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Grace and the Fulness of Revelation in Christ:
A Study of Karl Rahner's
Foundations of Christian Faith.

by Donald Bolen
A dissertation submitted to the
Faculty of Theology, Saint Paul
University, in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts in Theology.
Ottawa, Canada
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Don Bolen
April 22, 1994

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Old men ought to be explorers....

– T. S. ELIOT, "East Coker," *Four Quartets*

In theology too you are pilgrims who seek the eternal homeland of truth in
a constantly new exodus.

– Karl RAHNER, *Ignatius Speaks to a Modern Jesuit*

INTRODUCTION

The faith claim that the fulness of God's revelation to humanity is communicated in the person and event of Jesus Christ finds one of its classic formulations in the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews:

At various times in the past and in various ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son....(Heb.1:1-2)

While this text is cited in both Vatican I's *Dei Filius* and Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*, these two documents stand as representative signposts of a significant shift in the Church's understanding of revelation and its fulness in Christ. In *Dei Filius*, revelation is identified primarily with the body of doctrinal truths contained in Scripture and Tradition, as set forth by the Church's magisterium; from this perspective, fulness of revelation suggests the complete canon of revealed truths. *Dei Verbum* develops the richer perspective of God's speaking to human beings "as friends," a divine communication which reaches its historical fulness in God's "presence and self-manifestation" in Jesus Christ.¹ The transition has been from a propositional model of revelation to a more dialogical, personalist and biblical understanding of revelation as historical event.

Dei Verbum has been received as a watershed in Catholic theology; but it by no means marks a definitive end in the emergence of an increasingly dialogical and

¹. *Dei Verbum*, #2, #4. See Henri BOUILLARD, "Le Concept de Révélation de Vatican I à Vatican II," in *Révélation de Dieu et langage des hommes*, (*Cogitatio Fidei*, vol.63, Paris: Cerf, 1972), pp.35-49.

historically conscious understanding of Christian revelation and its fulness in Jesus Christ. Debate has continued on a number of issues: the relation between revelation as communicated knowledge and as historical event; the role of the subject in the receiving and welcoming of Christian revelation; reconciling the closure of public revelation at the death of the last apostle with the active, continuing presence of God in the world; the relation between revelation in Christ and revelation in other religious traditions.² A central locus of each of these areas of discussion is the meaning and significance of the Christ event within the framework of "revelation history." One key aspect of this question, which has yet to be extensively explored, is the relationship between the fulness of revelation in Christ and ongoing revelation.³ It is with an eye to this relationship and its theological implications that we intend to approach Karl Rahner's 1976 text *Foundations of Christian Faith*; though as we will momentarily see, Rahner's method of approaching this relationship invites a slightly larger phrasing of our starting question.⁴

². On current debate in the theology of revelation, see: David TRACY, "The Particularity and Universality of Christian Revelation," in *Concilium*, 113 (1978), pp.106–116; Claude GEFFRÉ, "Esquisse d'une Théologie de la Révélation," in Paul RICOEUR, ed., *La Révélation* (Bruxelles: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 1977), pp.171–203; Gerald O'COLLINS, "Révélation passée et actuelle," in René LATOURELLE, ed., *Vatican II Bilan et Perspectives: Vingt-cinq ans après (1962–1987)*, vol.1, *Recherches Nouvelle Série*, no. 15 (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1988), pp.141–152; Thomas Franklin O'MEARA, "Toward a Subjective Theology of Revelation," in *Theological Studies*, 36 (1975), pp.401–427.

³. This thesis has been written in conjunction with THO 7235, "Revelation: Fulness in Christ. Continuity and Actuality," a seminar led by Prof. Normand Provencher, O.M.I., from Sept. 1989 to Apr. 1990.

⁴. Karl RAHNER, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976). The English text, trans. William DYCH, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), will henceforth be referred to as *Foundations*.

At a conference marking the occasion of his 80th birthday, Rahner noted: "The one, real center of Christianity and its gospel is therefore for me the real self-communication of God, in his own most personal reality and glory, to the creature."⁵ Undeniably, the mystery of God's radical gift of self to human beings – whose existence is itself a gift – is at the heart of Rahner's understanding of revelation, and is the core insight and claim not only of *Foundations*, but of his whole theological project.⁶ In the introduction to *Foundations*, Rahner differentiates within this basic faith claim the two major categories which will concern us here, in positing that "the only really absolute mysteries are the self-communication of God in the depths of human existence, called grace, and in history, called Jesus Christ...."⁷

The self-communication of God *in grace* is given "always and everywhere to all human beings," as the innermost dynamism of our human subjectivity.⁸ Mediated through the world and its history, this self-communication may be accepted or rejected without being recognized in a thematic, explicit or unambiguous manner. The self-communication of God *in Jesus Christ* is the irrevocable eschatological

⁵. Karl RAHNER, "The Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," *Communio*, 11, no. 4 (1984), p.407.

⁶. The 1979 essay "Foundations of Christian Faith," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.19 (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp.3–15, is Rahner's own commentary on the text of the same title. It identifies the fundamental idea of Christianity presented in *Foundations* as "the gracious self-communication of God in himself" (p.10).

⁷. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.12.

⁸. Karl RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: God Speaks?," interview with Marietta Peitz and Karl Weich on West Germany's Channel 2 (ZDF), Mainz, May 16, 1971, in Paul IMHOF and Hubert BIALLOWONS, eds., *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews 1965–1982* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p.75.

climax of the history of revelation. In the historical concreteness of his life, death and resurrection, the God–man Jesus is the unsurpassable self–promise of God to humanity in absolute proximity, as our absolute future.

In Rahner's terms then, the problematic of the fulness of revelation in Christ and ongoing revelation is posed and grappled with in his articulation of the relationship between the two moments or phases of God's self–communication – the transcendental experience of grace and the event of Jesus Christ – within the overarching category of the history of revelation.⁹ The project undertaken here is a study of this relationship, within the framework set forth in Rahner's *Foundations*. Working in conjunction with the method, logic and boundaries of his text, we will attempt: to trace the intrinsic relationship he posits between revelation in Christ and in grace as it is unfolded through the central stages of his methodology; to gain a more profound understanding of how this relationship functions as a cornerstone of his thought; to articulate and analyze the implications he constructs upon this cornerstone.

The central criteria of evaluation will be the intelligibility and coherence of the text itself. Only in the final chapter, and there only in a minimal way, will we open the gates to a select handful of critiques, introducing the criteria of the adequacy and relevance of Rahner's interpretation. We will argue that Rahner's exposition of the profound inner correlation between revelation in grace and in Jesus Christ offers a

⁹. As will be readily apparent, while grace has a *transcendental* character, it is always mediated historically; and the self–communication of God in *history* always presupposes the transcendental subjectivity of the human person. The relationship between the *transcendental* and the *historical* will be a recurring theme throughout this work.

creative framework for reflection on Christian faith, and that the implications he draws forth from this framework respond courageously to our present context. While Rahner's analysis of the reception of grace in human experience is subject to critique from hermeneutical and contextual schools of theology, and his Christology's historical grounding is weak, his framework embodies a flexibility and openness to dialogue which continues to make his project ever worthy of being grappled with.

Our method, drawing upon insights from contemporary hermeneutic theory, approaches theology as an interpretive discourse on faith, which mediates meaning primarily through written texts. This recognition underlies the choice of one central text to be studied, with an attentiveness to its frame of reference, its intelligibility, its genre, purpose and method. Within such an approach we are not primarily concerned with the influences and sources Rahner draws upon.¹⁰ Our aim is not a historical study in a linear sense. Nor are we engaging in a comparative study. Outside of the introductory overview which follows, our concern is not primarily with the genesis or development of Rahner's thought; there is no claim to exhaust Rahner's entire contribution to the question being grappled with. While we will draw on a number of his essays and interviews from the same time period, these will function in a supplementary manner, complementing and developing the basic structure and content which is set forth in *Foundations*. Through the main body of

¹⁰. In this regard our approach coheres with that adopted within *Foundations*. Rahner notes in the preface that because of the introductory character of the text, "the author considered it superfluous to add subsequently explanatory footnotes and references to literature. In the framework of this book that would seem to him to be a learned pretense to which he is not inclined" (p.xiv). Indeed Rahner has included only one footnote in the entire text; the editor has doubled his output in this regard, adding a second one.

our project, secondary sources will be appealed to only in so far as they serve to clarify what is set forth within the bounds of Rahner's text. What is intended is a very critical reading and analysis of a very difficult text, from the perspective of one particular question; nothing more.

Foundations is an appropriate text to be studied through such an approach, for several reasons. Firstly, while the majority of Rahner's publications are essays or compilations of essays, *Foundations* is a single comprehensive text which has been received by the theological community as being of considerable significance. David Tracy called it a "masterful work;" Larz Pearson adds that it "seems destined to be inscribed on the list of theological classics."¹¹ Secondly, following upon four decades of theological reflection, it is a work marked by Rahner's full maturity as a thinker. References to *Foundations* in interviews and in other Rahner texts indicate that he himself saw it as the work most reflective of his primary theological concerns.¹² Thirdly, it is a text which grapples with the whole of Christianity, the totality of Christian existence. As his "lengthiest unified study," it best allows for the contextualizing of particular questions within his overall project.¹³ Finally, our subject

¹¹. David TRACY, "Exploring the Horizon of Absoluteness," review of *Foundations* in *Commonweal*, 105 (Oct.27, 1978), p.693; Larz PEARSON, review of *Foundations* in *Thomist*, 43 (1970), p.186.

¹². For example, see the March 1984 interview with the editors of *Vida Nueva*, "The High Point of an Eighty-Year-Old Theologian's Life", in Paul IMHOF and Hubert BIALLOWONS, eds., *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of his Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), pp.38-40. Asked about his contribution to theology, Rahner responded that "what is most important is contained more or less in my *Foundations of Christian Faith*." See also Karl RAHNER, *I Remember: An Autobiographical Interview with Meinold Krauss* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), where Rahner suggests that *Foundations* represents "to some extent, a summary of my theology" (p.59).

¹³. Leo O'DONOVAN, in Leo O'DONOVAN, ed., "A Changing Ecclesiology in a Changing Church: A Symposium on Development in the Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner," in *Theological Studies*, 38 (1977), p.736.

of research – the relation between revelation in Christ and in grace – is not a marginal concern within the text, yet neither is it clear and unambiguous at the outset; hence it merits being investigated.

Our study is divided into four chapters. The first chapter introduces Rahner's transcendental method and its philosophical and theological presuppositions as it informs the aim and structure of *Foundations*. The second chapter will reflect on grace as constitutive of all human experience, at least as offer, and as the category by which Rahner speaks of ongoing revelation in human history. Jesus Christ as the summit and fulfilment of the history of grace in human existence will be the focus of the third chapter. In the final chapter we will look to the implications drawn by Rahner as a result of the correlation he posits between Christ and grace, and reflect on how this correlation informs his theological system from its Trinitarian foundations through to its ecclesiological speculations. The thesis will conclude with a few final reflections on the study as a whole.

The remainder of this introduction aims to situate Rahner in his context, draw out the major lines of his theological project in its breadth, and look to the themes and concerns of the later writings encompassing *Foundations*. While somewhat lengthier than might be expected, these introductory reflections will serve to contextualize the narrow focus of our project within the vast landscape of Rahner's theological impact and legacy.

Rahner in his Context

In his eighty years, Karl Rahner has lived through, helped to initiate, and stands as a chief representative of a major paradigm shift in Roman Catholic theology. Born in Freiburg im Breisgau on the edge of the Black Forest in 1904, Rahner entered the Society of Jesus at age eighteen. He was initially slated to teach philosophy; as a doctoral student he attended Martin Heidegger's seminar in Freiburg for two years, while writing a dissertation on St. Thomas' analysis of human knowing. The thesis' attempt to apply Thomas' thought to modern questions led to its infamous rejection by his director Martin Honecker.¹⁴ A change of assignment brought Rahner to Innsbruck, where in 1936 he successfully completed what he later termed a "small, lousy, but at least according to the standards of the time, adequate" dissertation in theology on patristic interpretations of the water and blood flowing from Jesus' side in Jn. 19:34.¹⁵

Rahner began teaching dogmatics in 1937, in a Catholic theological context dominated by a "theologically unproductive and spiritually sterile" neoscholasticism.¹⁶ Fergus Kerr sheds light on the time period in speaking of a generation of

¹⁴. Herbert VORGRIMLER, *Karl Rahner : His Life, Thought and Works* (London: Burns & Oates, 1965), pp.20–25. The rejected dissertation was subsequently published under the title *Geist in Welt* (Innsbruck: F. Rauch, 1939), and much later published in English as *Spirit in the World* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968).

¹⁵. Karl RAHNER, "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," interview with *Herder Korrespondenz*, Feb. 1974, in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.16. The dissertation, entitled *E Latere Christi: Eine Untersuchung über den typologischen Sinn von Jo 19,34*, is unpublished and untranslated at present.

¹⁶. John P. GALVIN, "Grace for a New Generation: The Rahner Revolution - #1," *Commonweal*, 112 (Jan. 25, 1985), p.40.

theologians who "in self-protection, against the anti-Modernist blizzard, either stopped asking questions or else backed away from the more central issues."¹⁷ In Rahner's phrasing, this was the era of *Pian monolithism*, where theologians practiced "a sort of 'Denzinger theology,'" going about their work "in a theological territory which was already defined for them."¹⁸

Influenced by Heidegger, by Joseph Marechal's Kantian reading of Thomas, and pre-eminently by Ignatius of Loyola, Rahner set forth to reintroduce into theology a spirit of tough-minded questioning and an interaction with the major questions of the day.¹⁹ In the opening essay of the first volume of *Theological Investigations*, published in 1954, Rahner laments the lack of critical reflection on the central truths of Christian faith: "Over how many questions does there reign the graveyard calm of weariness and boredom!" Noting that the dogmatic theology of

¹⁷. Fergus KERR, "Rahner Retrospective #1: Rupturing *Der Pianische Monolithismus*," *New Blackfriars*, 61 (May 1980), p.230.

¹⁸. As cited in KERR, "Rahner Retrospective #1: Rupturing *Der Pianische Monolithismus*," p.226; from Karl RAHNER, "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.11 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), p.70.

¹⁹. The question of major influences on Rahner's thought is a field of study all its own. Many commentators trace the particular influences on his thought; Leo O'DONOVAN, in "In Memoriam: Karl Rahner, S.J., 1904-1984," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 53, no.1 (1985), p.130, gives an almost credal account of these influences: "From Aquinas he learned an epistemological and metaphysical realism, from Kant the transcendental perspective, from Hegel a dialectical view of history, from Heidegger an existential ontology - and from Ignatius of Loyola a spirituality seeking God in all things." Harvey Egan has recently published an excellent article on Ignatius' influence on Rahner's thought; see "Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Spiritual Exercises," *Thought*, vol.67, no.266 (Sept.1992), pp.257-70. While Rahner acknowledged his indebtedness especially to Ignatius, Marechal & Heidegger, he was hesitant to trace the impact of specific individuals on his work. In an interview with Leo O'DONOVAN, "Living into Mystery: Karl Rahner's Reflections at 75," *America*, 140 (Mar. 10, 1979), pp.177-178, Rahner says "I am, if you want to put it that way, like every other human being, the product of my environment, but really more the product of a diverse, a perhaps anonymous and symmetrical environment that worked on me from different sides."

the day was "very orthodox" but "not very vividly alive," he footnotes that a "dead orthodoxy" is also a form of heresy.²⁰

The next ten years saw what was left of the *Pian monolith* quiver in the liberating winds of the Second Vatican Council. By 1967, Rahner could speak of increasingly visible signs of "a great new departure in Catholic theology," springing up primarily "from the fact that there was an almost inconceivable amount of progress to be made in dialogue in order to *catch up with* modern philosophy and the historical sciences."²¹ It is within the context of *catching up* – with modern philosophy in its "turn to the subject" and the corresponding emergence and deepening of historical consciousness – that Rahner's own contribution to a new departure in Catholic theology can best be understood.

Forging a new Theological Framework

Rahner's bibliography lists over 4,000 publications. In addition, he edited the theological encyclopedia *Sacramentum Mundi* and other reference works, and served as a founding editor of both the *Questiones Disputatae* series and the theological journal *Concilium*. This prolific output complemented over three decades of teaching theology, at the universities of Innsbruck and Vienna, Munich and Münster. During the Second Vatican Council Rahner was a member of the

²⁰. Karl RAHNER, "The Prospects for Dogmatic Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), pp.11, 13.

