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Edited by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines
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Introduction

DECLAN MARMION and MARY E. HINES

It is both terrible and comforting to dwell in the inconceivable nearness of God, and so to be loved by God that the first and last gift is infinity and inconceivability itself. But we have no choice. God is with us. *Prayers for a Lifetime*¹

The year 2004 marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Karl Rahner, S. J., who, it is widely acknowledged, was the dominant theological voice of the Roman Catholic Church in the twentieth century. For many, his theology has come to symbolize the Catholic Church's entry into modernity, an event publicly and ritually celebrated at the Second Vatican Council. Not surprisingly in the forty years since the Council and the twenty years since the death of Rahner both the Council and the theology of Karl Rahner have undergone some critical reappraisal, often in connection with their relationship to modernity. With the widespread intuition that society had moved beyond modernity into a somewhat amorphous consciousness called "post-modern" came the need to look critically at all things labelled "modern." On the other hand, there is also a growing concern with a tendency in some quarters to retreat into a kind of naïve pre-modern mindset that would also call into question the vision of the Council and the theological insights of Karl Rahner. The legacy of Karl Rahner stands between this Scylla and Charybdis. It seems, then, an appropriate time to re-examine his theology and to introduce Karl Rahner to students of theology for whom he has not been a formative influence.

This collection of essays brings together a number of noted Rahner scholars from Australia, Canada, Europe, and the United States whose contributions reflect the continuing relevance of Rahner and his relationship both to modernity and to the emerging ethos of post-modernity. The *Companion* touches the major themes of Rahner's writings, offering both an exposition of the main lines of his thought as well as critical analysis. We hope that the volume will serve as an introduction and companion to explore

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the many dimensions of Rahner's theological thought and that it will be a contribution to the reassessment of the impact and ongoing relevance of Rahner's theological legacy to Church and world.

Karl Rahner was born on March 5, 1904, the middle child of seven, in the city of Freiburg in the Black Forest. By his own account, his childhood was unremarkable for the time. His family was middle class and thoroughly Catholic, though not overly pious. An average student at secondary school, he entered the Jesuit community after graduation, following his brother Hugo. With typical reluctance to discuss personal matters, he claimed not to recall the precise motivations that led him to the Jesuits. His years of Jesuit formation and philosophical and theological study in Austria, Germany, and Holland gave him the threads out of which he would develop his thought – in critical dialogue with the prevailing neo-scholastic theology of the time and the currents of modern German philosophy, but also deeply marked by the Ignatian spirituality into which he was being initiated.

From 1934 to 1936 he pursued graduate studies in philosophy at Freiburg and participated in Martin Heidegger's seminar. In a story that warms, or terrifies, the hearts of many graduate students, Rahner's doctoral thesis in philosophy, which became his foundational philosophical work, *Spirit in the World*, was rejected. His creative rethinking of the metaphysics of knowledge of Thomas Aquinas in relationship to the insights of modern philosophy, particularly Kant and Heidegger, was too much for his thesis director who took a more traditional scholastic approach. Rahner then went to Innsbruck where he completed a dissertation in theology that was accepted for the doctorate. A much less significant work, it was not published until very recently.

Rahner began lecturing at the theological faculty at Innsbruck in 1937 and remained until it was closed by the Nazis in 1939. During the war he did pastoral work, mostly in Vienna, taught theology briefly at Pullach, and returned to Innsbruck when the faculty reopened in 1948. He taught in Munich and Münster, and returned as emeritus to Innsbruck where he died in 1984. On the surface, this appears to be an unexceptional academic and religious life, but during those years he developed an approach to theology that offered both intellectual and spiritual reinvigoration to what had become for many a sterile and lifeless theological landscape.

The prayer quoted above offers a key to understanding the central pre-occupation of Karl Rahner's life and work. It is a theme to which he returns in the final essay included in this work, a talk delivered very close to his death – God, the incomprehensible mystery, the horizon of being, who has graciously chosen to draw near to human beings, whose very essence is to be

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drawn to this horizon as question to answer. For Rahner, to be human is to be in relationship with God. His philosophical work reflects on the conditions for the possibility of this relationship, thus the term “transcendental.” His more theological work works out the consequences of this relationship in the concrete circumstances of life. Rahner himself rejected the idea that he was a systematic theologian since he never developed a system. Nor did he articulate a theological method as did his contemporary Bernard Lonergan. Most of the numerous and eclectic theological works that he produced were in response to pressing ecclesial and social questions of the day.

