

Book Review

Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, New York: Crossroad, 1978 (rep. 2000).

Rahner describes his purpose in writing as a renewed attempt to arrive at an “idea of Christianity,” in order to situate the faith within the intellectual horizon of people today. He invites us to “strenuous thinking and hard intellectual work.”

He certainly did not disappoint me in this latter regard. At times he is difficult to follow and wordy; but one must admire the sheer strength of the man as he works his way through his task — nearly 500 pages of it.

Rahner does not want simply to repeat what is said in catechisms, nor give the impression that he is telling us about the faith for the first time. His stress is on investigation and probing. At the same time he wishes to give an account of “the hope that is in us,” an “intellectually honest justification of Christian faith.” People should not simply believe what the creed has dictated.

In the light of these aims, we expect Rahner to be true to his Jesuit heritage, while not being afraid to question and take Scripture seriously. From my perspective, holding these two demands in a satisfactory synthesis is sometimes virtually impossible. Despite superb diplomacy, Rahner does not always achieve it.

Rahner’s whole purpose is further summarized as the desire to express the whole of Christianity and give an honest account of it “on a first level of reflection.” Rahner is unhappy with ivory tower specialization. Surprisingly, he claims not to be a specialist in exegesis, though he modestly says that he has done his homework in this field.

Chapter 6, about a third of the entire book, deals expressly with Christology, as the major part of his systematic presentation. Rahner thinks that the relationship of a theology of the spirit and intellect to a theology of the heart, of

decision and of religious life is a difficult problem. The book is not for those looking for religious inspiration without reflection.

Rahner's central question is simply, in his own words: "What is a Christian and how can one live this Christian existence today with intellectual honesty?" The faith is under attack today, as it was not when Rahner began his own studies. The seminaries, however, are offering too much scholarship for its own sake, too splintered and fragmented. His work is an attempt to correct this.

Christology

God's self-communication does not mean that God says something about Himself in some revelation or other. It is God revealing Himself in His own being, for the sake of knowing God and possessing Him (118). This statement left me wondering about the status of Scripture in the process of revelation. Rahner is aware of the difficulty of the word "Trinity" because nearly everyone will hear it tritheistically, being unable to understand the word "person" in any other sense than our contemporary meaning of "a center of self-consciousness" (134). He complains (as did Warren Groff in *Christ the Hope of the Future*) that the terms of the classical debate about the relationship of Jesus to the Father (hypostasis, etc.) are ambiguous. God, says Rahner, is a single consciousness, although "the unicity of one self-presence in consciousness and freedom in the divine Trinity remains determined by the mysterious threeness which we profess about God." He is critical of the "psychological theories of the Trinity" from Augustine onwards.

We should start the process of Christology from history and think of an economic Trinity. This sounds like the method of a number of contemporary theologians who wish to define Christ firstly "from below." How does Christ fit into the Trinity? There are "three modes of presence," but "they really are different, yet they belong to the one and same God in Himself and for Himself" (137). The real meaning of the Trinity is that God is at once a God of infinite distance and absolute closeness.

Rahner is at his most complex in the section on the "History of Salvation and Revelation." I began to get weary when I came to the section on "Categorical Mediation of Supernaturally Elevated Transcendentality." (What might that be in German?!)

Coming more precisely to the detail of Rahner's Christology in the context of the 20th-century debate about Christ, we may point out that there is a well-defined group of theologians, Catholics and Protestants, who are unhappy, more or less explicitly, with the Nicean and Chalcedonian definitions of Christ. Kung, Schillebeeckx and Schoonenberg are the most outspoken of the Catholics and fell foul of the system. In the Protestant camp, Hendrikus Berkhof (*The Christian Faith*), Ellen Flesseman (*Believing Today*) and John Robinson (*Human Face of God* and *The Priority of John*) all raise difficulties about the validity of the classical Greek Christology which became orthodoxy in the fourth and fifth

centuries. Common to all these theologians is the tendency to question and reject the notion of the preexistent Son, as distinct from the preexistent logos. The equation, one to one, of these two, logos and Son, they find problematic. They maintain rather that the logos is not necessarily a “second member of the Trinity” but God’s self-expression personified. This became a real person at the conception of Jesus (John 1:14). Jesus himself did not preexist. This theology is a Christology “from below” or “from behind,” starting with the Old Testament, and does not start as traditionally “from above,” beginning with an eternally preexistent Second Person. This does not mean that Jesus is just a man, or a “mere man.” As Pannenburg insists, though we start with the historical Jesus, we must still say that “When dealing with Jesus we are dealing with God.”