²¹. Karl RAHNER, "Philosophy and Philosophising in Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.9 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), p.58.

theological commissions which produced *Dei Verbum*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Lumen Gentium*.²² While his theological enterprise includes pastoral theology and devotional works, the majority of his writing lies in the areas of dogmatic and fundamental theology, generally taking the shape of essays on significant issues or particular questions.²³

David Tracy offers a fitting introduction to the spirit and concerns of this body of Rahner's work:

There is a restless, even driven, quality to a Rahner essay which forces the reader to think. He always seemed to begin with a rhetoric reminiscent of Cicero: all the questions he would not ask, could not ask, had no time now to ask, hoped to know enough some day to be able to ask properly. So many unanswered, perhaps unanswerable, questions. Then, exit Cicero, and enter pure Rahner: the question he would ask. That question inevitably turned out to be one of the central questions we wanted to ask all along: what can we know? what can we hope for? who are we? who is this Jesus Christ? what does it mean to speak the word mystery? what is grace? who is God? Through all these questions, the religious quest of Karl Rahner became imprinted on the Catholic landscape.²⁴

As Tracy indicates, Rahner's texts have a knack of going to the "heart of the matter."²⁵ Situating God's gracious self-gift to the world at the center of his

²². Rahner's influence on the Council is difficult to measure. In the autobiographical interview *I Remember*, pp.81–83, when asked about the fact that cardinals referred to him as the "Holy Ghost Writer" of the Council, Rahner responded "Well, that's nonsense, isn't it?," and suggested that the significance of individual theologians at the Council has "become a bit mythologized." While acknowledging a small impact on certain questions, he says he "did not play an especially exciting role." Cf. Karl RAHNER, "Witness to the Council," interview with Thomas Fox, Innsbruck, 1982, in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, pp.74–75.

²³. Most of Rahner's essays in fundamental and dogmatic theology are published in the sixteen volumes of *Schriften zur Theologie*, translated into English in the twenty-three volumes of *Theological Investigations*.

²⁴. David TRACY, "All is Grace: A Rooted Radical," *Commonweal*, 111 (Apr. 20, 1984), p.230.

²⁵. TRACY, "Exploring the Horizon of Absoluteness," p.694.

theological enterprise, he notes: "(a)ll else that Christianity offers or expects from us is with respect to this only an introduction or 'secondary consequence.'"²⁶ From this center, Rahner's presentation of Christian faith embodies, in Anne Carr's words, "a coherence and consistency, even a kind of simplicity" despite the density and complexity of his thought.²⁷

This unified articulation of Christian faith is grounded firstly in a fidelity to dogma, a keen understanding and respect for tradition; secondly in a restless questioning, and a sensitivity to the horizons and concerns of the contemporary world. These are not opposing alternatives for Rahner. A theology in service to its times, one attentive to "the promise and threat of modernity," necessarily grapples anew with Christian dogma, seeking to render it in a credible and meaningful language for today.²⁸ Through his transcendental method, asking the condition of the possibility of God's loving self-communication and the reception of this gift by human beings, Rahner attempts to make precisely this kind of connection between contemporary horizons of self-understanding and Christian faith, between anthropology and theology.²⁹ Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment concerns of human authenticity and freedom become the heart of Rahner's anthropology,

²⁶. RAHNER, "Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," p.407. See also *I Remember*, p.58.

²⁷. Anne CARR, "Unsystematic Systematician: The Rahner Revolution – #2," *Commonweal*, 112 (Jan. 25, 1985), p.43.

²⁸. Harvey EGAN, "A Friend Remembers Karl Rahner's 'Theological Life,'" *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, 85 (Jan. 1985), pp.63–64; cf. TRACY, "All is Grace: A Rooted Radical," p.230; "Cardinal vs. Theologian," *The Month*, 231 (1971), p.106.

²⁹. CARR, "Unsystematic Systematician," p.44. This method is operative in *Foundations*, and will be discussed in the first chapter.

characterizing the human being's capacity to receive or reject God's self-gift.

In acknowledging that God's self-communication itself has a history, Rahner takes up what is likely the most difficult task facing contemporary theologians, namely reckoning with the historical character of Christian faith.³⁰ He asks more questions than he answers concerning the historicity of theology; here as elsewhere, a major part of his contribution lies in the level of his questioning.³¹ In a 1966 lecture entitled "The Historicity of Theology," Rahner attempts to awaken the "astonishing" and "by no means self-evident" character of Christianity's claim that ultimate truth, the truth decisive for salvation, itself should have a *history*. Taking this seriously rules out a propositional understanding of the fulness of revelation in Christ:

The history of revelation may not be watered down to a succession of individual propositions, communicated one by one by God to the bearer of revelation, and by addition causing the 'deposit of faith' to grow gradually, until in the revelation in Christ it has reached its final extent and now only requires to be administered and tapped by the Church.³²

Rahner's most comprehensive writing on the historicity of revelation is located in *Foundations*, and will be discussed in detail in forthcoming chapters.

Among Rahner scholars one can hear traces of a debate concerning the

³⁰. Hans-Georg GADAMER, in his text *Le Problème de la Conscience Historique*, (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1963), p.7, writes: "L'apparition d'une prise de conscience historique est vraisemblablement la révolution la plus importante parmi celles que nous avons subies depuis l'avènement de l'époque moderne."

³¹. Fergus KERR, in "Rahner Retrospective #2 - The Historicity of Theology," *New Blackfriars*, 61 (July/Aug. 1980), p.341, writes that concerning the historicity of theology, "Karl Rahner's enduring service to Catholic theology has been to get questions at last acknowledged that have been denied for a hundred years."

³². Karl RAHNER, "The Historicity of Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9, pp.66-67.

development of his theology over the years, and the legitimacy of discussing his work "as if it were all of one piece."³³ There is arguably a consistency evident in Rahner's predominantly pastoral aim in doing theology. At age 75 he notes:

However abstract and schoolmasterly my theology may have been, it still has had in the end a pastoral, ministerial inspiration. I mean, I have never or at least very seldom done theology for theology's sake, like 'art for art's sake.'³⁴

His pastoral concern is evident in that the questions he grapples with rise out of lived faith and real existential concerns, and also in that his theology's basic thrust is to awaken, deepen and explicate the traces of God already present within every person's ordinary human experience.³⁵

A second area marked by continuity is his transcendental method and the interplay it presupposes between theology and anthropology. Yet Rahner remarks that he does not want to be stereotyped by the texts which first set forward his method, suggesting that *Spirit in the World* and *Hearers of the Word* were "rather lopsided works of my youth."³⁶ If Rahner's method did not change a great deal, the clarity with which he centered on God's free self-communication to human beings,

³³. Edward VACEK, "Development within Rahner's Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 42 (1975), p.36. Larz Pearson's review of *Foundations*, in *Thomist*, pp.186-87, serves as a good example. Pearson writes: "Rahner has generated a theological edifice that has varied little in the course of its accomplishment."

³⁴. Interview with O'DONOVAN, "Living into Mystery: Karl Rahner's Reflections at 75," p.178.

³⁵. See Johann Baptist METZ, "The Significance of Rahner," *The Tablet*, 238 (Apr. 21/28, 1984), p.386; EGAN, "A Friend Remembers Karl Rahner's 'Theological Life,'" p.62; Karl RAHNER, *Everyday Things* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965).

³⁶. RAHNER, "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.22. *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) was originally published as *Hörer des Wortes: Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie* (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1941). On *Spirit in the World*, see above, footnote #14.

and the concrete and radical implications he drew from this center, certainly increased and deepened over the years.³⁷ For this reason his later writings, especially those dating from his retirement in 1971 onwards, are of particular interest and significance.

The Late Writings

In a 1979 interview, Rahner noted that "one should never stop thinking too early."³⁸ David Tracy writes that as Rahner reached his full maturity as a theologian, "a curious sea change took place:"

The 'later' Rahner insisted he knew less and less than he thought he knew at the beginning. God's reality became more incomprehensible the more comprehensible our best thoughts about God became. And we became more and more incomprehensible to ourselves the more we learned of ourselves. Our once-clear answers dissolved into unnerving questions. The questions multiplied and intensified to render theology a religious quest, worthy of a lifetime of effort.³⁹

Rahner was keenly aware that the field of theology had grown immensely during his own lifetime, and that no one person could master all its disciplines.⁴⁰ Beyond the strictly theological disciplines, Rahner saw increasingly that the sciences and the

³⁷. Edward VACEK, in "Development within Rahner's Theology," p.36, describes this development as being "from a highly focused and somewhat narrow view to a more expansive, inclusivist perspective."

³⁸. Interview with O'DONOVAN, "Living into Mystery: Karl Rahner's Reflections at 75," p.180.

³⁹. TRACY, "All is Grace: A Rooted Radical," p.230.

⁴⁰. In 1974, Rahner noted: "If one added up what a scholarly theologian must ideally know today, after forty years of my theological work I have become ten times dumber. Forty years ago the ratio between what I knew, and the problems, available information, and methods, was maybe 1:4; today it's more like 1:400." From "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," p.19.

arts, the events of history, indeed all human experiences revealed something of God, yet the individual theologian "knows practically nothing of these."⁴¹ The late writings reflect a profound humility in the face of the mystery of God, and a vocal resistance to theological smugness and arrogance wherever they were encountered:

Does not...the tone of the Church's moral proclamation sometimes frighten one through its lack of ambiguity and its immutability, characteristics not even so easily found in the human being himself...How much do our statements from the university podiums and from the pulpits and from the holy tribunals of the Church have such a ring that one does not perceive clearly that these statements are virtually trembling with the last bit of a creature's modesty....⁴²

During his retirement years, Rahner was in dialogue with the contemporary world and its practical concerns as never before. In "Ignatius Speaks to a Modern Jesuit," which Rahner often referred to as his personal testament, he summons his colleagues:

Study Marx, Freud and Einstein, try to evolve a theology which can touch the ear and heart of men today. But the point of departure and the end of your theology...remains Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen Lord.⁴³

In the late writings, the gap between church and world narrows. Rahner speaks of the intrinsic correlation between the liturgy of the church and the "liturgy of the world," co-extensive with human history.⁴⁴ History is perceived as "the one long

⁴¹. RAHNER, "The Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," pp.411-12.

⁴². Ibid., pp. 406, 412-13.

⁴³. Karl RAHNER, "Ignatius Speaks to a Modern Jesuit," in *Ignatius of Loyola* (Collins: Toronto, 1979), p.32.

⁴⁴. Karl RAHNER, "On the Theology of Worship," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 19 (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp.141-49.

conversation that is meant to draw all the world home."⁴⁵

In his ecclesial writings, he spoke of the danger of retreating into a "new ghetto," and called for a more democratic, declericalized and self-critical Church.⁴⁶ In articles such as "Open Questions in Dogma Considered by the Institutional Church as Definitively Answered," he invites renewed discussion on a wide variety of issues, from the ordination of women to the range of papal authority and the procedure for electing bishops.⁴⁷ Inter-faith dialogue and church unity became passionate concerns. While he envisioned a world church which would allow for variation in liturgical forms and authentic pluralism in church law and practice, he acknowledged that much of Vatican II had not yet been implemented, and that "we are living through a 'wintry season.'"⁴⁸

Rahner died of heart failure on March 30, 1984. The man who generally refused to answer biographical questions, who said his own theology intrigued him very little, received extravagant tributes from his contemporaries.⁴⁹ David Tracy identifies

⁴⁵. Leo O'DONOVAN, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," in *Theological Studies*, 46 (1985), p.632.

⁴⁶. RAHNER, "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," p. 33; Karl RAHNER, "The Unity of the Church to Come," interview with Eduard Kopp, Hamburg, Feb. 1984, in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p. 173.

⁴⁷. Karl RAHNER, "Open Questions in Dogma Considered by the Institutional Church as Definitively Answered," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 15 (1978), pp.211-26; Karl RAHNER, "Women and the Priesthood," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp.35-47.

⁴⁸. RAHNER, "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," p.39.

⁴⁹. Walter KASPER, "Karl Rahner – Theologian in an Age of Brokenness," in *Theology Digest*, 28, no.3 (Fall, 1980), p.203; Leo O'DONOVAN, "To Lead us into Mystery," in *America*, 150 (June 16, 1984), p.455.

Rahner as one of the "four or five thinkers in the rich tradition of Catholic theology of whom it can be said: after that work, nothing can be the same again."⁵⁰ Johann Baptist Metz writes:

Karl Rahner developed the theological background out of which all of us theologians now proceed. Yes, I say all of us. Even those who criticise and dismiss him, talk about his insights. And those who ignore him, ignore much more than a theological position. In any case, Karl Rahner renewed the face of Catholic theology. Nothing is exactly as it was before him.⁵¹

In adding their tributes, Anne Carr and Leo O'Donovan point to the unfinished character of Rahner's thought; unfinished not in the sense that he ran out of time, but rather in a sense which indicates something of a new way of doing theology. Rahner's legacy is not a complete theological system, but a life's creative work of faithfully, systematically, passionately engaging in open-ended reflection on questions most worthy of being grappled with.⁵²

It is especially in light of this unfinished and open-ended aspect that the present study hopes to find its proper context: within the long Catholic tradition of grappling with fundamental questions in theology, seeking to carry forward something of the spirit of one of that tradition's finest thinkers by engaging in a study of one of the cornerstones of his life's work.

⁵⁰. TRACY, "All is Grace: A Rooted Radical," p.230.

⁵¹. METZ, "The Significance of Rahner," p.386.

⁵². CARR, "Unsystematic Systematician," p.43; O'DONOVAN, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," p.646.

CHAPTER ONE

FOUNDATIONS: AIM AND METHOD

The precise question, therefore, is whether there is an intrinsic unity between the event of the Incarnation on the one hand, and the self-transcendence of the whole spiritual world into God through God's self-communication on the other.¹

While we are half through the text before this question of the relationship between Christ and grace is explicitly asked, it is an intrinsic concern from *Foundations'* opening lines. In laying the groundwork for a closer analysis of the way in which Rahner's theology grapples with this relationship, we begin by attempting to contextualize our inquiry within the contours of the principal text being studied. Hence in this first chapter we intend to identify the aims and central thrust of *Foundations*, introduce the philosophical presuppositions which inform its method, and explore the logic of the text's starting point and structure.

A First Level Reflection

Rahner traces the origins of *Foundations* back to a course he gave at Munich and later at Münster under the title *An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. While at the publisher's suggestion the title *Grundkurs des Glaubens* was added, literally "basic course of faith," the text is not intended as a catechism but as "a quest for the ultimate grounds of faith." As the subtitle indicates, Rahner's concern is to

¹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.199-200.

present Christianity "as a whole under one *idea*...reflecting on the ultimate unity and the essential coherence of everything that Christianity proclaims."²

Ultimately what we want to do is merely reflect upon the simple question: "What is a Christian, and why can one live this Christian existence today with intellectual honesty?... (we) want to reflect here upon this fact of our Christian existence, and we want to justify it before the demands of conscience and of truth by giving an "account of our hope" (1 Pet.3:15).³

In its attempt to summarily express the structure of Christian life and faith as a whole, Rahner situates his text within a tradition stretching from the Apostles' Creed and St. Augustine's *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Charity* through to Paul VI's "Creed of the People of God." In so far as it seeks to speak of Christian faith in its original unity and in its totality, *Foundations* also finds a precedent in the intentions – though not in the method – which inspired 19th century efforts to produce a "theological encyclopedia."⁴

In the preface Rahner acknowledges that his text is written for those who are willing to engage in "some rather strenuous thinking and some hard intellectual work," and are not afraid to "wrestle with an idea."⁵ More specifically, Rahner notes that the external stimulus for *Foundations* was Vatican II's *Optatam totius* (#14), which proposed that priestly formation cultivate "a better integration of philosophy and theology," centering on the mystery of Christ. The decree recommends an

². RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.4.

³. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.2.

⁴. Ibid., pp.2, 4–5.

⁵. Ibid., p.xi. Indeed one reviewer, Roland TESKE, in "Rahner's Summa," *Cross Currents*, 28 (1978), p.201, notes that for many readers Rahner's *introduction* to the idea of Christianity itself requires an introduction.

introductory course in which students, grounded in this mystery of salvation, would "see clearly the meaning of ecclesiastical studies, their interrelationship, and their pastoral intent." Rahner notes that if there is both need and justification for such an introductory course, it "would have significance not just for the education of priests."⁶

Foundations is by its own admission an experiment.⁷ As Rahner notes later in the text,

all the problems of reconciling Christian teaching and its interpretation of existence with the life-style and mentality and experience of today's world are rolled up into one and concentrated in our topic.⁸

Rahner is acutely aware of the vastness of the topic and the limitations of one scholar's ability to grapple with it. He is also vehement in pointing out that an intellectually honest justification of Christian faith today cannot proceed simply as it has in the past. Changes in both theological climate and method have necessitated a rethinking of the grounds of Christian faith in addressing contemporary horizons of thought.

Rahner suggests that when he studied theology forty years earlier, Christian faith was largely taken for granted. "Our faith was partially and essentially conditioned by a quite definite sociological situation which at the time supported us and which today does not exist." In contrast, today's theology students live "in a situation of crisis for their faith," within a context where many people find it difficult to fathom or

⁶. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.3-4.