Rahner’s early works reveal the style of theologizing that was both to aggravate his critics and win approval from admirers. Rahner is a theologian of continuity, not looking simply to reject the recent past but to show how it could be broken open to reveal other possibilities. In the context of the nineteenth century revival of Thomism, Leo XIII in *Aeterni Patris* (1879) had declared the philosophy and theology of Thomas Aquinas to be the official theology of the Roman Catholic Church. By the beginning of the twentieth century when Rahner was studying theology, the prevalent theological approach in seminary education was what was often called a manualist approach. Students of this neo-scholastic theology studied out of textbooks that most often presented the theology of Thomas Aquinas in a dry, static, and abstract form, quite unrelated to human experience. Neo-scholasticism emphasized obedience to ecclesial authority as the primary responsibility of the Catholic Christian. Throughout his life Rahner reacted strongly against this approach, fearing that post-Enlightenment Catholics would find such an approach to faith alienating and incredible.

As Rahner began his theological career, however, there were already a number of attempts to bring Thomistic theology more into dialogue with the intellectual currents of the modern world. The Belgian Jesuit Joseph Maréchal (1878–1944) and the French Jesuit Pierre Rousselot (1878–1915) were the most influential in Rahner’s own interpretation of Thomas. Many of these proponents of a “new theology” were concerned to retrieve the “real” Thomas from the deformations of his neo-scholastic interpreters and to show that there was an experiential awareness in Thomas that opened him to relationship with contemporary philosophical currents, particularly the “turn to the subject” which emphasized the role of human experience.

In neo-scholastic thought, revelation had been understood as purely extrinsic to human experience, primarily known propositionally. In his early works, Rahner is concerned to demonstrate through his transcendental method that revelation, which is in the first place God’s own self-communication, is experienced unthematically as the awareness of

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unlimited being against which we experience all our limited categorial knowing. God is not one object among the many objects of our knowing, but the infinite and mysterious horizon against which we experience all other reality. In his second philosophical work, *Hearer of the Word*, Rahner focuses on the human being as constitutively open to the possibility of hearing God's self-communication. Thus anthropology, or reflection on the experience of being human, is the condition for the possibility of receiving God's revelation. Though no essay in this volume takes Rahner's anthropology as its explicit focus, no area of his theology can be treated without dealing with this distinctive and pervasive starting point of Rahner's theological project.

Although this transcendental method is often cited as the distinctive mark of Rahner's theology, it must be understood in relationship to the nature of the vast number of books and articles that are firmly situated in the categorial, responding to the concrete questions of the distinctive historical and ecclesial period in which he lived.

Particularly from the period just prior to the Second Vatican Council, through the Council where he was appointed as a *peritus*, until his death, Rahner was occupied with the many dimensions of ecclesial Christianity – intra Roman Catholic issues as well as questions concerning the Church's relation to culture and to the many social questions of the mid to late twentieth century. Though the mystery of God is clearly the centre of Rahner's thought, his anthropology understood human being as essentially relational, thus the transcendental necessity of the Church as the concrete locus of the human encounter with God.

After the two major philosophical works, the majority of Rahner's writings are concerned in some way with the Church, whether internally or in relation to culture. His relationship to the Church was complex. His stance was often critical, especially when he saw the church retreating into what he called a "Pian" approach (after the recent popes named Pius, with whom he identifies this approach), his shorthand for the authoritarianism of neo-scholasticism. As the Council receded in memory his vision became darker and his fears increased that there would be a retreat to a pre-Conciliar mentality. He referred to "a wintry season" and to the Church as burden. But it is clear that his critique came from a love for the Church and his conviction that it was the necessary continuation of the definitive mission and ministry of Jesus in the world. Its failings impeded that mission. His friend and sometime critic Johann Baptist Metz once said, "He has this church in his guts, and feels its failures like indigestion."²

Rahner's pastoral concern for the Church is demonstrative of a theological influence at least as important, and probably more important, than the

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theology of Thomas and the influence of German philosophy. Karl Rahner was a Jesuit priest marked deeply by the theology and spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola.

