical experience’.<sup>5</sup> In fact, ‘mysticism as the experience of grace’ grounds not only the ordinary Christian’s life of faith, hope and love but also that of anyone living according to his or her conscience.<sup>6</sup> This view of mysticism as the experience of grace permeates not only Rahner’s mystical theology but also much of Rahner’s overall theology.

Rahner suggests avoiding the term ‘mysticism’ because of its almost unavoidable association with odd psychic phenomena that have nothing to do with ‘normal’ Christian life—although he does not hesitate to use the term himself, and in a variety of ways.<sup>7</sup> He insists, however, that the reality of the experience of God in daily life, rather than the term used for it, is what matters.

In the final analysis it is unimportant whether you call such a personal, genuine experience of God, which occurs in the deepest core of a person, ‘mystical’.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, edited by Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 182.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘Teresa of Avila: Doctor of the Church’, in *The Great Church Year*, edited by Albert Raffelt and Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 362–363 (original emphasis). See also ‘Brief von P. Karl Rahner’, in Klaus P. Fischer, *Der Mensch als Geheimnis. Die Anthropologie Karl Rahners* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1974), 405–406.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘Reflections on the Problem of the Gradual Ascent to Christian Perfection’, in *Theological Investigations*, volume 3, translated by Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1967), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘Mysticism’, in *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, edited by Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury, 1975), 1010–1011.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie*, volume 3 (2nd edn, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1972), 523.

<sup>8</sup> *Faith in a Wintry Season: Interviews and Conversations with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life, 1982–84*, edited by Paul Imhof, Harvey D. Egan and Hubert Biallowons (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 115.

Rahner is also convinced that everyone experiences God constantly, not intermittently, although often only in a hidden way:

It must be made intelligible to people that they have an implicit but true knowledge of God—perhaps not reflected upon and not verbalized; or better expressed, they have a genuine experience of God ultimately rooted in their spiritual existence, in their transcendentality, in their personality, or whatever you want to call it.<sup>9</sup>

This view of grace provides the foundation for Rahner's contemporary mystical theology.

Despite his frequent use of the terms 'experience of grace' and 'experience of God', Rahner is not referring to *an* experience, because God cannot be reduced to a specific content of thought or object of love in consciousness. The 'transcendental' experience of God and of grace, in Rahner's sense, is the ground of all experiences and is not a particular, or 'categorical', experience to which we can point. As the 'horizon' in which all our experiences take place, the 'objectless awareness' of God and of grace is the atmosphere in which we live, our basal spiritual metabolism, more intimate to us than we are to ourselves, as the mystics are fond of saying. Just as we often overlook or take for granted our breathing, our beating hearts, or our own self-awareness, so too does the ever-present experience of God often remain overlooked, repressed, or even denied.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Mysticism of Everyday Life***

Rahner holds the position that everyone—even the agnostic or atheist—who lives moderately, selflessly, honestly, courageously and in silent service to others, lives what he calls the 'mysticism of everyday life'.<sup>11</sup> He stresses not only the intrinsic unity between the love of God and

<sup>9</sup> *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 115.

<sup>10</sup> This is a salient theme in Nicholas Lash's book, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame P, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> See Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life*. For concrete examples of the mysticism of everyday life, see Karl Rahner, 'Experiencing the Spirit', in *The Practice of Faith*, edited by Albert Raffelt and Karl Lehmann (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 81. Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote of 'persevering through the grayness of every day in faith, hope, and love' (*The Von Balthasar Reader*, edited by Medard Kehl and Werner Löser [New York: Crossroad, 1982], 342). Thomas Merton wrote of 'masked and hidden contemplatives' who led 'hectic' lives of self-emptying service and were closer to God than they thought (Thomas Merton, 'The Inner Experience: Kinds of Contemplation [IV]', *Cistercian Studies*, 18/4 [1983], 294). St Francis de Sales emphasized an 'ecstasy of work and life' that embraces renunciation and self-denial in true imitation of the crucified Christ (*Treatise on the Love of God*, translated by John K. Ryan [Rockford: Tan, 1975], volume 2, book 7, chapters 6–7, 30–33).

neighbour<sup>12</sup> but also Jesus' teaching that love for the least of his brethren is love for him—even in the case of those who do not know him.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the most profound form of the mysticism of everyday life, in Rahner's view, is the unreserved love for another.

When anyone—Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, Christian, Muslim, agnostic or atheist—courageously and totally accepts life and him- or herself, even when everything tangible seems to be collapsing, then that person experiences, at least implicitly, the holy Mystery that fills the emptiness both of oneself and of life. Accepting the depths of one's humanity, the depths of life and thus Mystery itself—fostered either with or without explicit Christian faith, hope and charity—is the salient feature in Rahner's mysticism of everyday life.