⁷. *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁸. *Ibid.*, p.179.

believe in God's connectedness to the world.⁴

The increasing challenge to meaningfully and credibly ground Christian faith is complicated by a new theological pluralism which has radically altered the way in which fundamental theology can reasonably be approached and undertaken. Rahner notes that four centuries ago, a scholar like Francis Suarez could have a solid grasp of "more or less everything that might be important for the justification of Christian faith at his time and in his situation."⁵ Today that is unthinkable for any individual scholar:

Theology has in fact become fragmented into an immense number of individual disciplines, with each individual discipline offering an enormous amount of material, employing its own very differentiated and difficult methodology, and having very little contact with other related or neighboring theological disciplines.⁶

Moreover, the contemporary context is marked by an equally vast pluralism of philosophies. Furthermore still, philosophy no longer provides the only interpretation of human existence relevant to theology; rather, theology "must necessarily enter into dialogue with a pluralism of historical, sociological, and natural sciences."⁷

The consequences of this vast pluralism are, in Rahner's estimation, largely positive. Not only have the various disciplines which theology draws on each offered a wealth of insight; they also address the reality that we are multi-

⁴. Ibid., pp.5, 81.

⁵. RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.5.

⁶. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.7.

⁷. Ibid., pp.7-8.

dimensional human beings, and that historical and cultural differences necessitate a pluralism of approaches to meaningfully speak the Christian message.⁸ Nevertheless it must be frankly acknowledged that the individual believer, when confronting the need to give an intellectually honest account of his or her faith, can no longer do so by way of the individual theological disciplines. Fundamental theology used to speak condescendingly of the "*rudes*," the theologically uneducated who could be saved despite being unable to give a reflective account of their faith. Rahner posits that today's theological pluralism makes *rudes* of all of us.⁹

In light of this qualitatively new situation which holds in theology, Rahner identifies his project as a "first level of reflection where faith gives an account of itself." He distinguishes this from the second level of reflection which takes place within each of the specialized theological disciplines. Because none of the specialized disciplines can account for the whole of Christian faith, "they have moved beyond the realm within which an individual Christian and also an individual theologian must give an account of his faith." Hence in a way which is "antecedent to the legitimate tasks and methods of these contemporary disciplines," Rahner's first level of reflection aims to give an account of the meaning and credibility of a commitment to Christianity "precisely in the way that is possible for one person, for one theologian."¹⁰

⁸. See RAHNER, *I Remember*, pp.91-92; Karl RAHNER, "Contemporary Questions," interview with Alain Woodrow, Paris, 1983, in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.79; *Foundations*, p.xiii.

⁹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.8-9.

¹⁰. *Ibid.*, pp.xii-xiii, 10; RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.7.

Rahner situates the first level of reflection between the simple catechism on the one hand, and the mastery of all relevant theological disciplines on the other hand. In "a kind of legitimate flanking maneuver," it avoids the impossible path of expertise in each discipline, yet nevertheless seeks a credible foundation for Christian faith. While a first level of reflection might be called pre-scientific, it demands as much scientific rigour and strenuous thinking as any of the specialized theological sciences. Ultimately it is a necessary and legitimate level of investigation simply because "life and existence require such a level."¹¹

The first level of reflection which Rahner proposes requires a convergence of fundamental and dogmatic theology.

The point of our foundational course in theology is precisely this, to give people confidence from the very content of Christian dogma itself that they can believe with intellectual honesty.¹²

An intrinsic unity between fundamental and dogmatic theology is already suggested if fundamental theology is understood in a Thomistic sense as being done "under the 'light of faith,' and is a justification of faith by faith." Rahner insists that fundamental theology does not proceed in isolation from Christian faith; rather, "faith precedes theology."¹³

Neither does this limit fundamental theology to an "*apologia ad intra*," confirming the faith of the believer but not giving an account of faith before non-believers. On

¹¹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.xii-xiii, 6, 10.

¹². Ibid., p.12.

¹³. Ibid., pp.12-13, 204.

the contrary, Rahner's text has a strong apologetic thrust which is fundamentally concerned with non-Christians. But its "*demonstratio christiana ad extra*" is structured firstly on the assumption that it addresses persons who are already recipients of grace, having implicitly and unreflectively accepted God's self-communication offered in the depths of their human experience; and secondly on the presentation of a philosophical anthropology, informed by Christian faith, in which believer and non-believer alike are asked whether the human person and the fundamental experience of human existence are not in fact what Christianity identifies them to be.¹⁴

It is in this latter regard that Rahner speaks of the success of his experiment in *Foundations* as depending at least in part upon the reader. If the text "has more to do with a personal decision to believe" than do other scholarly theological works, it is largely because Rahner's anthropology engages his audience on an existentiell level.¹⁵ The reader is presented with an account of the "original and basic experience of (human) subjectivity and personhood," which is in essence an experience of grace, and asked to reflect on the truthfulness of that self-interpretation. Rahner is already here laying the foundations for his correlation between theology and anthropology, between revelation in Christ and in grace.

¹⁴. Ibid., pp.25, 294.

¹⁵. Ibid., p.1. Rahner differentiates between *existentiell*, referring "to the free, personal and subjective appropriation and actualization of something which can also be spoken of in abstract theory or objective concepts without such a subjective realization," and *existential*, as in the frequently used Rahnerian phrase "supernatural existential," alluding to "an aspect of concrete human nature precisely as human," an element in a person's ontological constitution which is constitutive of human existence even prior to the exercising of freedom. See translator's footnote, *Foundations*, p.16.

This leads us inevitably into a detailed consideration of Rahner's method in *Foundations*; before we turn to these considerations, it will prove helpful to attend to the epistemological presuppositions which Rahner sets forth, presuppositions which underlie his methodological choices and shape his argumentation.

Philosophical Underpinnings

In nine dense pages at the end of his introduction and a handful of key paragraphs dispersed throughout the text, Rahner sets forth a keen analysis of the structure of human experience and knowledge – especially "spiritual" experience and knowledge – pertaining to the actualization of human existence. His considerations are centered around the "inescapable unity in difference" between the primary pre-reflexive self-presence of the knowing subject and the subsequent "reflexive objectification" of this self-presence.¹⁶ Rahner's analysis of this complex relationship serves a double purpose in *Foundations*. Firstly, it underlies the relationship between the lived reality of human experience and the effort to interpret that reality; hence it speaks to the task he has undertaken of presenting Christianity under the unifying idea of God's self-gift, a presentation which offers an interpretation of human experience and the meaning of human history. Secondly and more specifically, the structure of human experience and knowledge set forward here will become a cornerstone upon which Rahner will construct his understanding of nature and grace.

¹⁶. Ibid., pp.15–18.

Within the spectrum of epistemological stances, Rahner situates himself between the rationalists, who privilege objectifying concept over original experience, and the modernists, who privilege the original self–presence of the subject. He begins by positing a unity of reality and its self–presence in the knowing subject which "is more, and is more original" than the unity of reality and its reflexive objectification.

When I love, when I am tormented by questions, when I am sad, when I am faithful, when I feel longing, this human and existentiell reality is a unity, an original unity of reality and its own self–presence which is not *totally* mediated by the concept which objectifies it in scientific knowledge.¹⁷

This original self–presence is not pure experience unencumbered by language; there is a moment of reflection present here, even a kind of knowledge, though not the conceptual or scientific knowledge which seeks a mastery over what is known. The original knowledge which Rahner speaks of has more to do with the capacity to encounter reality, to stand before the incomprehensible horizon which is the ground of all experience. Borrowing Thomistic terminology, Rahner says this original self–presence and knowledge is the capacity of *excessus*, of "going out into the inaccessible."¹⁸ We will need to say more about this in a moment.

In speaking of a "unity in difference" between original self–presence and the objectifying concept, Rahner posits that the two elements "*are one and are not one*;" there is a tension between the two which moves them "asymptotically" towards unity. John Honner, commenting on Rahner's use of the terms "unity in difference" and

¹⁷. Ibid., pp.15–16.

¹⁸. Karl RAHNER, "The Human Question of Meaning in Face of the Absolute Mystery of God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.18 (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp.95–97.

"asymptotic convergence," says they indicate "a movement *towards* unity that is also grounded *in* the unity."¹⁹ In the relationship between original knowledge and its objectifying concept, Rahner points to a dynamism in two directions. On the one hand, the original self-presence of the subject, seeking to be expressed and understood by way of language, tends towards greater conceptualization, towards "theoretical knowledge of itself." On the other hand, because our understanding has been formed by a common language and educated "from without," we are ever confronted with the possibility of using concepts without having grasped their meaning. He gives the following as an example:

It is precisely we theologians who are always in danger of talking about heaven and earth, about God and man with an arsenal of religious and theological concepts which is almost limitless in its size and proportions. We can acquire in theology a very great skill in talking and perhaps not have really understood from the depths of our existence what we are really talking about.²⁰

Hence language and concepts are in turn oriented towards the original self-presence in which "what is meant and the experience of what is meant are still one."²¹

The result is a dynamic tension between original knowledge and its concept. The original unthematic experience can never be fully grasped in reflection, can

¹⁹. John HONNER, "Unity-In-Difference: Karl Rahner and Niels Bohr," in *Theological Studies*, 46 (1985), pp.480, 489. Honner defines an asymptote as "a line that approaches nearer and nearer to a given curve without ever meeting it within a finite distance." Hence an asymptotic convergence implies that "paired concepts are kept distinct, though with a congruence at infinity, and hence constitute a proleptic unity-in-difference" (p.483).

²⁰. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.16.

²¹. *Ibid.*, pp.16-17.

never be fully communicated in language.²² Yet while ambiguity will always mark human language and concepts, Rahner suggests a movement in which

we should be coming to know better and better in a conceptual way what we have already experienced and lived through prior to such conceptualization, although not entirely without it.²³

The tension between original knowledge and its concept is heightened when the subject of concern is the conceptualizing of the lived experience of God's self-communication to the world. Rahner reminds his readers that in *Foundations* we are dealing with the idea of Christianity, not with the reality immediately; yet the idea, as he articulates it, concerns God's self-communication not only in the historical experience of Jesus Christ, but in all human experience, all acts of knowledge, freedom and will. Articulating this one idea of God's self-communication – through these two mutually conditioning categories of revelation in Jesus Christ and in the depths of human experience – requires the defining of a profound correlation between the structure of human experience and the Christian message; otherwise it does not serve to unite dogmatic and fundamental theology, and does not succeed in articulating a unifying revelation of God which extends the length and breadth of human history.²⁴

Recognizing the all-consuming character of conceptualizing God's involvement with humanity, an involvement which remains hidden and obscure yet stands as the

²². Ibid., p.133.

²³. Ibid., p.17.

²⁴. Ibid., p.14; RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.10.

mystery at the heart of Christian faith, Rahner notes that the tension between the reality and idea of Christianity is acute:

(H)ere as nowhere else idea and reality are incommensurate with each other, although, on the other hand, nowhere does the idea require turning to the reality itself in order to be understood as much as it does here.²⁵

He goes on to say that even if his particular project fails, "this failure could only be understood by Christians as the mandate and the task to try again and harder."²⁶

Vital to Rahner's whole discussion of the relationship between experience and concept, and to the eventual interpretation of fundamental human experience as the vehicle of God's grace, is his identification of all acts of knowledge or freedom as "transcendental." He proposes that in the act of knowledge, the known is not simply something which comes from without. Rather, in the primary act of knowing, the subject possesses a knowledge both thematically, of what is objectively manifest from without, and unthematically, of the self as knowing subject.

In knowledge not only is something known, but the subject's knowing is always co-known....This subjective consciousness of the knower always remains unthematic in the primary knowledge of an object presenting itself from without. It is something which goes on, so to speak, behind the back of the knower, who is looking away from himself and at the object.²⁷

This situation is not altered when the self-consciousness of the knowing subject becomes the object of reflection; for once again the subjective pole in the act of knowing is constituted by an unthematic self-presence of the knowing subject. This

²⁵. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.14.

²⁶. *Ibid.*, p.17.

²⁷. *Ibid.*, p.18.

subjective pole, though hidden, is not superfluous; indeed, it governs antecedently what and how something can become known. The *a priori* structure of the knowing subject is the condition of the possibility of any act of knowledge.

Rahner moves on to say that an inquiry into the *a priori* structure of the faculty of knowledge reveals the finite subject as "fundamentally and by its very nature pure openness for absolutely everything, for being as such." Every act of knowledge, just as every act of freedom, reveals a transcending of the subject's finitude in its being grounded in and oriented towards what it did not create, the condition of the possibility of knowledge or freedom at all. Rahner calls this ground the "term of transcendence," the "ultimate horizon within which human existence is lived," "absolute mystery."²⁸ He calls the exercising of this *a priori* openness before reality "transcendental experience."

We shall call *transcendental experience* the subjective, unthematic, necessary and unending consciousness of the knowing subject that is co-present in every spiritual act of knowledge, and the subject's openness to the unlimited expanse of all possible reality. It is an *experience* because this knowledge, unthematic but ever-present, is a moment within and a condition of possibility for every concrete experience of any and every object. This experience is called *transcendental experience* because it belongs to the necessary and inalienable structures of the knowing subject itself, and because it consists precisely in the transcendence beyond any particular group of possible objects or of categories.²⁹

The term of transcendence is experienced as what is "innermost and at the same time what is absolutely different." As the ground and condition of possibility of all knowledge and freedom, it can only be spoken of indirectly and analogously,

²⁸. Ibid., pp.20–21, 69–73.

²⁹. Ibid., p.20.

and cannot be incorporated into a system alongside of that which it grounds. It can be constantly overlooked or ignored, yet is constitutive of all experience. All acts of knowledge and freedom take place "against the background of an affirmation of...mystery, or of absolute being," even though that grounding might be thematically denied as it is unthematically manifest. In its incomprehensibility, Rahner suggests that absolute mystery is "what is *self-evident* in human life."³⁰

If transcendence is not something which we practice on the side as a metaphysical luxury of our intellectual existence, but if this transcendence is rather the plainest, most obvious and most necessary condition of possibility for *all* spiritual understanding and comprehension, then...mystery really is the one thing that is self-evident, the one thing which is grounded in itself even from our point of view. For all other understanding, however clear it might appear, is grounded in this transcendence.³¹

Transcendental experience, while grounded in and oriented towards incomprehensible mystery, always takes place not alongside but *in* history, mediated through concrete and objectifiable decisions, actions and events. Reciprocally, history "only becomes history in contrast to nature through what one calls transcendence."³² As corresponding dimensions of all human subjectivity and all human experience, the transcendental and historical presuppose and mutually condition each other.

(T)he transcendental element is always an intrinsic condition of the historical element in the historical itself, and in spite of its being freely posited, the

³⁰. Ibid., pp.21-23, 69-73.

³¹. Ibid., pp.21-22.

³². RAHNER, "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," p.22.

historical element co-determines existence in an absolute sense.³³

The reciprocal relationship between the transcendental and the historical in human experience necessitates a reflection on both the transcendental structures which inform human experience, and on the actual history of the human experience of transcendence.³⁴ When Rahner proceeds to identify the human experience of transcendence as the vehicle of God's self-communication in grace, this two-fold reflection on transcendence and its history also becomes a reflection on revelation and the history of revelation. To better grasp the way in which this two-fold reflection is unfolded through the text, we turn to Rahner's method and the construction and organization of his argument in *Foundations*.

Method and Structure

Rahner's theological method has often been identified as a transcendental anthropology. While he is reluctant to see this label as a full and unambiguous characterization of his theology, Rahner acknowledges pursuing a "transcendental" line of enquiry, which he defines as follows:

As I understand the term, it simply means that, with reference to all statements of faith and theology (if they are to be justified) the question must be asked how and why man, in virtue of his own nature,...is the one with whom these statements can and must actually be concerned.³⁵

A transcendental approach seeks out "the conditions in which knowledge of a

³³. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.208.

³⁴. Ibid., pp.87, 171.

³⁵. RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.8.

specific subject is possible in the knowing subject himself."³⁶

Foundations follows a transcendental approach in so far as it is concerned with the *a priori* conditions of the human subject hearing the Christian message and receiving it as ultimately meaningful. While this line of enquiry sets forth a philosophical anthropology, it proceeds from a faith stance, and recognizes the historical foundations on which Christian faith stands. Hence Rahner's philosophical anthropology does not presuppose that one knows nothing of the person and event of Jesus Christ.³⁷

In introducing Rahner's method, one can speak of his starting point from two different perspectives. Firstly, one can identify the believing Christian's actual faith relationship with Jesus Christ as the point of departure. In giving an account of one's faith, the believer need not begin with an abstract reflection on ultimate reality or the meaning of human existence, but can legitimately begin by reflecting "first of all upon the faith which he actually has and upon the nature of it."