Both his engagement with the concrete questions of the Church and the mystical tendency characteristic of his theology find their roots in Ignatian spirituality. The *Spiritual Exercises* begin with the subjectivity of the human person and it can be argued that this theological insight is at least as important to Rahner's starting point as is the influence of the German philosophers.

Rahner's essay on Ignatius of Loyola³ in which he has Ignatius speak to contemporary Jesuits is revelatory of the debt he acknowledges to Ignatius. The mystical dimension that he identifies in Ignatius presumably underlies his own spirituality. Although, as we mentioned, the Church occupies a great deal of Rahner's attention, it is not for him by any means the primary datum of faith. For him always, the center is God who enters into relationship with humans through God's own self-communication, which is his primary understanding of grace, "uncreated grace." He chides Jesuits of the past for understanding grace as something foreign to human experience and known only through an extrinsic understanding of revelation. For him, contrary to the neo-scholastic understanding of the time, grace can be experienced. He has Ignatius say, "All I say is I knew God, nameless and unfathomable, silent and yet near, bestowing himself on me in his Trinity. I knew God beyond all concrete imaginings."⁴ Here again is the core of Rahner's theology. This obviously leaves him open to the critique that in the last analysis the concrete or categorial is quite secondary to him. By his own admission Rahner is not a theologian in which all the threads can be neatly tied together. In spite of this seeming relativization of the categorial he paid enormous attention to the nitty-gritty concerns of life as an ecclesial Christian. A number of the authors in the *Companion* engage this debate as to whether Rahner is primarily a theologian of the transcendental for whom the categorial is radically secondary, but it must be said that in offering his transcendental analysis he always posits the categorial. His work in Christology is illustrative of his own understanding of this approach.

In his treatment of this most explicitly Christian issue in *Foundations of Christian Faith* he says that "the two moments in Christian theology reach their closest unity and their most radical tension,"⁵ i.e., the transcendental theology that develops an a priori doctrine of the God-man and the historical testimony about what happened in Jesus. But the historical and actual encounter with the God-man must come first. "At this point what is most historical is what is most essential."⁶ This conviction becomes even

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more explicit in his later work. It is important to note here the development in Rahner's own thought. Commentators and critics often identify Rahner almost exclusively with the preoccupations and approaches of his early works, but there are important shifts that take place particularly in the years following Vatican II.

Although Rahner did historical work right from the beginning – his work on the history of spirituality and on the history of the sacrament of penance, for example – his attention to history becomes much more pronounced in the later works, perhaps in response to the critic he took most seriously, his friend and student, Johann Baptist Metz. As we have noted this development is perhaps most clear in his Christology. The early christological work such as “Current Problems in Christology”⁷ begins “from above” with the christological doctrines. *Foundations* attests that “the basic and decisive point of departure, of course, lies in an encounter with the historical Jesus of Nazareth, and hence in an ‘ascending Christology,’” though this affirmation is not extensively developed. The essay “The Two Basic Types of Christology”⁸ brings the two approaches into dialogue and suggests that for the future a pluralism in approaches to Christology is to be expected and valued.

Parts I and II of this volume focus on significant and well-developed areas of Rahner's thought, a number of which have already been touched on. Part I deals with the spiritual, philosophical, and theological roots of Rahner's theology. Harvey Egan develops the centrality of Rahner's work on spirituality; Thomas Sheehan examines the philosophical underpinnings of Rahner's transcendental project, while Stephen Duffy deals with the radical reorienting of the understanding of grace that is so emblematic of Rahner's approach. Major theological themes are then treated in Part II. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza takes an innovative approach to Rahner's theological method and proposes that the occasional nature of Rahner's writings suggests that he is not a foundationalist but primarily a practical theologian. Daniel Donovan offers a clear exposition of his understanding of revelation and its correlative, faith. David Coffey focuses on Rahner's contribution to the renewal of trinitarian theology and Roman Siebenrock traces the chronological and theological developments in Rahner's Christology. Richard Lennan offers an analysis of Rahner's work on ecclesiology and ecumenism, while Jerry Farmer deals with the related issues of ministry and worship.