**Ordinary  
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authentic life**

This view has profound theological and pastoral significance. I know of no theologian who so emphasizes the idea that we weave the fabric of our eternal lives out of our humdrum daily lives.<sup>14</sup> A genuine Christian must have the bold, but often hidden, confidence that ordinary daily life is the stuff of authentic life and real Christianity.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the words 'ordinary', 'banal', 'humdrum', 'routine' and the like, appear frequently in Rahner's writings. For him, 'grace has its history in the person's day-to-day existence with its splendors and failures and is *actually experienced there*'.<sup>16</sup>

The everydayness of Jesus' life grounds Rahner's appreciation of daily life:

That which is amazing and even confusing in the life of Jesus is that it remains completely within the framework of everyday living; we could even say that in him concrete human existence is found

<sup>12</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 6, translated by Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 231–249.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, translated by Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Eternity from Time', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 19, translated by Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 169–177. For an eloquent theology of work, sleeping, eating, drinking, laughing, seeing, sitting and getting about, see his 'Everyday Things', in *Belief Today*, translated by Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 20–21. And see Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), and Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner* (Louvain: Peeters, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> This is a constant theme in Karl Rahner, *Biblical Homilies*, translated by Desmond Forristal and Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> Karl Rahner, 'On the Theology of Worship', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 19, 147 (emphasis added).

in its most basic and radical form. The first thing that we should learn from Jesus is to be fully human!<sup>17</sup>

In Christ, God has assumed the everyday. Because of Christ, the mysticism of daily life is one of joy in the world and an Easter faith that loves the earth.<sup>18</sup> Participation in the death of Christ, although often anonymous, enables a person to die to self and to the world in order to surrender to the Mystery that permeates daily life. To experience that such dying is not in vain is to participate in Christ's resurrection. This is the christological foundation for a mysticism of everyday life.

Rahner offers common human experiences to help us 'dig ... out from under the rubbish of everyday experience'<sup>19</sup> real life occurrences of grace, such as accepting with hope the experience of utter loneliness; forgiving with no expectation of the other's gratitude or even of feeling good about one's selflessness; being utterly faithful to the depths of one's conscience, even when taken as a fool; praying, even when it feels useless; maintaining faith, hope and love, even when there are no apparent reasons for so doing; experiencing bitterly the great gulf between what we desire from life and what it actually gives us; and silently hoping in the face of death.<sup>20</sup> God is experienced, in Rahner's view, most clearly and intensely,

... where the graspable contours of our everyday realities break and dissolve; where failures of such realities are experienced; when lights which illuminate the tiny islands of our everyday life go out.<sup>21</sup>

And Rahner prefers negative experiences to joyful ones because:

... wherever space is really left by parting, by death, by renunciation, by apparent emptiness, provided the emptiness that cannot remain such is not filled by the world, or activity, or chatter, or the deadly grief of the world—there God is.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Rahner, 'On the Theology of Worship', 121.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Rahner, 'The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 3, 277–293; 'On the Spirituality of the Easter Faith', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 17, 8–15.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Experiencing the Spirit', in *The Practice of Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 83.

<sup>20</sup> Rahner, 'Experiencing the Spirit', 81.

<sup>21</sup> Rahner, 'Experiencing the Spirit', 81. Also see *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 57, 83, 142, 183, 227, 245, and 293; 'Reflections on the Experience of Grace', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 3, 86–89. 'Experience of the Holy Spirit', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 18, translated by Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 189–210.

<sup>22</sup> Rahner, *Biblical Homilies*, 77.

One of Rahner's short pieces gives poignant examples of individual mystics of everyday life, whom he also calls 'unknown saints'. He writes:

I still see around me living in many of my [Jesuit] companions a readiness for disinterested service carried out in silence, a readiness for prayer, for abandonment to the incomprehensibility of God, for the calm acceptance of death in whatever form it may come, for total dedication to the following of Christ crucified.<sup>23</sup>

He mentions, among others, his friend Alfred Delp, who signed his final vows with chained hands and then went to his death in Berlin for anti-Nazi activity; and another friend, a prison chaplain appreciated more for the cigarettes he brings to the inmates than for the gospel he preaches. The mystic of everyday life, Rahner's unknown saint, is 'one who with difficulty and without any clear evidence of success plods away at the



*Alfred Delp*

task of awakening in just a few men and women a small spark of faith, of hope and of charity'.<sup>24</sup>

Rahner's understanding of the mysticism of everyday life also results in a different theology of sanctity. He distinguishes the canonized saints from the unknown—not by different degrees of holiness, but rather by the 'explicit, conscious self-discovery in the official, public sphere, achieved by the Church through the canonisation of these saints'.<sup>25</sup> The canonization process illustrates the truth that the Church has not only a 'development of dogma' but also a 'development of holiness'. Canonized saints,

<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Why Become or Remain a Jesuit?', *Madonna* [Jesuit publication, Melbourne, Australia] (April 1987), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Rahner, 'Why Become or Remain a Jesuit?', 11.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Rahner, 'The Church of the Saints', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 3, 103. See also Karl Rahner, 'Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 8, translated by David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 3–23; 'All Saints', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 8, 24–32.