He can and may begin this way because faith precedes theology, and he certainly does not have to think that theological reflection must first construct his faith from out of nothing as it were, or must recapture completely a faith which ultimately after all is based on grace and free decision.³⁸

In Rahner's method, this faith stance is acknowledged as a starting point, but remains implicit in the first stage of the transcendental enquiry.

The explicit starting point is a reflection on the human subject as possible hearer

³⁶. RAHNER, "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," p.87.

³⁷. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.25, 203.

³⁸. *Ibid.*, p.204.

of the Christian message. Such an enquiry seeks to construct "the conditions which make possible a genuine capacity to hear the historical message of Jesus Christ, and an insight into the necessity of hearing it." Here the line which clearly distinguishes philosophy from theology becomes blurred, and the transcendental reflection is shown to be directed by historical underpinnings.

We always reflect upon the conditions of possibility for a reality which we have already encountered. But this does not make such a reflection superfluous. It offers a clearer and more reflexive understanding of what we have encountered as real, and it gives an added legitimacy to our intellectual conviction that we have grasped reality as it is.³⁹

Rahner's method is circular; it is a post-revelatory reflection which offers a justification for Christian faith, a first level of reflection which draws together dogmatic and fundamental theology. The circular character of transcendental enquiry raises questions about the legitimacy of such an approach. Commenting on the transcendental method in *Sacramentum Mundi*, Hans Baumgartner writes:

The problem of transcendental reflection is that beginning and end mutually determine each other. The perspective of the phenomena which constitute the starting-point is coloured by the anticipatory grasp of the ultimate and unconditioned ground, while conversely the interpretation of the absolute is qualitatively determined by the previous choice and interpretation of the phenomenal data.⁴⁰

William Spohn cleverly states the criticism this way: "We are not impressed by a

³⁹. Ibid., p.177.

⁴⁰. Hans Michael BAUMGARTNER, "Transcendental Philosophy," in Karl RAHNER, ed., *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol.6 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p.284.

magician who pulls the rabbit out of his hat when we have first seen him stuff it in."⁴¹

Rahner argues that his method does not result in a "vicious circle;" the correlation he posits is not hidden or contrived, but is explicitly and repeatedly set forth as a reflection already grounded in Christian faith. He insists that his transcendental approach in no way attempts to deduce the Incarnation from human experience, to reduce Christianity to philosophy, or to emancipate faith from "the burden of history."⁴² The central claim that the Incarnation arises in history as a free outpouring of saving grace does not necessitate a rejection of transcendental reflection on this event. Rahner notes that "even the miraculous and the unexpected in history must be able to affect us;" consequently it is not only legitimate but of a mature mode of thinking to reflect on the conditions which are presupposed in our reception of this outpouring of grace.⁴³

Rahner further legitimates his method in proposing that faith knowledge itself has a circular structure, a structure grounded in the mutually conditioning relationship between experience and understanding.

When the reality of man is understood correctly, there exists an inescapable circle between his horizons of understanding and what is said, heard and understood.⁴⁴

The believer is invited into an ever deeper understanding and conceptualizing of

⁴¹. William SPOHN, "The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology," in *Theological Studies*, 47 (1986, #1), p.93.

⁴². RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.24–25, 179, 203–7, 212, 237.

⁴³. *Ibid.*, p.207.

⁴⁴. *Ibid.*, p.24.

Christian faith, an understanding which in turn summons him "before the real truth of his being." The circular structure of faith remains open not only for the believer but also for the non-believer. Because God's self-communication is constitutive of all human experience as its ground, the non-believer too is invited into an articulation of this experience of grace.⁴⁵

Rahner's method, structured upon the mutually conditioning elements of transcendental preconditions and historical revelation, gives rise to a corresponding correlation between transcendental grace and revelation in Jesus Christ, the fulness of historical revelation. While this correlation is already implicit in his starting point, he leads the reader through three basic stages in unfolding the shape and implications of the relationship between the historical and the transcendental. The first stage, comprising the first five chapters of *Foundations*, consists of Rahner's transcendental anthropology. The approach through these chapters is cumulative, each reflection extending and expanding the contours of the human subject as a question to which Christian revelation offers an answer.⁴⁶ Oriented towards the absolute mystery which grounds and sustains human existence, the subject is revealed as one whose everyday human experience mediates an offer of grace and of salvation.

The sixth chapter, which comprises nearly one third of the text, presents

⁴⁵. Ibid., pp.24, 230-32.

⁴⁶. Further insight into Rahner's structuring of *Foundations* can be gathered from John McDERMOTT, "The Christologies of Karl Rahner - #2," in *Gregorianum*, 67 (1986), p.298, and from *Foundations* itself, pp.11, 116, 176, 209-212.

Rahner's Christology. In this second stage of his method, historical testimony concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is intertwined with transcendental reflection on the conditions which this revelation presupposes. The mutually conditioning relationship between historical and transcendental lines of enquiry invites a correlation of ascending and descending Christologies. Standing at the heart of Rahner's argument, this chapter reflects on God's unsurpassable gift of self in Christ as the culmination and fulfilment of the deepest hope implicit in the history of God's gift of self in grace.

If Rahner's transcendental anthropology can be seen as leading up to the Christological center and culmination of his theological quest, then the final three chapters of *Foundations* can be interpreted as "devolving from" his Christology.⁴⁷ In reflections on the church, Christian life, the sacraments and eschatology, the third stage of Rahner's method draws out practical implications arising from his presentation of the central idea of Christianity as the mystery of God's free and forgiving self-gift to the world.

As is his well-seasoned practice, Rahner is eager to point out the limitations of his project and the methodology he employs. As a cumulative study structured upon an ever deeper correlation between transcendental reflection and historical revelation, it tends to be repetitive in places, covering a recurring body of material from expanding perspectives.⁴⁸ As a transcendental reflection with faith at its

⁴⁷. McDERMOTT, "The Christologies of Karl Rahner – #2," p.298.

⁴⁸. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.177.

starting point and as its aim, it needs to be complemented by other more explicitly historical and biblical approaches; any exclusive claim to such an approach would be to "fall into the error of hybris and the crudity of claiming to solve all things in terms of reflective thought."⁴⁹ Finally, the universal scope of his project – the unifying of Christian faith under the one idea of God's self-gift – results in very brief reflections on central topics such as the Trinity, the cross, and eschatology; other aspects of Christian faith, such as the social and political self-understanding of Christianity, are not developed at all.⁵⁰ These limitations are coupled with the inevitable fragility of any effort to thematically articulate the relationship between God and the world, a fragility Rahner is keenly sensitive to:

When one undertakes something like this, he stands before the great thinkers, the saints, and finally Jesus Christ. The abyss of existence opens up in front of him. He knows that he has not thought enough, has not loved enough, and has not suffered enough.⁵¹

But one proceeds, Rahner would say, because one must; because giving an intellectual account of one's faith compels one to.

⁴⁹. RAHNER, "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," p.99.

⁵⁰. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.xiii.

⁵¹. *Ibid.*, p.2.

CHAPTER TWO

UNEARTHING THE WELLSPRINGS OF GRACE

Karl Rahner frequently remarks that his understanding of grace was forged in response to the extrinsicist approach to revelation set forth in the traditional school theology of the 19th century. According to the latter model, revelation was seen largely in a propositional way, presenting truths unattainable through human reason and giving commands which must be followed because they derived from a direct intervention of God.

It was said that, since revelation is evidently guaranteed by miracles, it follows that in the Old Testament, in Jesus Christ and in the Church derived from him, a historical revelation has been given. This fact was, as it were, proved as a whole and the intention was to extract specific truths of faith from divine revelation, demonstrated by such formal reasoning, and present them to the individual with the rider: this is revealed truth; you must believe it; it does not matter whether you understand it or not, or whether you find any interior, personal access to it.¹

This model of revelation, operative in the critique of Modernism at the beginning of the 20th century, was structured upon a sharp distinction between nature and grace. Everyday life, although made possible through God's creation, was seen as taking place within the profane realm of nature. Grace was presented as "a second storey added to the already completed house of nature."² Revelation was

¹. Karl RAHNER, "The Foundation of Belief Today," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.16 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), p.4. See also *Foundations*, pp.11, 116, 154.

². John McDERMOTT, "The Christologies of Karl Rahner," *Gregorianum*, 67 (1986), p.97. See also Karl RAHNER, "The Theological Dimension of the Question about Man," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.17 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p.66.

understood as occurring "only now and then, at some definite points in history;" the sum total of God's particular external interventions into human life thus constituted the history of revelation.³ Rahner points out that within this scheme, the sinner or unbeliever could be completely lacking and untouched by God's grace.⁴ Furthermore, for those who do believe, the grace of faith is made superfluous. If the individual propositions of faith are handed on through divine intervention and proven reliable through miracles, no grace is required to see that they ought to be accepted and obeyed.⁵

While this model of revelation was never part of church doctrine, it did have a dominant influence on Catholic theology. It evoked Rahner's ire, and brought forth his enduring critique, largely because of two decisive implications: it minimized the fundamental importance of everyday human existence, and it placed very narrow confines on God's universal will for salvation, making it extremely difficult to speak

³. Karl RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: God Speaks?," p.73. See also Karl RAHNER, "Consecration in the Life of the Church," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.19, p.60. Apart from his criticism of school theology, Rahner introduces a cautionary note that today our language in speaking about grace and the experience of God needs to be more nuanced than the "pure and simple 'concrete', graphically descriptive language" which marked past theologies and may have been justifiable then. In "Religious Feeling Inside and Outside the Church," from *Theological Investigations*, vol.17 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p.237, he writes: "The reason why religious language that sounded much more concrete used to be possible was that people felt able to localise God's workings at particular points in the world and history far more unreservedly; and from these points they could talk about God specifically, so to speak." Rahner's caution is not addressed to the use of metaphor and symbol in religious language, but rather to statements which would sound a positivist or fundamentalist tone in a world increasingly attentive to the complex relationship between language and experience. He is also justifying a certain abstraction and complexity in his own language and theological reconstruction of the workings of grace.

⁴. Karl RAHNER, "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," p.21.

⁵. RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: God Speaks?," p.74.

of salvation outside of the visible institutional church.⁶

Calling this model of revelation inadequate, unfruitful for the life of faith, and incongruent with reality, Rahner proposes in its place a theology of revelation which aims to be credible within contemporary horizons of meaning and which seeks foundations beyond an appeal to the formal authority of Scripture and the magisterium.⁷ He suggests that in the contemporary world it is not enough to learn about God from external sources. A commitment which radically shapes and defines one's existence must necessarily be grounded in human experience, most particularly in the experience of self.

From what source does today's person draw an absolutely firm conviction about the existence of God, according to which he or she can live and die? I think the only solution consists in this: one must try to lay bare the wellsprings for such a conviction deep within the human person.⁸

For Rahner, the wellspring of such a conviction is grace; not grace as external intervention, but as the self-communication of God at the heart of human existence, the self-gift of God as the inner dynamism of the world. While not aiming to eliminate the distinction between nature and grace, Rahner does not see them as separable in concrete human experience. In *Foundations* he sets forth a conceptual framework which posits a more original unity between them, such that one cannot

⁶. For instance, in a May 1982 interview at Innsbruck with Jan van den Eijnden, "The Importance of Thomas Aquinas," in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, Rahner speaks of the loss of a close connection between nature and grace as "the original and mortal sin" of Baroque Jesuit theology, creating "a gap that is really terrible" (pp.48-49).

⁷. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.12. See also: "Consecration in the Life of the Church," pp.60-61; "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," p.24.

⁸. Karl RAHNER, "Contemporary Youth and the Experience of God," interview with Hubert Biallowons and Ferdinand Herget, Augsburg, 1984, in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.115.

speak of nature totally independently of grace. His reworking of this relationship results in complementary reflections on the human being as *open to infinite mystery* and *being embraced by that mystery*; being oriented to God as *distant incomprehensible horizon* and experiencing God's *radical closeness in forgiving intimacy*.

While Rahner sets forth his conception of grace in fine pedagogical fashion by gradually expanding the contours of his philosophical and theological discourse on the human subject, we will attempt to proceed in a more direct way by analyzing his proposal through three mutually conditioning reflections: on the human person as necessarily and inescapably oriented towards the infinite horizon of mystery which we call God; on the revelation of God not only as distant ground but as self-giving love, as our real home; and on the history of revelation as co-extensive with human history.

God as Distant Horizon

Chapter One of *Foundations* begins with a question: "What kind of a hearer does Christianity anticipate so that its real and ultimate message can even be heard?"⁹ Rahner's aim is not to set forth a theological anthropology which might function on the same level as other reflections on the human being derived from the human or empirical sciences. Rather, he is concerned with the human being as question, the question which the person not only *has* but *is*, and which creates the

⁹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.24.

possibility of hearing the Christian message as answer.¹⁰ In rethinking the human starting point in light of Christian revelation, Rahner's aim is to identify the essential structures of the human person, the existentials operative in all human experience. These existentials are the presuppositions which Christianity not only assumes are operative within the human person, but which its message also cultivates within its hearers.¹¹

While contemporary human sciences legitimately aim to derive and explain human beings and human action – with the consequence that the realm of freedom is difficult or impossible to locate – and disciplines such as structuralism allow the subject to "disappear altogether," Rahner's basic identification of the human being is as *free subject*.¹² The landscape of this freedom needs to be mapped in two directions, for it is freedom constituted at once by an *openness to transcendence* and a *rootedness in history*.

In the first chapter it was noted that according to Rahner, all human experience takes place against a background or horizon of mystery. This background is the *transcendental ground* of human experience, and is unthematically encountered in every act of human freedom or knowledge as that which makes it possible. Thus an experience of transcendence constitutes "the ultimate depths and radical essence

¹⁰. Ibid., p.11.

¹¹. Ibid., p.24. See also the 1983 interview with Alain Woodrow, "Contemporary Questions," in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.79.

¹². RAHNER, "The Theological Dimension of the Question about Man," pp.53–54; *Foundations*, pp.27–39.

of *every* spiritual and personal experience...."¹³ It is in these same depths of transcendental experience that a person at least unthematologically discovers the capacity to call one's life into question, to stand openly and responsibly before oneself or indeed before the whole of reality – the capacity, that is, for freedom.

Human freedom is not in the first instance the faculty by which a person "can do or not do this or that through arbitrary choices."¹⁴ Rather, it is the fundamental, perhaps unarticulated experience that one has the power and responsibility to decide about and to actualize oneself, that one is unavoidably given over to oneself.¹⁵

Freedom is first of all the subject's being responsible for himself, so that freedom in its fundamental nature has to do with the subject as such and as a whole. In real freedom the subject always intends himself, understands and posits himself. Ultimately he does not do *something*, but does *himself*.¹⁶

It must be said right from the start that this freedom is rooted in history, and that the contours of this task of self-actualization are shaped decisively by the givens of world and history. The human person, says Rahner, "is a being who is in a multiplicity of ways subject to necessity."¹⁷ One is born into a world of things and persons not chosen but given in advance, a world where one will also die. One lives within a world which has been marred by the guilt of others, within a history

¹³. Karl RAHNER, "The Experience of God Today," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.11 (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1974), p.154.

¹⁴. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.94.

¹⁵. *Ibid.*, pp.35–38.

¹⁶. *Ibid.*, p.94.

¹⁷. *Ibid.*, p.97.

which is characterized by the ambiguous exercising of human freedom. Furthermore, regional anthropologies reveal the many ways in which each person has been determined biologically, sociologically and in numerous other ways, each of which show a person to be contingent upon the givens of historical circumstance.

Indeed there is much in each of us which has not been freely chosen.¹⁸ But that does not mean that we are not free. Rather, this realm of necessity gives concrete shape to the context in which our self-actualization as spatial and temporal beings is to take place.

Historicity means that characteristic and fundamental determination of man by which he is placed in time precisely as a free subject, and through which a unique world is at his disposal, a world which he must create and suffer in freedom, and for which in both instances he must take responsibility. Man's being-in-the-world, his permanent dispersion in the other of a world which he finds and which is imposed upon him, a world of things and a world of persons, is an intrinsic element of the subject himself, an element which he must understand and live out in freedom....(T)he subject's self-alienation in world is precisely the way in which the subject discovers himself and affirms himself in a definitive way. Time, world and history mediate the subject to himself and to that immediate and free self-possession towards which a personal subject is oriented and towards which he is always striving.¹⁹

If human freedom is conditioned by our historicity, it is also shaped decisively by the term of transcendence which grounds this freedom. The subject's being-in-the-world is ultimately grounded in a being-in-relationship with the term of transcendence. In the first chapter the term of transcendence was briefly introduced as that which grounds all else, but as such cannot be situated within any system of co-ordinates itself. It remains as abiding mystery, as the ground not only of our

¹⁸. Ibid., pp.27-28, 42, 107.