Ethics and eschatology remain to be mentioned. Rahner's ethical thought comes from his deep conviction about the unity of the love of God and love of neighbour, another key instance of his conviction of the relationship between the transcendental and the categorial. Not known primarily

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as an ethicist, Rahner worked with the category of “fundamental option” to offer a context for understanding moral decision making in light of one’s whole disposition before God. Brian Linnane takes up the area of ethics and its relation to Christian witness.

Eschatology for Rahner was an integral part of theology. It is one of the most intriguing areas of his thought where he deals with the possibility of universal salvation, or *apokatastasis*, questions of individual and community, and the relation between the material and the spiritual. As he approached death himself, Rahner became more preoccupied with issues of how one lives into one’s own death. Peter C. Phan probes this significant dimension of Rahner’s thought for both its present significance and its future possibilities.

Having evoked the context, influences, and some central and well-developed themes of Rahner’s theological journey, it is important to note some of the many other topics that engaged his attention through his long career. They provide an insight into the journey of the Roman Catholic Church as well as into the changing social landscape of his time. Rahner wrote on Mary, where his work also shows considerable development from the early approach of opening up the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption to later work that recognizes the ambiguities in the Mary tradition and a need for reconceiving the place of Marian devotion in light of the hierarchy of truths and the changed situation of contemporary women. In the context of this changed social and cultural situation Rahner also explored the role of women in ministry. He evaluated the 1976 “Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood” as authentic but reformable teaching and encouraged further discussion of the issue.⁹ Perhaps Rahner’s long friendship with the German author Luise Rinser was an influence on his sympathetic attention to women’s roles in Church and society. His reticence about his personal life leaves the possible influence of Luise Rinser on his theological work largely to conjecture.¹⁰

Rahner also wrote on the theology of revolution, on the dialogue with Islam, on religious pluralism, on atheism, on the natural sciences and their relation to faith, and on theology and popular religion. Part III of the volume takes up some of these topics of Rahner’s later life which show the development in his own work and perhaps provide a bridge to today’s concerns. These chapters also introduce in a more focused way some contemporary areas of critique as well as acknowledging indebtedness to Rahner’s theological project as foundational to today’s theological preoccupations.

Liberation and political theologies as well as feminist theologies often acknowledge Rahner for his recognition of the important role of experience

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as a starting point in theology. In turn they critique him for his lack of attention to specific, historical experience, the experience of the poor and marginalized, including the experience of women. Although more complex, this describes Metz's critique – a critique Rahner accepted. Although Rahner's theology did not make this move, he recognized that this was a legitimate direction for its development. Gaspar Martinez and Nancy Dallavalle explore the relationship between Rahner and liberation, political, and feminist theologies.

Rahner wrote on ecumenism, but there has been little attention to his reception in Protestant theology. Nicholas Adams offers a realistic assessment of the impact of Rahner in Protestant circles, focusing especially on the critique of George Lindbeck.

Theological aesthetics is also an area of contemporary interest where Rahner's views have been little noted. Gesa Thiessen draws attention to the importance of artistic image and poetic word as sources of Rahner's theological imagination.

One of the most widely controverted areas of Rahner's theology was his use of the phrase "anonymous Christian" to express his conviction that all human beings are touched by the grace of Jesus Christ and therefore drawn into the salvific embrace of God. Jeannine Hill Fletcher situates that discussion within the context of the prevalent exclusivist understandings to which Rahner was responding and contemporary theologies of religious pluralism. Does Rahner's inclusivist position, infelicitous as its language may have been, remain a viable theological option for understanding religious diversity?

CRITIQUES

Karl Rahner had his critics, both during his lifetime and now in a changed philosophical and ecclesial world. During his lifetime, Hans Küng, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Johann Baptist Metz raised critiques from significantly different perspectives. Hans Küng was impatient with Rahner's insistence on showing the continuity of his approaches with the tradition rightly understood. Was a linear, positive, unfolding of the tradition inevitable? Could not the Church ever just admit mistakes?