... are the initiators and the creative models of the holiness which happens to be right for, and is the task of, their particular age .... They show experimentally that one can be a Christian even in 'this' way.<sup>26</sup>

However, in his view, one should ponder more deeply the mystery of the anonymous saint, the saint of everyday life.

### ***The Mysticism of the Masses***

In addition to the mysticism of everyday life, Rahner describes what he oddly calls the 'mysticism of the masses' or the 'mysticism in ordinary dress'.<sup>27</sup> This designates the 'mysticism' of those in contemporary charismatic movements, who claim to be intoxicated with the Holy Spirit, experience dramatic faith conversions, speak glossolalia, publicly and loudly proclaim their faith, prophesy, experience swooning or being slain in the Spirit, healings, and the like. This 'noisy' mysticism manifests itself more ostentatiously than the mysticism of everyday life and more commonly than the extraordinary mysticism of the saints.

Although Rahner considers himself to be a 'sober' Christian, he takes seriously charismatic phenomena as real and concrete expressions of Christianity—*when* they deepen Christian faith, hope and love. However, his writings indicate an unease with and suspicion of this 'mysticism in ordinary dress'. For example, he urges those in the charismatic movements 'to find a way to a genuine self-understanding and [to] come to terms with themselves in a self-critical way'.<sup>28</sup>

In so far as charismatic experiences disrupt 'everyday religious consciousness', Rahner understands them as the reverberations or echoes from the person's primordial experience of God that overflow into the various dimensions and levels of one's psychic structure. This psychosomatic language can both point to and disguise that fundamental experience of God. He neither views them—even when genuine—as the unadulterated operation of the Holy Spirit, nor does he dismiss them—as some of his contemporaries did—as so much 'rubbish' or as a sign of skewed religious emotions.

<sup>26</sup> Rahner, 'The Church of the Saints', 100.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 16, translated by David Moreland (New York: Seabury, 1979), 35–51.

<sup>28</sup> Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', 99.



In contrast to an elitist tendency by some in charismatic groups to identify every emotional twitch as a sign of the Holy Spirit, Rahner recommends:

A mysticism of daily life, the finding of God in all things, the *sober* drunkenness of the Spirit mentioned by the Church Fathers and ancient liturgy, which we dare not reject or disdain just because it is *sober*.<sup>29</sup>

He much prefers people who pray, receive the sacraments and experience only what he calls a ‘wintry spirituality’,<sup>30</sup> that is, one closely allied with the torment of atheists, though obviously people who practise it are not atheists.

### ***The Mysticism of the Classical Masters***

In addition to the mysticism of everyday life and the mysticism of the masses, Rahner writes of the mysticism of the ‘classical masters’. These giants of the Christian mystical tradition fascinate him because from them one ‘hears the views of the person who himself experiences most clearly

<sup>29</sup> Karl Rahner in *Dialogue*, 329, 297 (emphasis added). ‘Sober Christianity’ is a phrase often found in his lectures and writings.

<sup>30</sup> See *Faith in a Wintry Season*.



and with the least distortion the relationship which exists between the human subject and the reality we call God'.<sup>31</sup> He thus looks to them because of the exceptional clarity and intensity with which they partake in the fundamental God-experience that everyone has. These geniuses of the mystical life live through, and explain, what mysticism in the strict sense actually is.

The Church's extraordinary mystics, in Rahner's view, can teach us much in this increasingly secular and self-sufficient age, an age in which God is seemingly absent. Rahner writes:

It is more urgent than ever to have a theology and, even beyond this, an initiation into man's personal experience of God. And the classical masters ... are thoroughly good and irreplaceable teachers when it is a question of developing such a theology and mystagogy that makes intelligible the personal experience of God.<sup>32</sup>

A theology that awakens people to their own inner depths can illuminate the experience of God not only for Christians but also even for those who would deny God's existence. This is the context for understanding a statement of Rahner's that is becoming well known: 'The devout Christian of the future will either be a "mystic", one who has experienced "something", or he will cease to be anything at all'.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, a theology and mystagogy drawn from the experiences of the great Christian mystics may help Christians in their dialogue with Eastern religions.

Because the classical mystics interpreted their experiences of God with the terms of their day, their writings must be transposed for contemporary use.