¹⁹. Ibid., p.41.

experience but of our personhood, as that which understands and encompasses everything, but "cannot itself be encompassed." Neither can it be approached directly or grasped immediately; as term of transcendence, it is present "only in the mode of otherness and distance."²⁰

Rahner's claim is that in the transcendental experience which is constitutive of human life, we come to an *unthematic knowledge of God as the term of transcendence*. It is not the kind of knowledge which gives mastery or control, and it does not come to us from without. As Rahner once put it, we do not know about God in the same way that most of us know "about Australia," as knowledge externally conveyed.²¹ It is not a kind of understanding which can be set alongside other departments of objective knowledge; nor does it begin precisely where reason leaves off. Rather, belonging to the very "roots of cognition" within a person, it comes through our encounter with the world, through our most fundamental and ordinary human experience.²² The complex set of experiences which constitute the length and breadth of a human life – experiences of wonder and celebration, of struggle, restlessness and fear, of loneliness and sorrow, thinking and hoping, of love and work and responsibility – these, and other such experiences, open us to an unthematic knowledge of God; but it is a knowledge of God precisely as the

²⁰. Ibid., pp.63–65.

²¹. RAHNER, "Contemporary Youth and the Experience of God," in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.115. See also *Foundations*, p.53; William DYCH, *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville, Minn.: Michael Glazier, 1992), pp.18–21.

²². Karl RAHNER, "Experience of Self and Experience of God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.13 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), p.123. See also *Foundations*, p.52.

infinite ground of reality "which remains at root a mystery." While it is each person's particular and concrete life experience that mediates an unthematic knowledge of the term of transcendence, all human experience shares the basic character of originating from and being sustained by a common ground. Hence, "in a thousand different forms" and events and experiences it is borne in upon us that the human being is "the existent to whom the silent and uncontrollable infinity of reality is always present as mystery."²³

Rahner consistently reminds his readers that in speaking of experience or knowledge of God, he is referring to our original unthematic transcendental experience, not to subsequent reflection on this experience.

We must emphasize again and again that the transcendence meant here is not the thematically conceptualized "concept" of transcendence in which transcendence is reflected upon objectively. It is rather the a priori openness of the subject to being as such, which is present precisely when a person experiences himself as involved in the multiplicity of cares and concerns and fears and hopes of his everyday world. Real transcendence is always in the background, so to speak, in those origins of human life and human knowledge over which we have no control.²⁴

As articulated in the first chapter, Rahner posits a unity-in-difference between our original unthematic experience and the reflection which conceptualizes it. The experience can never be fully captured by reflection. It can be wrongly interpreted or suppressed, and most often goes unreflected upon; human beings, says Rahner, are forever unwittingly preoccupied with the grains of sand along the shore where

²³. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.35. See also: *Foundations*, pp.31-33, 209; "Experience of Self and Experience of God," p.124; "The Experience of God Today," p.158; "Religious Feeling Inside and Outside the Church," p.235.

²⁴. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.34-35.

we dwell "at the edge of the infinite ocean of mystery."²⁵

However there is also a dynamism towards the thematic, a dynamism driven most clearly by experiences of heightened intensity, where the mysterious term of transcendence breaks in upon human consciousness and points us towards a reality beyond ourselves.

While it (the experience of transcendence) is present unacknowledged and unexpressed in every exercise of our spiritual faculties, it nevertheless manifests itself more clearly and in some sense as an object of enquiry in those episodes in which the individual, normally lost amid the individual affairs and tasks of his everyday life, is to some extent thrown back upon himself and brought to a position in which he can no longer overlook those factors in his life which he customarily evades.²⁶

Here Rahner offers a wide range of possibilities: the experience of aloneness, "when the silence resounds more penetratingly than the accustomed din of everyday life;"²⁷ the experience of radical authenticity, of wonder or joy that passes all understanding; the experience of annihilating anxiety or emptiness, of absolute powerlessness in the face of death or of "unquenchable hunger for meaning."²⁸

These experiences offer an awareness of the self as inescapably in relationship with the infinite horizon of being. This awareness does not thereby suggest that the human subject is infinite spirit, as posited by some strands of thought within German Idealism. Rahner suggests that the subject discovers the self not as absolute spirit

²⁵. RAHNER, "The Experience of God Today," p.159. See also *Foundations*, pp.35, 54.

²⁶. RAHNER, "The Experience of God Today," p.157.

²⁷. Ibid.

²⁸. *Foundations*, pp.34, 69–70, 132; Karl RAHNER, "The Future of the World and of the Church," interview with Giancarlo Zizola, Rome, 1982, in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.163.

– but as empty question, and as one who ultimately "receives" being.²⁹ Transcendental experience is a drastic reminder of the subject's finitude, of the radical difference between the grounded and the infinite ground. It reveals an inescapable relationship established by, at the disposal of, and grounded in an incomprehensible other. Knowledge of God, then, is more an experience of *being known* than of possessing knowledge.³⁰

It is being addressed by what no longer has a name, and it is relying on a reality which is not mastered but is itself the master. It is the speech of the being without a name, about which clear statements are impossible....Man always stands before the 'deus absconditus', even when he tries to look away and refuses to accept the truth that clear knowledge of the reality of the world, which gives him mastery over the world, comes from this 'deus absconditus'. Knowledge is primarily the experience of the overwhelming mystery of this 'deus absconditus'.³¹

In its silence the term of transcendence dissolves all our certainties. Human knowledge is but "a small island" which is borne by and floating in a vast sea. All of our truths are revealed as stemming from "the unfolding of the mystery itself, from the *one* truth;" all clear understanding is "grounded in the darkness of God."³²

While transcendental experience points us towards a *deus absconditus*, who is present to us "in the mode of withdrawal, of silence, of distance," Rahner says that there is a genuine *self-disclosure* of God in this experience and encounter. He

²⁹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.34. Cf. RAHNER, "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," p.88; Karl RAHNER, "The Hiddenness of God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.16, p.236.

³⁰. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.42, 58.

³¹. RAHNER, "The Hiddenness of God," p.237.

³². *Ibid.*; *Foundations*, pp.22, 42; cf. Karl RAHNER, "Courage for an Ecclesial Christianity," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.20, p.4.

cautions that speaking of God in this way always means speaking by analogy; here we are speaking of God precisely as the infinite horizon which grounds our encounter with categorical reality – with the world and with other people.³³ It means that we are not speaking in an unmediated way, and that we need not hope to speak with ultimate clarity about God. But, asks Rahner rhetorically, "what is clarity?"³⁴ Hence he proceeds to speak of God's self-disclosure as term of transcendence in numerous ways, some of which have already been referred to. God is the one who is made manifest as "the other," the mystery who offers itself to us while remaining mystery.³⁵ God is the nameless one who encompasses us and bestows our existence upon us, "judging us and endowing us with the grace of our ultimate freedom."³⁶ As term of transcendence, God is the condition of possibility of all acts of freedom and knowledge, thus is revealed as the infinite horizon of all freedom, all understanding. And as condition of possibility of love – the capacity to be radically present to another, to give of self to another – God is disclosed as the "infinite term of love." This leads Rahner to speak of the term of transcendence as *holy mystery*.³⁷

Identifying God as term of our transcendence also invites speaking of human beings and the world in terms of createdness and creatureliness; not so much as

³³. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.34, 51–2, 61, 64, 72.

³⁴. RAHNER, "The Experience of God Today," p.159.

³⁵. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.58, 65.

³⁶. RAHNER, "The Experience of God Today," p.160; *Foundations*, p.58.

³⁷. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.65–66.

this points back to an original moment of creation, but as "an ongoing and always actual process" of being created in time, an "ongoing being-given to itself" by a God who establishes and grounds our being and becoming. For the creature it is a relationship of dependence, yet this dependence on God does not conflict with or lessen our freedom and autonomy; rather, our freedom derives precisely from this relationship. Rahner likens the relationship between God and creature to the unity "between an original word and the response to it which is made possible by the word."³⁸

The term of transcendence is also disclosed as the one who confronts the creature with a choice. If freedom is given as gift, then it is a gift for which a response is required. Since the task of freedom, the task of self-actualization in history, always takes place against the horizon of the holy mystery, ultimately our freedom is exercised in a lived yes or no to the term of transcendence. As with all transcendental experience, this free decision *is always mediated* by our everyday world, by our culture and language, our interpersonal relationships and our concrete daily choices – "even when this freedom intends and wants to be freedom vis-a-vis God immediately and thematically."³⁹

(S)ince in every act of freedom which is concerned on the categorical level with a quite definite object, a quite definite person, there is always present, as the condition of possibility for such an act, transcendence towards the absolute term and source of all of our intellectual and spiritual acts, and hence towards God, there can and must be present in every such act an *unthematic "yes" or "no"* to this God of original, transcendental experience....In this sense we encounter

³⁸. Ibid., pp.58, 78–79.

³⁹. Ibid., pp.98, 456.

God in a radical way everywhere as a question to our freedom, we encounter him unexpressed, unthematic, unobjectified and unspoken in all of the things of the world, and therefore and especially in our neighbor.⁴⁰

For the being upon whom freedom has been bestowed, this decisive choice cannot be avoided; nor does one have the right to "give back" one's "admission ticket to existence."⁴¹ Human freedom leads us before the infinite horizon of being which, in a variety of ways, presses upon us, making its mysterious presence felt. It can be ignored, or its reality denied, but then "it becomes an irritant," annoying us, silently disturbing the peace of an existence which wants to be "clear and distinct and planned."⁴²

This self-disclosure of God – as holy mystery, as ground of our being and becoming, as question to our freedom – is really "the presence of God as question, not as answer."⁴³ The human being thus also remains an enigma: the finite creature who is by necessity in relationship with the infinite; the existent who is free yet conditioned, free yet dependent, free yet open to judgment by a silent nameless

⁴⁰. Ibid., pp.98–99. Alongside the primacy of love of neighbour, Rahner emphasizes that the term of transcendence is accepted in the act of obedience to one's conscience, and in a trusting openness towards the realm of mystery and transcendence in one's life (p.54); cf. Karl RAHNER, "Anonymous and Explicit Faith," *Theological Investigations*, vol.16, pp.55–56. Rahner also offers an interesting reflection on how the world of language, which gives access to the collective history of interpretation of human experience, also confronts the individual with the question of human freedom and its ultimate origins and purpose. He points to the word "God" as a constitutive part of the language sphere we are born into. It is the word which confronts us with ourselves and our freedom, and raises questions "about reality as a whole and in its original ground." In addressing ultimate concerns, it calls into question not only our human origins, but also our present and future, and raises the urgent question of salvation; hence Rahner suggests that "it is an almost ridiculously exhausting and demanding word." *Foundations*, pp.44–51.

⁴¹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.95–96, 106.

⁴². RAHNER, "Courage for an Ecclesial Christianity," p.4. Cf. *Foundations*, pp.22, 51.

⁴³. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.171.

presence. The human person is one whose ultimate end remains veiled, hidden in the ineffable mystery which is the origin and ground and goal of human existence, and which in its radical otherness, "remains at a distance."⁴⁴ Hence, as Rahner notes more than once, "there is really only one question":

Whether this God wanted to be merely the eternally distant one, or whether beyond that he wanted to be the innermost center of our existence in free grace and in self-communication.⁴⁵

Is there the possibility of an immediacy to God in which, without him ceasing to be really himself by being made a categorical object, he no longer appears merely as the ever-distant condition of possibility for a subject's activity in the world, but actually gives himself, and this in such a way that this self-communication can be received?⁴⁶

The question itself already implies a hope of fulfillment, a hope deeply embedded in the human condition. The hope is that we ourselves are not so much an empty question as a graced question, a question that God graces with a redemptive answer.⁴⁷

Grace as an Existential of Human Existence

The self-disclosure of God as question, as infinite mystery, is often referred to as *natural revelation*. Catholic doctrine, as set down at the First Vatican Council, maintains that God can in principle be known through natural reason.⁴⁸ Here God

⁴⁴. Ibid., pp.32, 43, 55.

⁴⁵. Ibid., p.12.

⁴⁶. Ibid., p.85.

⁴⁷. Ibid., pp.12, 33.

⁴⁸. D.S. 3004, as cited by Rahner in *Foundations*, p.55.

is known not in immediacy, but only by analogy, as first cause. Rahner suggests that the distinction between natural knowledge of God and revelation faith must be maintained: it upholds that God could have created nature without grace, hence preserving an understanding of grace as unmerited free gift; and it reflects something of the differentiated way in which the persons of the Trinity are in relationship with humanity (a concern which will be addressed in the fourth chapter). But Rahner is quick to add that the distinction between nature and grace is grounded in a more fundamental unity, and therefore is ultimately of secondary importance. He notes that *natural revelation* is often "a misleading term," misleading because the natural is never experienced in isolation; rather, it is always penetrated through and through by God's grace.⁴⁹ Their inseparability for Rahner is evident in his analysis of the transcendental knowledge of God, which we spoke of in the previous section:

The knowledge of God we are concerned with, then, is that concrete, original, historically constituted and transcendental knowledge of God which either in the mode of acceptance or of rejection is inevitably present in the depths of existence in the most ordinary human life. It is at once both natural knowledge and knowledge in grace, it is at once both knowledge and revelation–faith, so that distinguishing its elements is a subsequent task of philosophy and theology.⁵⁰

Rahner's reconstructed relationship between nature and grace informs the foundation of his understanding of God's self–communication in history. In this section we hope to briefly address Rahner's unfolding of this relationship, and to

⁴⁹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.55–57, 170. Cf. RAHNER, "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," p.24; RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: God Speaks?," pp.74–75.

⁵⁰. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.57.

identify what he means in stating that grace is a *supernatural existential* which is constitutive of all human existence. Before we proceed, a mention of Rahner's method is worth inserting once again, in order to avoid confusion. At this stage in his project, after setting forth the basic components of his philosophical anthropology, Rahner begins an explicitly Christian interpretation of this anthropology. While he is not yet addressing the subject of Christology, he is reflecting on the fundamental character of human experience (prior to and following the coming of Christ) *in light of* the history of revelation, most especially in light of what has been revealed in and through Jesus Christ; for it is fundamentally the Christ event which defines the structure of creation and God's self-communication to it in history.⁵¹ Yet for Rahner, transcendental grace and the Christ event are mutually conditioning moments; they "can only be understood together, and as a unity they signify the one free decision of God for a supernatural order of salvation, for his self-communication."⁵² Thus while he carefully contextualizes his Christological reflections within the history of grace (*Foundations*, ch.6), he proceeds first of all by offering a *Christian interpretation* of the human person and the transcendental experience which is constitutive of the human being as free subject.⁵³

The human person, suggests Rahner, is constituted both "by creation and by

⁵¹. Ibid., pp.201, 208.

⁵². Ibid., p.201.

⁵³. Ibid., pp.25, 117, 131.

God's self-communication," by nature and grace.⁵⁴ While nature and grace can never be categorically separated in human experience, Rahner suggests that we can speak of them as being governed by two different kinds of causality. The realm of nature is governed by an *efficient causality*, where the effect is different from the cause. When God creates something other than God's self, creating it finite and dependent, nature comes into being. Established freely by God, the human person is created as the existent which recognizes its finitude in relation to its transcendent ground; this ground is experienced as absolute and wholly other, inaccessible yet in relationship with the human being as the hidden bearer of meaning and the unseen judge, a relationship which remains ultimately ambiguous for the created subject.⁵⁵ But the human person is also constituted by God's self-communication, by grace. This self-communication is governed by a different causality, a *formal* (or *quasi-formal*) *causality*, which pertains not to the creation of a new reality, but which fundamentally affects existing reality from the very beginning of its existence.

Grace, states Rahner, is ever present as the permanent modification or elevation of our natural human transcendentalty; nature is created by God precisely as the presupposition of grace, as "the *grammar of God's possible self-expression*."⁵⁶ Put another way, Rahner states that grace *radicalizes* nature, elevating its deficient

⁵⁴. Ibid., p.162.

⁵⁵. Ibid., pp.120-21, 129-30. Cf. pp.77, 162, 170.

⁵⁶. Ibid., p.223. See also p.122.

mode by fulfilling its original purpose.⁵⁷ When Rahner says that this self-expression or self-communication is "a modification of our transcendental consciousness produced permanently by God in grace," he is suggesting that grace itself is an existential, a *supernatural existential* of human life. The self-gift of God is freely bestowed on human beings in their transcendental constitution; it is embedded in the transcendental structure which is constitutive of human existence.⁵⁸ Indeed human persons were created to receive this grace, and receive it from the beginning of their created existence, yet its bestowal remains "an act of God's highest personal freedom," an act of gratuitously shared divine life and love.