Von Balthasar questioned Rahner's whole anthropological starting place, finding his theology too human-centered. Along with other critics from the right, he questions whether Rahner has evacuated Christianity of its categorial content in favour of a relationship with God not essentially mediated by the concrete content of faith. Metz, for his part, was

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concerned with an individualism or privatism which seemed to render the social and historical dimensions of Christianity quite irrelevant. In the light of Rahner's hopeful expectation of salvation the suffering, the unexpected reversals, and the interruptions of life could be overlooked.

In the context of post-modernity questions are raised about the ongoing relevance of a theology so rooted in notions of permanent truth and an anthropology presupposing a modern understanding of the self. Michael Purcell addresses the challenges of post-modernity to a theology seemingly so rooted in the ethos of modernity.

READING RAHNER

Although often considered difficult to read – and he can be – Rahner's major themes recur throughout both his academic and more popular writings. It is sometimes better to approach him first through the more popular works where the pastoral concern and mystagogical sensibility that mark all his work is unmistakable. Works such as *Encounters with Silence*, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, *Everyday Faith*, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, and *Christian at the Crossroads*, to name just a few, are excellent ways to encounter Rahner's major themes in accessible language. They reveal the deep pastoral intent of Rahner who famously said that all (real) theology is pastoral theology. Rahner had no patience with abstract theological speculation for its own sake. A brief bibliographical guide for students approaching Rahner for the first time is found at the end of the volume and a brief glossary of commonly used terms will also help first-time readers.

RAHNER'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

Rahner started out in a theological climate that was dramatically different from today. He was dealing with a monolithic theological and philosophical system that placed obedience to external authority at its center. Philosophy was the privileged partner and interpretative companion to theology. Today radical pluralism is the situation. Along with philosophy, the social sciences, and increasingly the empirical sciences, are being brought into the dialogue searching for meaningful interpretations of humanity, God, and the cosmos. If post-modern thinkers question Rahner's understanding of truth and his understanding of the self, there exists an equally strong tendency today to return to a pre-Conciliar mentality, to an authoritarian approach to faith, to the kind of neo-scholasticism that was Rahner's

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nemesis. Fundamentalisms of many kinds abound and not just outside Christianity. In the light of this complex reality, Johann Baptist Metz suggests that Rahner is the ideal theologian for this post-modern period. Rahner, in Metz's view, should not be simply identified with the ethos of modernity since his work critiques problematic aspects of modernity, as well as of pre-modernity and post-modernity. "Rahner's life work has succeeded in bringing together what has long been separated, indeed set at variance: his work has brought to an end the schism between theology and life history; it has related doctrine and life, the mystical and the everyday, in the context of the irreducible complexity and anonymity of our postmodern situation."¹¹ For Metz, Rahner's insights, though not the last word, remain valuable in today's complex world.

The authors you encounter in this *Companion* represent a variety of perspectives on the legacy of Karl Rahner. We have not attempted to harmonize them. Their perspectives may be influenced by the philosophical and ecclesial concerns of the author's own cultures and contexts. Whether their primary concern is a retreat into pre-modernity, or a concern that a theology so grounded in Rahner's philosophical positions can in fact speak to the issues of post-modernity, they agree that Roman Catholic theology has been profoundly touched and changed by the theology of Karl Rahner. To encounter Rahner is to encounter the variety of interpretations of his thought as well as the personal, spiritual, and theological impact that he has had on generations of scholars and believers.

Notes

- 1 K. Rahner, *Prayers for a Lifetime* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 3.
- 2 H. Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 37.
- 3 K. Rahner and P. Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. R. Ockenden (New York: Collins, 1979).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 5 *FCF*, 176.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 177.
- 7 "Current Problems in Christology," *TI* 1, trans. C. Ernst (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 149–200.
- 8 *TI* XIII, trans. D. Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), 213–23. See also K. Rahner and W. Thüsing, *A New Christology*, trans. D. Smith and V. Green (New York: Seabury, 1980).
- 9 "Women and the Priesthood," *TI* xx, trans. E. Quinn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 35–47. See also chapters 9 and 17 of this volume.
- 10 See L. Rinser, *Saturn auf der Sonne* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1994), 208–38.
- 11 J. B. Metz, *A Passion for God*, trans. J. M. Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998), 103.