And such a transposition could be fruitful, because the depth and radicality of the experience of God which the classical authors describe are not so commonplace that we could discover in ourselves the buds and traces of such an experience of God just as easily without their help as with it.<sup>34</sup>

Since 'the characteristic piety of a mystic is given a special depth and power by the specifically mystical element of his piety',<sup>35</sup> this Jesuit views

<sup>31</sup> Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', 92.

<sup>32</sup> Rahner, 'Teresa of Avila: Doctor of the Church', 362.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Christian Living Formerly and Today', *Theological Investigations*, volume 7, translated by David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 15.

<sup>34</sup> Rahner, 'Teresa of Avila: Doctor of the Church', 362–363.

<sup>35</sup> Rahner, 'The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World', 280–281.

the mystic as the one for whom the often barely audible and distorted experience of God found in everyone has been purified and amplified without deformation.

To Rahner's way of thinking, it is extremely difficult to define precisely a specific element or elements in the mysticism of the classical masters. He writes, however, that,

... we do after all possess a vague empirical concept of Christian mysticism: the religious experiences of the saints, all that they experienced of closeness to God, of higher impulses, of visions, of inspirations, of the consciousness of being under the special and personal guidance of the Holy Spirit, of ecstasies, etc. All this is comprised in our understanding of the word mysticism without our having to stop here to ask what exactly is of ultimate importance in all this, and in what this proper element consists.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the mysticism of the classical masters has something to do with their enhanced God-consciousness, their raptures, their visions and their special sensitivity to the least motion of the Holy Spirit. Rahner often explains their mysticism in terms of 'infused contemplation' and the concomitant 'suspension of the faculties'.<sup>37</sup>

Following mainly the teachings of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, classical mystical theologians sharply distinguish between 'acquired' and 'infused contemplation'.<sup>38</sup> In infused contemplation God makes Godself known to the individual through a special grace given only to a select few,<sup>39</sup> but acquired contemplation is accessible to any Christian who cooperates generously with 'ordinary grace'.

<sup>36</sup> Rahner, 'The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World', 279–280.

<sup>37</sup> In 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', 98 n.9, Rahner accepts the understanding of the mysticism of the classical masters presented in Irene Behn's classic study, *Spanische Mystik* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1957).

<sup>38</sup> Augustin Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, translated by Leonora L. Yorke Smith (Westminster, Vt: Celtic Cross, 1978); Auguste Saudreau, *The Life of the Union with God and the Means of Attaining It according to the Great Masters of Spirituality*, translated by E. J. Strickland (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1927); John Baptist Scaramelli, *Guide to the Spiritual Life* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1924); Joseph de Guibert, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, translated by Paul Barrett (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953); Joseph De Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice*, translated by William J. Young (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1964), 44–45; and Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, 64–200, for a highly detailed exposition. Poulain prefers the phrase 'mystic union' to 'infused contemplation'. Acquired contemplation is also frequently called 'ordinary prayer'.

<sup>39</sup> Although this terminology is relatively recent in the Christian mystical tradition, the reality is not. The anonymous author (d.c.1386) of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, to give one example, distinguishes clearly between what he calls 'meditation' and 'contemplation'. In his view, only God can grant the exceptional mystical the grace of contemplation. Examples abound. See Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2010).

*Acquired Contemplation*

Acquired contemplation comprises four levels: focused vocal prayer, meditation, affective prayer and the 'prayer of simplicity'. Liturgical and some private devotions obviously require vocal prayer—and a struggle against distractions. Meditation involves discursive, step-by-step remembering, reasoning about and pondering, for example, one of the mysteries of Christ's life, death and resurrection. Affective prayer—which requires only a minimal use of reason, memory, and imagination—arises when healthy religious emotions predominate during meditation. The prayer of simplicity<sup>40</sup> is the highest stage of acquired contemplation possible through human effort assisted by 'ordinary grace'. Here, intuition replaces imagining, remembering and reasoning. A tranquil abiding in the presence of God, often accompanied by strong emotions of joy, sorrow, admiration and adoration, dominate this level of prayer. Like a few bars from a song once heard, a dominant theme of spirit begins to haunt the person. More of the person seems to be praying, at a perceptively deeper level, and with less effort and interior activity.

**A tranquil  
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God**

*Infused Contemplation*

Classical mystical theologians emphasized the *qualitative* difference between acquired and infused contemplation, not only because the latter requires a special grace but also because infused contemplation brings about an explicit consciousness that one is grasped by God, that God is not only working with one, but also operating alone and requiring only one's consent.<sup>41</sup> Rendered passive because of God's compelling influence, mystics at this stage find vocal prayer difficult and meditation impossible because of the 'suspension of the faculties' that renders reason, memory and imagination almost powerless to act, except through violence. However, infused contemplation produces an immediate, indubitable consciousness of God's presence and powerful control. An obscure, yet rich and satisfying, loving knowledge penetrates and dominates the soul

<sup>40</sup> It is also called the prayer of 'simple regard', 'active recollection', 'active repose', 'active quietude' and 'active silence'—'active', to underline the difference between it and 'passive', or mystical modes of prayer.