In the concrete order which we encounter in our transcendental experience and as interpreted by Christian revelation, the spiritual creature is constituted to begin with as the possible addressee of such a divine self-communication. The spiritual essence of man is established by God in creation from the outset because God wants to communicate himself: God's creation through efficient causality takes place because God wants to give himself in love. In the concrete order man's transcendence is willed to begin with as the realm of God's self-communication, and only in him does this transcendence find its absolute fulfillment. In the only order which is real, the emptiness of the transcendental creature exists *because* the fullness of God creates this emptiness *in order* to communicate himself to it...This most free love is such that in free graciousness it creates the emptiness which it wants freely to fill.⁵⁹

In a relationship of formal causality, the cause becomes an intrinsic, constitutive principle of the effect itself, while retaining its own essence and freedom intact.

⁵⁷. Ibid., p.122; RAHNER, "The Theological Dimension of the Question about Man," pp.65-66. Cf. RAHNER, "Religious Feeling Inside and Outside the Church," p.234; Karl RAHNER, "Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.17, p.96. For an excellent analysis of the relationship between nature and grace and the implications of this relationship as developed by Rahner, see George VANDERVELDE, "The Grammar of Grace: Karl Rahner as a Watershed in Contemporary Theology," in *Theological Studies*, 49 (1988), pp.445-59.

⁵⁸. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.73, 126-33, 149.

⁵⁹. Ibid., pp.123-24.

Hence when Rahner suggests that grace is governed by a formal causality, he is saying that God has made God's free self-communication the innermost element of human self-actualization. In grace, God "communicates his own divine reality and makes it a constitutive element in the fulfillment of the creature." This *relationship*, notes Rahner in reflective understatement, is one which "remains obscure in its uniqueness."⁶⁰ The human being, created as the potential recipient of God's supernatural and divinizing grace, is nothing less than "the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God."⁶¹

This self-communication is not to be understood as some word or other *about* God; "what is communicated is really God in his own being," the inner reality of God, given at the center of human existence "for the sake of knowing and possessing God in immediate vision and love."⁶² God is neither the *unmoved Mover*, nor the asymptotic goal which can never be reached. The Christian interpretation of transcendental experience consists in the claim "that the holy mystery is present not only as a remoteness and distance which situates us in our finiteness, but also in the mode of an absolute and forgiving closeness and of an absolute offer of himself." The essence of Christianity is that God gives God's very self; the abyss of mystery draws near in intimacy as our "true and forgiving security," the promise

⁶⁰. Ibid., p.121.

⁶¹. Ibid., p.116. See also pp.120-24, 171-72.

⁶². Ibid., pp.116-18, 170-72.

of a lasting fidelity.⁶³ God remains mystery; but the mystery is offered as a gracious answer to the deepest questions and longing in the human heart. God's self-communication reveals "the nameless God as someone given to us."⁶⁴

God's self-communication in grace is an event, a dialogue with humanity in history. It is an *ontological* self-communication which corresponds to our essential being, addressing us as human persons in the depths of our free subjectivity and enabling us to enter into relationship with God.⁶⁵ Rahner states that this self-communication is what Christian terminology has identified as "sanctifying and justifying grace as a divinizing elevation" of the human person. Grace effects a change in human consciousness; in scholastic terminology, it gives "a new, higher and gratuitous, although unreflexive, formal object" which corresponds to our spiritual essence, and which is not attainable "by knowledge and freedom that are purely natural in their formal object."⁶⁶

While God's self-communication in grace is offered at the depths of human subjectivity, it cannot be recognized unambiguously in an individual's experience. Its transformative or radicalizing effect on human consciousness takes place in the

⁶³. Ibid., pp.86, 132. Cf. pp.119,125; "The Experience of God Today," p.153; "What Do I Mean When I Say: God Speaks?," p.76.

⁶⁴. Ibid., pp.125, 172.

⁶⁵. Ibid., pp.116-17, 126, 171.

⁶⁶. Ibid., p.172; Karl RAHNER, "Theological Thinking and Religious Experience," interview with Rogelio Garcia-Mateo and Peter Kammerer for *Entschluss*, Innsbruck, 1982, in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, p.327. Cf. "The Importance of Thomas Aquinas," pp.48-49. Scholastic theology posited a distinction between the formal and material objects of grace. The material object of grace refers to the specific effects of grace in the created being, whereas the formal object of grace refers to the very reality of God's presence, which is formally attained as a result of God's benevolence.

unthematic pre-reflexive realm of human transcendental. Hence Rahner speaks of a *mediated immediacy* in God's self-communication; even the most immediate and intimate self-communication of God is mediated by the transcendental structure of the receiving subject.⁶⁷

Although there is a dynamism within experience towards the thematic, any thematizing of the presence of God's grace in concrete human experience is complicated by two considerations. Firstly, the human being is constituted by grace but also by creation, resulting in a dialectic within history "between the presence of God as giving himself in absolute self-communication, and the absence of God as always remaining the holy mystery."⁶⁸ Secondly, God's self-communication is actualized as a history both of the sinful rejection and the saving acceptance of this grace; each individual's experience in history is shaped by both. Thus when, for instance, a person's childhood lacks the experience of love, forgiveness and security, it will be very difficult for the person to receive and trust a conscious formulation of God's grace offered at the depths of their human experience.⁶⁹

Nevertheless if this interpretation of human transcendence as elevated by grace is presented to a person by way of Christian faith, the person is invited to recognize

⁶⁷. Ibid., pp.83-84, 149, 172-73.

⁶⁸. Ibid., p.141.

⁶⁹. RAHNER, "Religious Feeling Inside and Outside the Church," p.239. Rahner goes on to write: "Only where life is freely accepted in general as having a sheltering significance, in an ultimate primal trust, will man in his freedom be also prepared to carry out the conscious formulation of this primal trust in the direction of God. The awakening of this primal trust does not take place effectively merely through words. It comes about through participation in the life of another person who, in his serenity and love, may be able to provide a fruitful model for this primal trust."

the presence of God at work in the depths of their existence, and to trust and accept the obscurity of their own human experience. While our interpretation of human experience may remain obscure and ambiguous, Rahner states that the person who accepts the offer of grace at the depths of their being does encounter (albeit unthematically) the boundless mercy of God:

In this sense we can say without hesitation: a person who opens himself to his transcendental experience of the holy mystery at all has the experience that this mystery is not only an infinitely distant horizon, a remote judgment which judges from a distance his consciousness and his world of persons and things, it is not only something mysterious which frightens him away and back into the narrow confines of his everyday world. He experiences rather that this holy mystery is also a hidden closeness, a forgiving intimacy, his real home, that it is a love which shares itself, something familiar which he can approach and turn to from the estrangement of his own perilous and empty life.⁷⁰

Needless to say, this interpretation and the hope it carries remain very fragile, "ever threatened."⁷¹ Yet Rahner persists in saying that the sum of individual and collective religious experience through human history, centering upon the free and absolute self-gift of God in Jesus Christ, makes it legitimate to interpret human existence and the human person as the event of a saving, gracious and forgiving self-communication of God.⁷²

The History of Revelation as Co-extensive with Human History

When God's revelation in grace is understood to be a constitutive part of the

⁷⁰. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.131.

⁷¹. *Ibid.*, p.210.

⁷². *Ibid.*, pp.116, 132.

fabric of all human experience, it is not much of a leap for Rahner to say that "there has never been a time or a place that was not a part of the history of revelation."⁷³ The simple insight that God's self-communication is anchored in each moment of human history carries with it the accompanying recognition that "the history of revelation in the human race is coextensive with the whole history of the world's freedom."⁷⁴ With this in mind, the once popular understanding of a history of revelation which (with the exception of a primeval revelation in paradise) began with Abraham and Moses and the Old Testament covenant would then seem *too small* to hold the Christian imagination or to communicate the density of relationship which exists between God and the human race. When this model of revelation history gives way, as it does in the thought of Karl Rahner, a space is created which beckons a questioning and reimagining of the structure and patterns which give shape to the history of God's dealings with humanity. In this brief section we would like to look to some of the initial insights into the history of revelation which Rahner draws forth out of his theology of grace, and to surface some of the questions about revelation history which will shape his Christological reflections.

We begin with Rahner's suggestion that the gracious modification of human transcendentality which is constitutive of all human experience is "the most fundamental event of revelation," the mode "upon which all other revelation is

⁷³. RAHNER, "The Importance of Thomas Aquinas," p.48.

⁷⁴. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.145.

based."⁷⁵ There is no intervention or self-communication of God in history which bypasses the basic structure of human subjectivity, a subjectivity informed by grace. It was said at the outset of the present research that we could not grapple with the category of ongoing revelation in Karl Rahner without closely identifying revelation after the Christ event with the grace operative through all human history. Here we must add that even revelation mediated through the prophets, apostles, and church councils, indeed through Christ himself, must be understood in relation to God's transcendental self-communication; of course, the reverse also remains true.

Secondly, if grace is revelation in the full sense of the word, then history itself in all its secularity is the privileged place of encounter with God. This is not so because transcendental experience is embedded in history in some amorphous way; rather, human transcendentality is real only as an event, in becoming historical. As Rahner puts it, "this transcendentality *takes place*; it does not simply exist." Human history in turn, whether the history of an individual, a people, or the whole human race, "is ultimately the history of transcendentality itself."⁷⁶ Thus the history of revelation can no longer be perceived as a monopoly of the religious sphere of human life, let alone the world of Judeo-Christianity.

(T)his means in principle that the original experience of God even in his self-communication can be so universal, so unthematic and so 'unreligious' that it takes place, unnamed but really, wherever we are living out our existence.... In this sense the world is our mediation to God in his self-communication in grace, and in this sense there is for Christianity no separate and sacral realm where

⁷⁵. Karl RAHNER, "The Importance of Non-Christian Religions for Salvation," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.18, p.292; RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.150. Cf. pp.86-87.

⁷⁶. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.138, 140-41, 153.

alone God is to be found.⁷⁷

Thirdly, the history of revelation, co-extensive with human history, is for Rahner also coexistent with the history of salvation. Since the event of grace is the offer of an absolute, free and forgiving self-communication of God, an offer which necessitates a free response of acceptance or rejection, the history of revelation is also "the history of salvation or its opposite." The history of revelation and the history of salvation indeed constitute a unity, because the absolute self-communication of God is "by definition" our salvation, that which justifies and divinizes us, makes us capable of being in relationship with God.⁷⁸

It is a history which is borne by God's freedom and human freedom together: God's freedom exercised both as the term of transcendence who remains holy mystery and as the gracious and redeeming offer of self; human freedom exercised either in the acceptance or rejection of that offer.

Insofar as this history is the history of God's freedom and of man's, and insofar as there exists therefore a concrete dialectic in history, both individual and collective, between the presence of God as giving himself in an absolute self-communication, and the absence of God as always remaining the holy mystery, this expresses what the history of salvation and revelation really means.⁷⁹

As with the history of revelation, this history of salvation takes place not only in human religiosity, but within the profane history of humankind. "Wherever human history is lived and suffered in freedom, the history of salvation and its opposite are

⁷⁷. Ibid., pp.132, 151-52.

⁷⁸. Ibid., pp.101, 138, 142-43. Cf. VANDERVELDE, "The Grammar of Grace: Karl Rahner as a Watershed in Contemporary Theology," p.446.

⁷⁹. Ibid., p.141.

also taking place....presupposing only that transcendental experience is actualized there and historically mediated."⁸⁰ As salvation does not bypass human historicity, history is charged with meaning as the place where freedom, revelation and redemption are actualized.

Finally, the history of revelation is a history of the human attempt to interpret the transcendental experience of grace and of mystery. A constitutive aspect of transcendence being actualized in history is the subject's self-interpretation of the original transcendental experience. As was indicated in the first chapter, there is a tension between the original transcendental experience and the thematizing or objectifying of that experience, a "unity in difference." They are distinct yet interdependent, and the history of revelation is a history of both. While we as human beings have dealings with God long before we begin to make that experience conceptual and thematic, the thematizing and interpreting is essential and necessary, and indeed "belongs to the very constitution of transcendental experience."⁸¹ As the categorical and historical self-interpretation of the original transcendental experience, it is "the consequence and the objectification of this original self-communication of God....It is its interpretation and hence its very history."⁸²

Rahner suggests that the history of revelation is the process, willed by God, by

⁸⁰. Ibid., p.144.

⁸¹. Ibid.

⁸². Ibid., p.154.

which "transcendent revelation becomes present to itself in history."⁸³ Since the history of interpretation of transcendental experience is carried out within the realm of human freedom, it is permeated by ambiguity and guilt, by glimpses of insight and inadequate interpretations; it is a history which is "provisional and not yet completely successful, and which is still seeking itself."⁸⁴

Revelation history extends beyond verbal propositions and hypotheses, to include the whole of human culture:

It takes place...in the whole history of man, in what he does and what he suffers in individual life; in what we call simply the history of culture, of society, of the state, of art, of religion, and of the external, technical and economic mastery of nature. It is here that this historical self-interpretation of man takes place, and not just when the philosophers begin to do anthropology.⁸⁵

There are intimations of a direction and structure in this history of interpretations, but in the final analysis obscurity holds sway, an obscurity which is only lessened for the Christian by the Christ event itself.

In presenting a very different framework for the history of revelation from that which has been upheld for much of church history, Rahner is at pains to show that his understanding of revelation provides a meaningful interpretation of church doctrine. His primary appeal is to God's universal will for salvation, the faith claim that all people are extended the possibility of salvation. Rahner points to numerous texts from the Second Vatican Council, most frequently to *Lumen gentium*, 16,

⁸³. RAHNER, "Anonymous and Explicit Faith," p.58.

⁸⁴. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.146, 155.

⁸⁵. *Ibid.*, p.153.

Gaudium et spes, 22, *Ad gentes*, 7, and *Nostra aetate*, 1ff., in insisting on the explicit teaching of the possibility of salvation open beyond the bounds of explicit Christianity.⁸⁶

According to the Christian view of things, even though a person is co-conditioned by original sin in his situation of salvation and sin, he always and everywhere has the genuine possibility of encountering God and achieving salvation by the acceptance of God's supernatural self-communication in grace, a possibility which is forfeited only through his own guilt. There is a serious, effective and universal salvific will of God in the sense of that salvation which the Christian means by his own Christian salvation....⁸⁷

Rahner suggests that this marks a real shift in understanding which has emerged with the Second Vatican Council. From Augustine to the 18th or 19th century, despite scriptural evidence to the contrary, Christians had tended to see the non-Christian world as the *massa damnata*, "a mass of people with no salvation in sight."⁸⁸ In the church today such a stance is no longer responsible:

Because of God's universal salvific will, a Christian has no right to limit the actual event of salvation to the explicit history of salvation in the Old and New

⁸⁶. Ibid., p.152. Cf. RAHNER, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol.16, pp.202-3. Two of the texts Rahner appeals to are the following: "There are those who without any fault do not know anything about Christ or his church, yet who search for God with a sincere heart and, under the influence of grace, try to put into effect the will of God as known to them through the dictate of conscience: these too can obtain eternal salvation." (*Lumen gentium* 16) "This (sharing in the paschal mystery) applies not only to Christians but to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is secretly at work. Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery in a manner known to God." (*Gaudium et spes* 22)

⁸⁷. Ibid., p.147.

⁸⁸. Ibid.; Karl RAHNER, "A 'Wintry' Church and the Opportunities for Christianity," interview with David Seeber, Freiburg, 1984, in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.193. Rahner's strong feelings on the subject of universal salvation come out frequently in the interviews near the end of his life. In one interview, he refers to St. Augustine's belief that all people untouched by Christianity were consigned to the damned as "too cold-blooded for my feelings." See Karl RAHNER, "Atheists and Believers," interview with the editors of *Vigila*, Budapest, 1984, in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.129.

Testaments, despite the theological axiom which has been current from the time of the Fathers down to our own times, namely, that outside the church there is no salvation.⁸⁹

Once it is granted that the offer of salvation has been given to every human being who has lived, it is not difficult for Rahner to argue for a framework for the history of revelation which is co-extensive with human history. He notes that "it is a self-evident axiom for the New Testament and for the later teaching of the church that salvation takes place only where there is *faith* in the word of God revealing himself in the proper sense of the term."⁹⁰ This faith which leads to salvation must be accepted in freedom, and to be accepted it must be known – although "knowing" is, for Rahner, decidedly not to be equated with conceptual knowledge. Now given our evolutionary view of the world, which posits "an enormously long history of humankind" wherein Judeo-Christian faith appears on the "last pages" of human history, the conceptual knowledge of faith which comes from historically encountering the good news of Jesus Christ is clearly not available to all people; therefore there must be a salvific faith which is made possible through the acceptance of God's self-communication in grace.⁹¹

(S)alvific activity without faith is impossible, and faith without an encounter with God revealing himself personally is a contradiction in terms. In the concrete, then, there remains no other conceivable possibility but a faith which is simply the obedient acceptance of man's supernaturally elevated self-transcendence,

⁸⁹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.147–48.