All these writers, including, I believe, Rahner, but in a quieter way, are saying: “The historical Jesus conceived anhypostatically, that is, without a human person as the ground of his existence, begins to look alarmingly like God dressed up as man,” almost a composite half-God, half-man. Schillebeeckx says, in this connection: “We have to see Jesus within the quite specific tradition in which he and his contemporaries were set: the horizon of experience which we now call the Old Testament and even more specifically in its late Jewish or Judaistic context.”¹ Rahner also wants to insist on the real humanity of Jesus.

Rahner believes that “what is most historical is most essential.” The incarnation of the logos should be the end, not the beginning, of our Christological analysis. He goes so far as to speak of the hypostatic union as “man’s transcendence into God by means of God’s self-communication.” This places Jesus in human categories. Though he is the “absolute Savior,” he is truly man, truly part of the biological process. God did not disguise Himself, which would be pure docetism. God lays hold of matter. Jesus is the reality of God. We can (against Bultmann) know much about the historical Jesus. We do not have to distinguish too sharply between what Jesus is in himself and what he is for us. These two approaches cannot be separated. Rahner clearly does not want to lose sight of the objective Christ of history. Of this Jesus he says: “Christ had not only to be ‘like us in nature’ so as to be our redeemer, but with us had to spring ‘from one’ (Heb. 2:11), our brother according to the flesh. For he could only possess this flesh, which was to be redeemed, if he was ‘born of woman,’ shared our origins as well as our nature.”²

Rahner approves of Chalcedon, but with obvious reservation about some of its implications. A careful inspection of what he says, or leaves unsaid, reveals his desire to allow freedom from outmoded language which today does not convey properly the meaning of Jesus. For example, Rahner says that the

¹ *Christ, the Christian Experience and the Modern World*, SCM Press, 1980.

² *Theological Investigations: God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, New York: Crossroad, 1973, I, 196ff.

proposition “Jesus is God” can be misleading or even heretical if by this a one-to-one identity is meant:

When the orthodox descending Christology of the Incarnation says that this Jesus “is” God, this is an abiding truth of the faith *if* the statement is understood correctly. But as the statement reads, it can also be understood in a monophysitic [i.e. that Jesus has only one nature, the divine nature] and hence in an heretical sense...For in and according to the humanity which we see when we say “Jesus,” Jesus “is” not God, and in and according to his divinity God “is” not man in the sense of a real identification...Consequently, the statement is always in danger of being understood in a “monophysitic” sense, that is, as a formula which simply identifies the subject and predicate (290).

On the issue of the preexistence of the Son, which has been a perennial threat to the real human personality of Jesus, Rahner wants to allow students of Scripture freedom to rethink: “Exegetes may and should be allowed the freedom to investigate impartially whether exactly what Jesus *himself* means by ‘Son’ of the Father in the absolute sense is simply identical with the God who expresses Himself in time, and hence also as preexistent, or whether it *also* contains an element which is not identical with this God and hence is not ‘preexistent’” (304). Putting the question even more directly, Does the Bible speak of the preexistent *Son* at all? If not, then Chalcedon would have to be greatly modified.

Finally, Rahner’s independence of dogma, if it obscures the real Christ, allows him to say that some who reject the orthodox creedal statements about Christology can be Christians. He speaks of the “limits of the dogmatic formulas.” I saw this as a sign of release from the stranglehold of some dogma about Christ which has long tended to cast a docetic spell over much Christianity.

I have one complaint. I wish that the present dissenters from Chalcedon would recognize that much less prominent figures than they long ago questioned exactly what they are now questioning but often paid for it with their lives at the hands of orthodoxy. Some Anabaptists (notably Adam Pastor in Holland and later the 16th-century Polish Brethren who composed the Racovian Confession) long ago tried to say that the Chalcedonian Christ was crypto-docetic.

Pastorally, it is most important for the church to understand who the real Jesus was and is. The attainment of that great central Truth will promote the health-giving and unifying Spirit, without which the Body of Christ remains dead. John’s Gospel was written, as he himself tells us, “that we should believe that Jesus is the Christ” (20:31). This abiding Truth is as much needed today.

Anthony Buzzard