<sup>41</sup> See Jean Vincent Bainvel, 'Introduction to the Tenth Edition', in Poulain, *Graces of Interior Prayer*, lxxxviii, and Albert Farges, *Mystical Phenomena* (London: Burns, Oates and Washington, 1926), 311. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St Thomas Aquinas and St John of the Cross*, translated by M. Timothea Doyle (Saint Louis: B. Herder, 1937), 162, leaves explicit consciousness out of his definition of infused contemplation.

in its innermost depths. Mystics maintain that the soul's mystical senses—analogueous to the five bodily senses—awaken to God's touch, voice, sweetness, scent and, to a lesser and highly qualified extent, visibility.<sup>42</sup> Their total inability to awaken, prolong, renew, or even foresee the approach or the end of these experiences astonishes them. Mystics claim that the experience is ineffable: that it cannot be translated into forms of current language or explained to someone who has never experienced anything similar.

#### *Awakened Contemplation*

A definite tension exists in Rahner's theology of grace and mystical theology because of his respect for the Scholastic manual theology of his day. Despite his emphasis on the intrinsic nature of grace at the heart of human existence, one still finds the influence of an older theology in his writings.<sup>43</sup> I find it strange that Rahner still uses the term 'infused contemplation', with its overtones of God's almost miraculous, extrinsic, direct intervention in the soul. I suggest that in view of his theologically and pastorally profound view of grace as the intrinsic milieu of all human activity, the term '*awakened contemplation*' is preferable.<sup>44</sup>

#### ***Mystical Theology in Terms of Human Consciousness***

Bernard McGinn, the foremost scholar of the history of the Western mystical tradition, defines 'the mystical element in Christianity [as] that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the preparation for, the *consciousness* of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God'.<sup>45</sup> With this definition, he shifts the understanding of

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Karl Rahner, 'The "Spiritual Senses" according to Origen', *Theological Investigations*, volume 16, 81–103, and 'The Doctrine of the "Spiritual Senses" in the Middle Ages', *Theological Investigations*, volume 16, 104–134.

<sup>43</sup> This tension is evident in, for example, Karl Rahner, 'Grace II. Theological', 'Grace III. Structure of De Gratia' and 'Grace and Freedom', in *Encyclopedia of Theology*, 587–595, 595–598, 598–601. Also see Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, 'Grace', 'Grace, Systems of' and 'Grace, Theology of', in *Dictionary of Theology*, new revised edn (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 196–200, 200, 200–201.

<sup>44</sup> From the viewpoint of contemporary evolutionary theory, the British Jesuit theologian Jack Mahoney (*Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration* [Washington: Georgetown UP, 2011], 117) criticizes the term 'infused contemplation' as evoking 'the half conscious image ... of a God separate from us and pouring into us as into distinct containers the creative expressions of divine causal energy. In contrast, the view of divine communication that emerges from the evolutionary approach ... partakes more of the idea of a fountain welling up from inside rather than of something being poured in from the outside.'

<sup>45</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, volume 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xvii (emphasis added).

mysticism away from an emphasis on 'experience'. In his view, this emphasis lends itself to a misunderstanding of mysticism as consisting of unusual sensations, particular forms of feelings, or sensible perceptions easily deracinated from the spiritual activities of human consciousness that form the full range of human conscious life: understanding, judging, willing, deciding and loving. McGinn prefers to explain mysticism in terms of 'consciousness' because the mystic is one who, in his view, becomes immediately and directly aware—'conscious'—of new and transformative ways of knowing and loving through states of awareness in which God becomes present in inner spiritual acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming centre of one's life.

Rahner's understanding of the dynamism of human consciousness also grounds his transposed and contemporary mystical theology.<sup>46</sup> His cognitional theory distinguishes between 'intentionality', which makes objects present to us, and 'consciousness', which makes us present to ourselves and to God. Whatever is known or loved as finite and particular ('categorical') is known and loved against the 'transcendental horizon' of holy Mystery, like a distant ship viewed against the sky. In Rahner's view,

... particularized knowledge is implicitly based on the unthematic awareness one also has of Being *simpliciter*, which includes an awareness—however inarticulate—of God, spirit, and freedom and thus of the mystery above us and within us.<sup>47</sup>

Because of what he calls the 'unlimited receptivity' of the human spirit, the human person has 'a dynamic orientation toward participation in the life of God' and an implicit awareness of it.<sup>48</sup>

Rahner maintains that in knowing or loving any 'object', the human spirit concomitantly co-knows and co-loves itself and God, through its intelligible and loving 'return-to-self'. Knowing or loving anything particular initiates the luminous presence of the human spirit to itself. This 'return-to-self' contains a simultaneous awareness of its 'transcendental' movement beyond anything particular to an infinite horizon within which all finite realities are known and loved. God, as the graced horizon of all

<sup>46</sup> In my view, the best explanation of Rahner's mystical theology is found in his article, 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', in *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 84–170.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Transcendence', in *Dictionary of Theology*, 509.