⁹⁰. *Ibid.*, p.148.

⁹¹. *Ibid.*, p.152; Karl RAHNER, "Profane History and Salvation History," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.21 (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp.10–11. Cf. RAHNER, "Anonymous and Explicit Faith," pp.53–55.

the obedient acceptance of his transcendental orientation to the God of eternal life.⁹²

With an evolutionary worldview in mind, Rahner also takes chapter one of *Dei Verbum* to task for its presentation of revelation history.⁹³ His threefold critique is very indicative of the concerns which shape his understanding of revelation. *Dei Verbum* speaks of Adam and Eve out of a traditional framework of meaning which is quite oblivious to post-Enlightenment questions about history and revelation, and hence "may seem somewhat naive and far removed from a contemporary horizon of understanding." Secondly, there is mention of salvation, but not of revelation in the period stretching from the fall to the call of Abraham. Rahner suggests that it thus separates history into two segments, the first of which is prior to revelation; in this it is not consistent with the Conciliar texts cited above, and reflects a clearcut distinction between nature and grace which fails to acknowledge that all of history is graced by the saving presence of God. Finally, pre-Christian revelation is presented "in the framework of a simple time series, a model which is not intelligible to us." Instead Rahner suggests that a history of revelation ought to take Christ as its starting point, and through this event look back to interpret the whole of human history, locating Old Testament revelation within that framework.⁹⁴ This latter concern is already a foreshadowing of his situating of the Christ event in revelation

⁹². RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.152.

⁹³. Karl RAHNER, "On the 'History of Revelation' According to the Second Vatican Council," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.16, pp.191-98.

⁹⁴. *Ibid.*, pp.193-98.

history, the subject we turn to in the following chapter.

Thus far we have seen how Rahner's rejection of an intrinsicist understanding of revelation has led to a whole restructuring of the framework of revelation history. In this restructuring, a number of questions have come to the surface, questions which will face us through the forthcoming chapters: If grace is the event of the absolute, saving self-communication of God at the depths of human experience, if revelation history is from the beginning a saving dialogue between God and humanity, then what else can be given on God's part, where is the newness and decisive significance in the Christ event? What light does the revelation of God in Jesus Christ shed on the whole history of revelation, its movement, dynamism, patterns? What is the relationship between the universal history of revelation co-extensive with human history and the *particular and official* history of revelation of the Judeo-Christian tradition? Where do other religious traditions fit into the universal history of revelation, and what criteria do we use to distinguish inadequate or depraved interpretations of God's self-communication from successful ones? Finally, grace is co-extensive with human history, but is its character modified in any way as a result of the Christ event? Is its presence given in the same way inside and outside the visible church?

These are among the key questions we carry forward into Rahner's reflections on the meaning of the event of Jesus Christ, and its intrinsic connectedness to God's self-revelation in grace. As David Tracy says, it often took Karl Rahner a while to ask his questions – he began with "all the questions he would not ask,

could not ask, had no time now to ask, hoped to know enough some day to be able to ask properly" – but inevitably the questions he did ask turned out to be "from among the central questions we wanted to ask all along."⁹⁵

⁹⁵. TRACY, "All is Grace: A Rooted Radical," p.230.

CHAPTER THREE

JESUS CHRIST: ABSOLUTE SAVIOUR, CENTER OF HISTORY

In addressing the question of what it means that God became human, Rahner writes:

Here lies the center of the reality from out of which we Christians live, and which we believe. It is only here that the mystery of the divine Trinity is accessible to us, and only here that the mystery of our participation in the divine nature is promised to us in a definitive and historically tangible way. The mystery of the church is only the extension of the mystery of Christ. But in all of the mysteries just mentioned together lies the content of our faith. This mystery is inexhaustible, and compared with it most of the other things we talk about are relatively insignificant. The truth of the faith can be preserved only by doing a theology of Jesus Christ, and by redoing it over and over again.¹

At the beginning of *Foundations*, Rahner states that his text originated in part out of the Vatican II document *Optatam totius* and its call for an introductory course which would concentrate the whole of theology under the unifying theme of the mystery of Christ.² While taking up this challenge, Rahner cautions against "a *too narrowly Christological approach*," noting that "it is not true that one has only to preach Jesus Christ and then he has solved all problems." Unfolding the mystery of Christ requires making a living connection between the mystery of Christ and the contemporary horizon within which human existence is lived, a connection which justifies the total commitment called forth by Christian faith. Rahner identifies the task in the simplest of words: "Why and in what sense may one risk his life in faith

¹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.213.

². *Ibid.*, p.3.

in this concrete Jesus of Nazareth as the crucified and risen God–Man? This is what has to be justified."³

Thus we have seen how Rahner proceeds to make this kind of living connection by way of a transcendental reflection on Christian faith. Beginning with an anthropology centered on human freedom, he shows freedom to be operative in all transcendental experience, and grounded in the mysterious term of this transcendence. We have traced how Rahner interprets this transcendental experience as being dynamized by a gracious self–communication of God at the depths of human existence. This gracious revelation has a history co–extensive with humanity's own. Rahner has reminded us again and again that this interpretation is only possible in light of the Christ event. Now we turn to this Christ event explicitly to see how it is articulated as the fulness of God's self–revelation, the peak and interpretive center of a radically graced human history.

Chapter Six of *Foundations*, consisting of ten interweaving sections united under the title "Jesus Christ," is a brilliant but troublesome piece of work. Rahner indicates that he has reworked and incorporated into this chapter material previously published in the *Theological Investigations* as well as from a Christology text he published with Wilhelm Thusing in 1974.⁴ The degree to which this material has been synthesized into a coherent chapter remains open to question. Rahner begins by acknowledging that the method of procedure in this chapter is "very difficult;" in

³. Ibid., p.13.

⁴. Ibid., p.xiv; Karl RAHNER and Wilhelm THUSING, *A New Christology* (London: Burns & Oates, 1980).

one of the sections he adds that the task is "difficult, onerous and many-sided...."⁵

This is so because a transcendental Christology brings together all the questions raised by both transcendental and historical methodologies:

(Here) the two moments in Christian theology reach their closest unity and their most radical tension: first, essential, existential-ontological, transcendental theology, which must develop in a general ontology and anthropology an a priori doctrine of the God-Man, and in this way try to construct the conditions which make possible a genuine capacity to hear the historical message of Jesus Christ, and an insight into the necessity of hearing it; and, secondly, plain historical testimony about what happened in Jesus, in his death and resurrection, and about what in its unique, irreducible and historical concreteness forms the basis of the existence and of the event of salvation for a Christian.⁶

It is not only a matter of meaningfully correlating transcendental presuppositions with an historical event; for the event is part of a distant past and cannot be appropriated directly. Our access to it is mediated to us by the New Testament, by a believing community and its tradition, by the Christological doctrine which seeks to communicate this event. Thus Rahner says at the outset that he will be developing "several lines of reflection" to bring home different aspects of an understanding of Jesus Christ.⁷ These lines of reflection include an outline of and guidelines informing a transcendental Christology, an attempt to work through a transcendental Christology from the perspective of an evolutionary worldview, explanations and critiques of existing Christological doctrine, reflections on historical sources and a judgment of what we can appropriate from those sources, and

⁵. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.176, 180.

⁶. *Ibid.*, pp.176-77.

⁷. *Ibid.*, p.177.

interpretations of self, world, history and non-Christian religions all opened up by the event of Jesus Christ. Through all of this Rahner weaves transcendental and historical considerations, the concerns of biblical and pastoral theology, the questions of dogmatic and fundamental theology, into what David Tracy identifies as "the finest and most original section of this remarkable book."⁸

The perception of David Tracy notwithstanding, the inner logic of the chapter's structure is not clear; at the very least it is complicated by two factors. The first pertains to the starting point, which Rahner identifies as "the historical encounter with Jesus Christ," and hence an *ascending* Christology. He notes that his approach is not "one-directional," but involves an intermingling of ascending and descending Christologies which serve to mutually clarify each other.⁹ While the latter insight is certainly reflected in the text and is intrinsic to his method, it is very difficult to locate where Rahner starts with an historical encounter with Jesus Christ. His first section is a transcendental reflection on the Christ event from the perspective of an evolutionary worldview. One could argue that such a method implicitly starts from a faith stance which seeks to give an account of itself, or that it explicitly begins with a reflection on history and the place of the human person within history; but neither point of departure gives priority of place to an historical encounter with Jesus Christ. Structurally it is only in the fifth section of Chapter Six that Rahner turns to issues concerning the historical foundations of Christology and our access to those origins.

⁸. TRACY, "Exploring the Horizon of Absoluteness," p.694.

⁹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.177.

Secondly, and presumably because of the incorporating of different previous works into his text, Rahner's attempts at mapping out a transcendental Christology seem to run in two parallel streams. On the one hand he offers an outline (sec.3) and guidelines (sec.8) for a transcendental Christology, which speak to the structure of *Foundations* as a whole; on the other hand he proceeds to introduce the notion of an evolutionary worldview and to proceed from scratch in setting forth the key components of a transcendental Christology. The two streams contain basically the same insights and come to the same conclusions, and are not at all contradictory; but one wonders why they are both there, or why no explanation is given as to their interrelationship other than the introductory remark that the subsequent lines of reflection "cannot and do not intend to avoid overlapping somewhat."¹⁰

The presentation which follows is not primarily intended as a synthesis of Rahner's Christology as set forth in *Foundations*. Rather, the analysis is directed by the guiding question of the thesis; hence it seeks simply to identify how Rahner arrives at, understands and articulates the claim that the fulness of God's revelation is present in Jesus Christ, and how the Christ event is related to God's self-communication in grace within the broader framework of revelation history. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section offers some preliminary reflections on concerns underlying Rahner's approach to Christology, including his challenge for contemporary theology to find new ways of expressing orthodox Christological doctrine in a language intelligible within contemporary horizons of

¹⁰. Ibid.

understanding. The remaining three sections bring us to the heart of the matter: offering a view of history, the world, and the structures of human existence which anticipate the Christ event; finding this anticipation met and fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; and in this fulfillment seeing the ultimate unity which binds God's self-communication in Jesus Christ to the whole of humanity's grace-filled history.

Beyond Recitation of the Ancient Formulas

The "official" Christology of the church is rooted in the basic faith claim that in the Logos God became human. Historically this doctrine was further clarified and made more precise in response to different misunderstandings as they emerged.¹¹ As a "straightforward descending Christology," it pays little heed to the historical encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, but *from the outset* speaks of God coming among us. Within our contemporary horizon of thinking, this approach is highly vulnerable to being misunderstood. Just as such misunderstandings were grappled with in the past, there is a need today to clarify what is being said in our Christological doctrines.¹²

Today too Christology has an urgent task, a task which is not accomplished by merely repeating literally the ancient formulas and their explanation....(N) either can this task consist in abolishing the ancient formulas. But it is an urgent necessity that we broaden the horizons, the modes of expression and the

¹¹. Ibid., p.286.

¹². Ibid., pp.286, 289-90.

different aspects for expressing the ancient Christian dogmas.¹³

Rahner identifies one key misunderstanding in the appropriation of Christological doctrine to be the total identification between subject and predicate in the statement "Jesus is God." He notes that the statement intends to affirm not an "absolute identity," but a "unique, otherwise unknown and deeply mysterious unity" of the human reality with God.¹⁴ In the statement "Jesus is human," such a complete identification does exist between subject and predicate. Rahner suggests that there is a frequent tendency to undermine the fulness of Jesus' humanity by misunderstanding Jesus' divinity in a monophysitic sense; from this perspective, the humanity of Jesus

is thought unreflexively to be the livery which God donned and in which he discloses himself and at the same time hides himself. What is still left and accepted of the humanity understood as the livery and body of God appears as pure accommodation and condescension on God's part for our benefit.¹⁵

Rahner's Christological language and his transcendental reflections are shaped decisively by grappling with this misunderstanding, as will be apparent in the coming sections.

A second concern which shapes Rahner's Christological reflections is the manner in which fundamental theology turns to historical sources in order to vindicate the claim that Jesus is the eternal Logos. Rahner notes that his

¹³. Ibid., p.291.

¹⁴. Ibid., pp.290–91; RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Jesus is God?," interview with Marietta Peitz and Karl Weich on West Germany's Channel 2 (ZDF), Mainz, Sept. 19, 1971, in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, pp.78–85.

¹⁵. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.290.

fundamental theology is driven by the same questions which dynamized scholastic fundamental theology: Who was Jesus? What did he proclaim? What account did he give of himself? But if the conclusions of modern exegesis are to be respected, then the answers of scholastic theology stand in need of rethinking. The direct appeal to Jesus' own words as evidence of a self-understanding identical with the Council of Chalcedon can no longer be upheld; nor can any number of arguments and their pre-critical reliance on Scripture.¹⁶ Clearly Rahner does not want to minimize or alter Christological doctrine; Tracy even identifies Rahner's text as a "retrieval" of the intellectual strength of a high Christology as set forth in the New Testament by John and Paul, and by the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon.¹⁷ Yet his work is shaped by the desire to allow these doctrines to be properly understood and intelligently accounted for in our present context.

These two concerns clearly shape the task which Rahner himself takes up; in turn they shape the faith claim which serves as the implicit starting point in Rahner's transcendental Christology. While in the following sections we will be paying more attention to where this transcendental reflection leads us, where it *ends*, in a circular method such as Rahner's the seeds of that end are already lying dormant in the start. Rahner makes truth of T.S. Eliot's poetic reflection, "in my beginning is my end."¹⁸ After the initial section of his transcendental reflection, Rahner steps back

¹⁶. RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.11.

¹⁷. TRACY, "Exploring the Horizon of Absoluteness," p.694.

¹⁸. Thomas Stearns ELIOT, "East Coker," line 1, in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p.21.

from his argumentation to explicitly inform the reader of the Christological claim he has begun with, a claim which articulates the basic faith of the Christian churches.

When it is asked how really Christian faith is lived in all of the Christian churches, we can say in a phenomenological description of this common Christian relationship to Jesus Christ: this relationship to Jesus Christ is present in and through the 'faith' that in the encounter with him in the unity and totality of his word, his life and his victorious death the all-encompassing and all-pervasive mystery of reality as a whole and of each individual life, the mystery which we call God, 'is present' for our salvation, offering forgiveness and divine life, and is offered to us in such a way that God's offer in him is final and irrevocable. Therefore this relationship can also be characterized as a relationship to the absolute and eschatological saviour....¹⁹

Rahner notes that wherever this kind of absolute relationship with Jesus Christ exists, "there is Christianity. Wherever it is interpreted adequately and legitimately in a profession of faith and hence unites people in this profession, there is ecclesial Christianity."²⁰ Rahner's articulation of this relationship clearly gives a privileged place to the claim that the fulness of revelation and of salvation come to us irreversibly and irrevocably in Jesus Christ; he is "the absolute, unsurpassable self-promise of God in absolute proximity."²¹

A World Awaiting its Innermost Center

In this central reflection at the core of our study, we also find ourselves at the core of *Foundations* and of Rahner's efforts to unify the many facets of Christianity under one *idea*. In the following sections we will continue to draw material from

¹⁹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.204-5.

²⁰. *Ibid.*, p.205.

²¹. RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Jesus is God?," p.84.

most of the lines of reflection set forth in *Foundations'* sixth chapter (and to a small degree from other sources), and will try to be faithful to the underlying flow of Rahner's argument while being sparse and deliberate in pursuing our own limited line of inquiry. The philosophical anthropology and its Christian interpretation set forth in the previous chapter are presupposed as a more comprehensive background to what will briefly be presented in a slightly different framework in what immediately follows.

Different horizons of understanding and different conceptual tools have given rise, past and present, to a variety of approaches to Christology. Karl Rahner is insistent that at our moment in history, amidst changing intellectual horizons, a *transcendental Christology* is necessary in mediating the content of Christian faith.²² In characterizing our contemporary horizon of understanding as an "evolutionary view of the world," Rahner proposes a transcendental Christology which seeks out the condition of the possibility of a contemporary questioning subject seeing in Jesus Christ the definitive revelation of God. Such a reflection would not try to deduce the Incarnation; instead, it would try to show "an intrinsic affinity and the possibility of a reciprocal correlation" between the Christ event and an evolutionary worldview, without making the former a necessary and intrinsic element of the latter.²³

In characterizing our contemporary outlook as an evolutionary view of the world, Rahner notes that he is not presupposing a specifically Teilhardian understanding

²². RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.205, 207-8.