<sup>48</sup> Rahner, 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', 144.

knowing and loving, is also implicitly co-known and co-loved. Rahner himself emphasizes that this transcendental dynamism of the human spirit is the essential foundation of mysticism.<sup>49</sup>

Rahner insists, too, that one's awareness of the spirit's transcendental movement, 'with God as the pure and unlimited term of his endless dynamism, can grow, [and] become more pure and unmixed'.<sup>50</sup> In mystical consciousness, the normal 'object' of consciousness becomes increasingly transparent and may almost entirely disappear. Then, the usually only implicit transcendental consciousness of God, which is co-present in every act of self-presence, begins explicitly to dominate consciousness. Finally, the horizon of all knowledge and love saturates the mystic's consciousness. The overlooked milieu in which 'normal' consciousness occurs now takes centre stage. Rahner maintains that:

... the more intensive and mystical the experience becomes, and the more a supernatural elevation of transcendence exerts its influence ... the clearer it must become that this emergence into awareness of transcendence and of the term to which it tends, discloses a transcendence *qualitatively different* from the merely concomitant and implicit form.<sup>51</sup>

Of the numerous figures in the Christian mystical tradition<sup>52</sup> who experienced the qualitative change in consciousness that Rahner describes, I shall briefly mention only five. Evagrius Ponticus (*d.* 399) talks about a 'pure prayer' that transcends one's normal consciousness and is granted only to the most advanced monks. John Cassian (*d.c.* 435) praises the 'prayer of fire' which is likewise reserved only for an elite few. Isaac the Syrian (*d.c.* 700) writes of a 'prayer of no prayer', in which one is engulfed by the Holy Spirit and ecstatically gazes at the incomprehensible. Nicholas of Cusa (*d.* 1464) emphasizes a consciousness replete with 'learned ignorance', one illuminated from within by *God's* knowing within us. He urges his readers to lift themselves up to God, who is the light of the human intellect, because 'in God's light is all our knowledge, so that it is not we ourselves who know, but rather it is God who knows in us'.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Rahner, 'Transcendence', 509.

<sup>50</sup> Rahner, 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', 145.

<sup>51</sup> Rahner, 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', 145–146 n. 34 (emphasis added). Also, Karl Rahner, 'Experience of Transcendence from the Standpoint of Christian Dogmatics', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 18, 173–188.

<sup>52</sup> See Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition*.

<sup>53</sup> *On Seeking God*, in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, translated by H. Lawrence Bond (Mahwah: Paulist, 1997), volume 2, §36, 225.

Ignatius of Loyola (d.1556) stresses 'consolation without previous cause'. 'It is the prerogative of the Creator alone', he writes, 'to enter the soul, depart from it, and cause a motion that draws the whole person into love of His Divine Majesty' (Exx 330), which produces a consciousness that is empty, yet fecund.

One contemporary commentator, Louis Roy, writes of an 'objectless consciousness', yet one that includes the 'element of infinite lovingness'.<sup>54</sup> Bernard McGinn emphasizes, however, that in God, 'infinite lovingness is one with infinite intelligibility' and both aspects of God's reality are made present in the 'objectless awareness' he also calls 'meta-consciousness'.<sup>55</sup> Both scholars dislike the terms 'pure consciousness' and 'bare consciousness' because, to their way of thinking, mystical consciousness exhibits the paradox of being an emptiness that is full. In Rahner's view, mystical consciousness is 'simply' one saturated with the human spirit's unrestricted and infinite non-conceptual loving knowledge of God that 'destroys the conceptual and the categorical in so far as these claim to be ultimate realities'.<sup>56</sup>



Russian icon of St John Cassian, c.1800

### ***The Natural Foundation of the Mysticism of the Classical Masters***

Rahner departs most radically from the classical masters and classical mystical theology when he contends that their mysticism differs from the mysticism of everyday life solely in the area of *natural* psychology. He insists that:

... mystical experience must not be interpreted as something which fundamentally transcends and supersedes the supernatural experience of the Spirit in faith. That is why the 'specific difference' of such

<sup>54</sup> Louis Roy, *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers* (Albany: State U. of New York P, 2003), 46–48, 50.

<sup>55</sup> See Bernard McGinn, 'Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal', *Spiritus*, 8 (2008), 52.

<sup>56</sup> Rahner, 'Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace', 47.

experience, as distinct from the Christian's 'normal' experience of the Spirit must belong to man's 'natural' sphere .... *Psychologically* mystical experiences differ from normal everyday occurrences in consciousness only in the natural sphere and to that extent are fundamentally learnable.<sup>57</sup>

To put it more concretely, the specific way in which the classical mystics experienced God belongs to the person's *natural* capacity for concentration, contemplation, meditation, submersion into the self, self-emptying and other psychomental techniques often associated with Eastern mysticisms.<sup>58</sup> In Rahner's view, even 'normal' Christians, in certain circumstances, can learn meditative-contemplative psychosomatic



<sup>57</sup> 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', 95 (emphasis added). Although Evelyn Underhill would disagree with Rahner on this point, she did stress that the classical mystics possessed a tenacious and even heroic psychological makeup, a nature capable of extraordinary concentration, in order to endure the great psychological storms that accompany mystical ascent. See Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: New American, 1974), 90–92. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 21, and *The Book of Privy Counseling*, chapter 17, in *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling*, edited by William Johnston (Garden City: Doubleday-Image, 1976), St John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.13, and *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 1.9, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), and St Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, chapter 23, in *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976), also underline that *God alone* can cause these mystical experiences and states. Rahner, therefore, contradicts the views of two Doctors of the Church.

<sup>58</sup> 'Brief von P. Karl Rahner', 406.



techniques that may enable them to sink more deeply into the self in order to experience God in a purer, clearer and more intense manner.<sup>59</sup>

The mysticism of classical masters, therefore, results from an unusual—though natural—psychological way of experiencing God in faith, hope and love. Furthermore, it is just one variety of the experience of the Spirit offered to everyone, even to non-Christians.<sup>60</sup> However, Rahner underlines that,

... meditation and similar spiritual ‘exercises’ are not thereby deprecated. For example, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, and the like—though natural acts in themselves—can be of extreme significance for salvation.<sup>61</sup>

The same can be said of natural meditative, contemplative and other psychomental techniques. One might also claim that the classical mystic is a salient example of one who has explicitly accepted God’s self-communication ‘to an existentially intense degree’.<sup>62</sup>

### **Rahner’s View of the Relationship between Mysticism and Holiness**

One of the most disputed and long-standing questions among the older schools of spirituality centres on the precise relationship between mysticism, understood classically as infused contemplation, and holiness.<sup>63</sup> Is infused contemplation absolutely necessary in order to attain the holiness enjoined by the gospel, becoming ‘perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5: 48)? The older mystical theologians normally divide into two camps: those who maintain that only someone graced with infused contemplation can attain holiness<sup>64</sup> and those who contend that there are other ways to holiness than infused contemplation.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>59</sup> For a similar approach, see Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> Rahner, ‘Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology’, 94.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Brief von P. Karl Rahner’, 406.

<sup>62</sup> Rahner, ‘Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology’, 96.

<sup>63</sup> For a good overview of this issue, see E. Lamballe, *Mystical Contemplation*, translated by W. H. Mitchell (London: R. and T. Washbourne, 1913).

<sup>64</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange writes: ‘There are not two unitive ways. There is only one.’ And, ‘the full perfection of charity in this life cannot exist without mystical contemplation’. See Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection*, 60, 175, 23–44, 162. For another proponent, see Antonio Royo and Jordan Aumann, *The Theology of Christian Perfection* (Dubuque: Priory, 1962), 178–196.

<sup>65</sup> Jean Vincent Bainvel, for example, insists that there ‘are very perfect persons to whom our Lord never gives such delights .... Not all the perfect are raised to perfect contemplation .... Many perfect men and women are canonized by the Church without there being in the process the slightest mention of infused contemplation.’ (‘Introduction to the Tenth Edition’, lxxiv) Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Von*

Despite flagging interest in this issue in his time, Rahner still asks,

... whether 'infused contemplation' is a normal stage in the Christian road to 'heroic' holiness, or whether it is an unusual gift with which not all saints are favored. One can ask further how mysticism and faith relate to one another.<sup>66</sup>

He also cautiously writes that 'the New Testament ... does not give explicit expression to such an orientation towards mysticism'.<sup>67</sup>

Rahner transposes this question by appealing not to theology but to what he calls an 'appropriate psychology'.<sup>68</sup> If this psychology were to show that we cannot surrender with our entire being to the mystery that we call God without suspension of the faculties, concentration, infused contemplation, meditation, submersion into the self, self-emptying and other psychomental techniques, then mysticism and holiness are intrinsically linked. Furthermore, if the appropriate psychology can show that such factors 'are necessarily part of a personal maturing process, *even if they are not always technically cultivated*' or reflected upon, then mysticism is indeed necessary for holiness.<sup>69</sup> If, on the other hand, psychology can establish that 'not every personal and Christian maturing process' requires such natural phenomena, 'even though these may possibly be a useful auxiliary',<sup>70</sup> then mysticism is not a necessary aspect of every Christian life.

My more than fifty years of reading the Christian mystical classics and forty years of personal experience with people of varying degrees of spirituality lead me to agree with Rahner that there is a mysticism of everyday life, wherein God's silent, mysterious action causes for many, through their fidelity to the demands of daily life, not only the dreadful dark nights described so vividly by the classical masters, but also oases of spiritual joy and peace—but in a more anonymous way than that

*Balthasar Reader*, 342) pointedly writes that 'the counterpart of the Oriental yogi or Zen master who has attained the peak of human capability is not the Christian mystic, but the Christian saint, whether mystic or not'. William Thompson-Uberuaga casts the issue differently when he writes: 'Unless one eliminates the one thing necessary for authentic mysticism in the judgment of most of the mystics, namely love, cannot any saint be a mystic? ... Perhaps the words 'mystic' and 'saint' highlight specific features of one and the same reality ...?' Thompson concedes that to distinguish between saint and mystic is not to separate them ('Listening to God's Whispers', *America* [20–27 June 2011], 24–25).

<sup>66</sup> 'Brief von P. Karl Rahner', 405–406 (unpublished English translation by Daniel Donovan).

<sup>67</sup> Rahner, 'Reflections on the Problem of the Gradual Ascent to Christian Perfection', 22 (emphasis added).

<sup>68</sup> Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', 97–98.

<sup>69</sup> Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', 98 (emphasis added).

<sup>70</sup> Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', 98.

described by the classical masters. However, for the vast majority of persons, even those who have walked some distance with the classical masters on the mystical path, perfect union with God is eschatological, to be reached only by passing through *the* dark night of the senses and of the spirit—which is death itself—and consummated through a purgatorial and transforming encounter with the spiritual fire, who is ‘Christ himself, the Judge and Savior’.<sup>71</sup>

That most Christians do not become mystics in the strict sense is obvious to Rahner.<sup>72</sup> He thus rejects any elitist interpretation of life ‘which can see a person’s perfection only in the *trained* mystic’.<sup>73</sup> He insists that the New Testament,

... awards to all who love their neighbor unselfishly and therein experience God that final salvation in God’s judgment which is not surpassed even by the highest ascent or the deepest absorption of the mystic.<sup>74</sup>

Any other understanding of Christian life, in his view, ‘would undoubtedly be either Gnosticism or theosophy and either an overestimation of mysticism or else a fundamental underestimation of the real depth of the “ordinary” Christian life of grace’.<sup>75</sup> For this reason, I have called Rahner a mystic of everyday life.<sup>76</sup>

Although Rahner died in 1984, I maintain that his mystical theology, albeit incomplete, has yet to be surpassed.<sup>77</sup> Through his mystagogical, theopoetical use of the great saints and mystics as theological sources he has, to a large extent, bridged the gap between theology and vital spirituality. His ability to link the mysticism of everyday life, the mysticism of the masses and the mysticism of the classical masters to the transcendental experience of grace that haunts every human heart

<sup>71</sup> See encyclical letter of Benedict XVI, ‘Saved in Hope: *Spe Salvi*’ (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2007), nn. 46–47, 53–54.

<sup>72</sup> Rahner, ‘Reflections on the Problem of the Gradual Ascent to Christian Perfection’, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Rahner, ‘Experience of Transcendence’, 175 (emphasis added).

<sup>74</sup> Rahner, ‘Experience of the Holy Spirit’, 208.

<sup>75</sup> Rahner, ‘Mysticism’, 1010–1011.

<sup>76</sup> Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life*.

<sup>77</sup> An adequate, contemporary mystical theology awaits an extraordinary scholar who is capable of assimilating Bernard McGinn’s monumental volumes, including those to come, on the history of the Christian mystical tradition and of transposing the historical data through the cognitional theory of Bernard Lonergan. See Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, 5 volumes to date (New York: Crossroad, 1991–2012), and Harvey D. Egan, ‘Bernard Lonergan’, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 345–349.

makes him truly the outstanding mystical theologian of the twentieth century. Convinced that there is nothing profane in the depths of ordinary life, Rahner challenges everyone to look more closely at what is actually there—although, all too often, only anonymously or repressed. Whenever there is a radical self-surrender, an absolute yielding of everything, a surrender to the Mystery that embraces all life—there is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ, the source of all mysticism.

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