²³. *Ibid.*, p.176-79.

of history; his usage of the term suggests he is implying a more general notion of a world which is evolving through time.²⁴ Seeking to ask the question of God and of Incarnation from within this framework raises its own difficulties, but it also carries the possibility of a profound relevance; for it involves an assertion which would allow God "to be present precisely where man feels at home and in the only place where he feels competent: in the world and not in heaven."²⁵ It is a level of reflection wherein we ask whether our faith is reconcilable with the "horizons of understanding" of our age and our contemporaries. While it may ultimately be a secondary question, it is valid and necessary if we are to give an account of our hope to the world in which we live.²⁶

Rahner begins grappling with an evolutionary worldview by asking how it views the relationship between spirit and matter. Since all created things in their diversity proceed from one cause and form a *single* world, spirit and matter share an inner commonality, although they are not reducible to each other.²⁷ This commonality is most clearly manifest in the human person, who is constituted of a unity of spirit and matter; they can consequently be best understood by reflecting on their relationship within the human existent.

Although Rahner is introducing a different terminology here, he proceeds to

²⁴. Ibid., p.180.

²⁵. Ibid., pp.179–80.

²⁶. Ibid., p.178.

²⁷. Ibid., pp.180–84.

define spirit in a way which corresponds closely to human transcendentality:

(B)eginning with the original experience of the single person of himself we can say: *spirit* is the single person insofar as he becomes conscious of himself in an absolute presence to himself, and indeed does this by the fact that he is always oriented towards the absoluteness of reality as such, and towards its one ground whom we call God.²⁸

Matter, in turn, is defined much in the terms that he had previously defined historicity:

it is the condition for what we experience immediately as time and space.... Matter means the condition for that otherness which estranges man from himself and precisely in doing so brings him to himself. It is the condition which makes possible an immediate intercommunication with other spiritual existents in time and space and in history.²⁹

The relationship between matter and spirit itself has a history, a history which reveals that "it is of the intrinsic nature of matter to develop towards spirit." This movement in the direction of spirit allows the emergence of something which is new and higher; it involves a "becoming *more*," and should be understood as "real *self-transcendence...as* emptiness actively achieving its own fullness."³⁰

Viewing history in terms of this process of becoming (which Rahner also speaks of as the movement from the unconscious to the conscious to the self-conscious) allows us to situate human existence within the history of nature and of the world. If the world is one and history is one, we can say that the history of nature develops towards the human person, who is the "definitive breakthrough" in the movement

²⁸. Ibid., pp.182-83.

²⁹. Ibid., p.183.

³⁰. Ibid., p.184.

towards spirit. Rahner states that the created world "finds itself" in the human person; it gains a thematic understanding of itself in the existent who experiences self-presence, and is conscious of being in relationship with "the absolute totality of reality" and with its unfathomable ground. In this sense, within a fundamental conception of the world and its history, the human person can be seen as that which encompasses the history of nature and carries it forward. The world's fulfillment can only come through the history of human freedom.³¹

This movement towards self-consciousness and freedom "can only be understood as taking place by the power of the absolute fullness of being."³² Here Rahner once again moves to a Christian interpretation of this thrust towards self-transcendence, suggesting that creation cannot reach its ultimate fulfillment until the ground which dynamizes this transcendence communicates itself to the world by addressing the spiritual creatures who are the goal of the world's movement towards self-transcendence. This self-communication is of course what Rahner identifies as grace; it is the self-communication of God's very self, given in such a way that God becomes the inner dynamism, the innermost life of the creature, leading creation towards fulfillment in the immediate presence of God.³³ From within an evolutionary framework, Rahner can then say that "the goal of the world is God's

³¹. Ibid., pp.181, 185-89.

³². Ibid., p.185.

³³. Ibid., pp.185-88, 190-91.

self-communication to it."³⁴

However, this interpretation of history is in need of an anchor within history which makes it credible; for there is much in time and space which does not seem to be going forward.

Again and again we find ourselves under the impression that nothing final will ever come out of this incalculably long and laborious process by which the cosmos finds itself in man. Again and again the process by which the reality of the world becomes conscious of itself in man seems to be aborted. Again and again a kind of secret obstinacy against self-consciousness, a kind of will to the unconscious seems to prevail.³⁵

Indeed the experience of an ultimate sense of order and purpose in the world is often rivalled by the experience of seeming absurdity and meaninglessness; the notion that things are changing for the better remains ever confronted by the fragility of goodness and "the ever *threatened* character of hope."³⁶

Perhaps the ultimate threat to this hope is the reality of death, which inescapably confronts the human person with ultimate questions about the validity and meaning of her or his existence, and indeed of human history as a whole.

Man faces his own death, and he knows this....(T)his knowledge is itself a piece of his dying and of his death because it constitutes the precise difference between the death of a man and the demise of an animal, because only man exists always and inescapably confronted with his end, with the totality of his existence, with its temporal end. Only man possesses his existence unto this end. Hence the question can only be what this death, which is constantly staring us in the face, tells us about ourselves, what this existence unto death

³⁴. Ibid., p.192.

³⁵. Ibid., p.190.

³⁶. Ibid., pp.33, 210.

is really all about.³⁷

Rahner suggests that it is not so much a matter of the human person desiring to evade death and to go on living forever in time; human life strives towards a definitive conclusion. "Time becomes madness if it cannot reach fulfillment. To be able to go on forever would be the hell of empty meaninglessness." But there is within each person (though it may remain unthematic or be suppressed) a desire for redemption, for the assurance that one's existence has a lasting validity and purpose; "every person wants to survive in some final and definitive sense."³⁸

Amidst the ambiguity and the ultimate questions which confront human existence, Rahner suggests that there emerges the possibility of a hope for an event in history which would guarantee that history is moving in the direction of God, and that human existence has a lasting validity. Such a daring and courageous hope would look to the mysterious ground of reality to be "a Thou who is absolutely trustworthy," a Thou who would offer itself to humanity in a definitive way. It is the hope for an event carrying a promise which could stand victorious in the face of death and the negation of existence. It is by necessity an extravagant hope, for "at that point there remain only two possibilities: hope for 'everything,' or mere despair."³⁹

Rahner suggests that this extravagant hope can be given a name. He calls it

³⁷. Ibid., pp.269–70.

³⁸. Ibid., pp.268, 271.

³⁹. Ibid., pp.193, 209–210.

hope for a "*saviour in an absolute sense.*"

We are applying this title to that historical person who appears in time and space and signifies the beginning of the absolute self-communication of God which is moving towards its goal, that beginning which indicates that this self-communication for everyone² has taken place irrevocably and has been victoriously inaugurated.⁴⁰

The absolute saviour is by definition the fulness of God's self-revelation. This salvific event need not occur at the beginning of history, nor does it necessarily mark the definitive end of time; but if this revelation is to be the ground of hope for all human history, it must be the irrevocable and unambiguous offer of God's very self, and this offer must be freely received.

In the genuine history of a dialogue in freedom between God and the human race, a point is conceivable at which God's self-communication to the world is indeed not yet concluded, but nevertheless the fact of this self-communication is already given unambiguously, and the success, the victory and the irreversibility of this process has become manifest in and in spite of this ongoing dialogue of freedom....This moment in which the irreversibility of God's historical self-communication becomes manifest refers both to the communication itself and to its acceptance.⁴¹

Rahner also speaks of this hope being entrenched in the human being in what he calls *memory*. Using the term in a way similar to Plato's *anamnesis* or Augustine's *memoria*, memory pertains not only to past events, but is also "an a priori principle of expectation, of searching, of hoping." While Rahner offers only a brief explanation of the term, the key point he draws forth is that the human person, as transcendental subject, is oriented by grace towards God, and implicitly hopes

⁴⁰. Ibid., p.193.

⁴¹. Ibid., p.194.

that this grace is so radical that it will bring this dynamism towards God to fulfillment.⁴² At its deepest level then, memory is this graced hope which looks for the event in history in which "the free decision for a saving end of all history is made and is within our grasp." Memory is "the anticipation of the absolute bringer of salvation. It seeks him and is on the watch for him in history...."⁴³

The scenario for an absolute saviour which Rahner sets forward emerges out of a transcendental reflection on the Christ event, as interpreted by ecclesial Christianity. It is an *idea*;⁴⁴ but in terms of our study of the relationship between Christ and grace it is a *seminal idea*, since for Rahner the longing for an absolute saviour articulates *the human need for a fulness of revelation*. Since his theology intrinsically links revelation and soteriology, it is the need for a *saving revelation*. This need emerges from and within the history of God's self-communication in grace.

Given this need and hope within the human subject, we now accompany Rahner in turning to the history of Jesus of Nazareth, asking whether "before the tribunal of conscience and of truth" we can give an account of our hope in him;⁴⁵

(f)or the real point of the Christian message lies precisely in the assertion that this Jesus, who died under Pontius Pilate, is none other than the Christ, the Son of God, the absolute saviour.⁴⁶

⁴². Ibid., pp.319–20.

⁴³. Karl RAHNER, "Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.17, p.48. This essay is one of the texts which Rahner has incorporated into *Foundations* (Ch.6, sec.10). It is cited here because the translation is clearer than as is found on p.320 of *Foundations*.

⁴⁴. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.228.

⁴⁵. Ibid., p.229.

⁴⁶. Ibid., p.232.

The God Who Draws Near

Rahner acknowledges two limitations at the outset of his turning to historical sources. The first is his repeated insistence that he is not an exegete, and that in a first level of reflection it ought to be enough to rely on basic findings which biblical theology regards as "sufficiently certain or probable."⁴⁷ The second limitation is one which biblical scholarship knows well: the historical distance which separates us from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Our access to the Christ event is "characterized by a certain element of uncertainty, obscurity and ambiguity which is both inevitable and insurmountable."⁴⁸ Yet the commitment which Christian faith calls for is absolute, and the tension between such an *absolute* commitment and the *relative* certainty about historical events which ground it is as inescapable as it is problematic.

(W)e have to admit that, in spite of well-founded historical knowledge about Jesus and his claim, in our case the distance between historical foundation and responsive commitment is the largest distance conceivable.⁴⁹

Christians who seek to give an account of their faith must nevertheless look to the New Testament; but fundamental theology's efforts to give a *ground* of faith – reasons to believe – may proceed in a more nuanced way than in the past. Rahner suggests that contemporary fundamental theology concentrate its attention firstly on

⁴⁷. Ibid., pp.xiv–xv, 14, 246–47.

⁴⁸. Ibid., p.233.

⁴⁹. Ibid., p.235.

Jesus' self-understanding as an eschatological prophet proclaiming God's nearness; and secondly on his resurrection from the dead as the vindication of that claim, a vindication which resonates with our own transcendental hope. While issues concerning the validity of either the miracles of Jesus or other Christological claims must be dealt with in theology insofar as they shape the content of faith, they need not be weighted with the burden of grounding Christian faith.⁵⁰

Following upon an overview of findings on the life and mission of Jesus, Rahner keys in on Jesus' self-understanding in relation to the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus' imminent expectation of God's kingdom is of course problematic for any fundamental theology to grapple with. Rahner states that "like every other human consciousness, the human self-consciousness of Jesus stood at a created distance from God in freedom, in obedience and in worship;" Jesus clearly did not know everything in advance, for "a genuine human consciousness *must* have an unknown future ahead of it." But Jesus' imminent expectation of the eschaton was not simply an *error*. Rather, it "was for him the *true* way in which he had to realize in his situation the closeness of God which calls for an unconditional decision."⁵¹

Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom also communicated his unique relationship to God, a relationship which gave him a freedom to radically challenge the religious practices and moral judgments of his day. Yet he understood his unique relationship with God to be exemplary for others, and invited them to address God as he did.

⁵⁰. Ibid., pp.246, 255-57, 263-64.

⁵¹. Ibid., pp.247-50.

He understood the coming of God's kingdom to be intrinsically linked to *his* proclamation; salvation was dependent on a decision for or against himself.⁵²

Rahner summarizes his argument as follows:

According to his own self-understanding he is already before the resurrection the one sent, the one who inaugurates the kingdom of God through what he says and what he does in a way that did not exist before, but now does exist *through* him and *in* him. At least in this sense the pre-resurrection Jesus already knew himself to be the absolute and unsurpassable saviour.⁵³

This claim only becomes ultimately clear and definitively validated in the resurrection. Rahner suggests that the death and resurrection of Christ need to be dealt with together, at least from a perspective of revelation and salvation.

The death of Jesus is such that by its very nature it is subsumed into the resurrection. It is a death into the resurrection. And the resurrection does not mean the beginning of a new period in the life of Jesus, a further extension of time filled with new and different things. It means rather and precisely the permanent, redeemed, final and definitive validity of the single and unique life of Jesus who achieved the permanent and final validity of his life precisely through his death in freedom and obedience.⁵⁴

Resurrection is not about the "resuscitation of a physical body," but about the validation of everything Jesus said and did. It is able to communicate that definitive validity because it happens in direct confrontation with a death that threatened to invalidate his claim and his person. United to his death on a cross, the resurrection gives "an answer to the question about the meaning of everything;" it is what

⁵². Ibid., pp.250-54, 280; RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.11. Rahner refers particularly to the "last judgment" text of Mt.25 to argue for the question of salvation as a question of accepting or rejecting Jesus himself.

⁵³. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.254.

⁵⁴. Ibid., p.266.

fundamental theology appeals to in grounding our belief in Jesus of Nazareth because in it "there is the very closest identity between salvific sign and salvific reality."⁵⁵

That being said, grounding one's faith by way of the resurrection has its own complications. By historical means we cannot reach the resurrection of Jesus, but only "the conviction of the disciples that he is alive." Access to resurrection faith comes only through the apostolic witness to this event. Furthermore since the resurrection accounts given by the gospels cannot be completely harmonized, there is a further distance from the event itself; the accounts cannot be understood as "descriptions of the experience itself in its real and original nature."⁵⁶

Yet Rahner suggests that the resurrection accounts do cohere in communicating the unique character of the Easter experience: it was given from without, and was not something of the disciples' own making; it was intrinsically linked to Jesus' crucifixion; it was testified to only by those with faith, and it grounded that faith; it was not comparable to any other experience the witnesses had, and in its uniqueness it bestowed "a unique task" on them to communicate what had happened. The testimony that *he had risen* could be accepted or rejected by those who heard it, but it could not be pushed aside on the basis that the witnesses had misinterpreted an event which was otherwise familiar; for the Easter experience carried with it a message of God's unique and definitive salvific intervention in

⁵⁵. Ibid., pp.264–66.

⁵⁶. Ibid., pp.276–77.

history.⁵⁷

In grappling with the faith appropriation of this Easter experience, Rahner draws together the earlier transcendental reflections on hope for an absolute saviour, for redemption, for meaning in history with the historical testimony about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Ultimately, Christian faith is not grounded in hearing something which comes from outside of us as a strange proclamation, but is made believable in the inner resonance between what is discovered or encountered in history and what is already anticipated transcendently. Jesus' eschatological claim, vindicated historically in his resurrection from the dead, does not ground faith alone; rather it exists in a "mutually conditioning relationship" with the grace of faith, with the inner subjective disposition to believe.⁵⁸

Rahner makes this correlation between transcendental anticipation and historical message even clearer for the reader by speaking of the hope for a definitive validity for our own lives as "a hope for one's own resurrection."⁵⁹ This transcendental hope is what allows us to appropriate and believe in Jesus' rising from the dead.

Looking at the matter this way we have to say: the transcendental experience of the expectation of one's own resurrection, an experience man can reach by his very essence, is the horizon of understanding within which and within which alone something like a resurrection of Jesus can be expected and experienced at all. These two elements of our existence, of course, the transcendental experience of the expectation of one's own resurrection, and the experience of faith of the resurrection of Jesus in salvation history, mutually condition each other. Except in view of the resurrection of Jesus, perhaps we would not in fact

⁵⁷. Ibid.

⁵⁸. Ibid., pp.238-40. Cf. p.126.

⁵⁹. Ibid., p.268.

manage to interpret ourselves correctly in this experience of our own. But it is also true conversely that one can really experience the resurrection of Jesus only if he is a person who has already had this kind of experience himself.⁶⁰

Rahner speaks of this mutual conditioning of the transcendental hope and historical message as "the circle between faith and the grounds of faith;" he furthermore suggests that the subjective openness to believe – which is implied in the transcendental hope for one's own resurrection – must have informed the faith of the first disciples and witnesses of the resurrection, just as it informs the faith of believers today.⁶¹ The subjective openness to believe is an option open to every person, an option which can be suppressed, or rejected altogether in the decision to opt for despair rather than to dare such a radical hope. But if this transcendental hope is embraced, it searches in history "to see whether it can encounter a risen one," to see whether indeed God has drawn very near; if the Christian message has already been encountered, a person can trust and believe "the witness of others that Jesus lives, that he is risen."⁶²

The death and resurrection of Jesus not only vindicate Jesus' earthly claim to be the eschatological prophet whose coming announces that God and God's kingdom have drawn very near; for his believers, the paschal mystery draws out the radical depths of this claim. Jesus' religious radicalism is now understood in the light of God breaking through religious practices and customs in an immediacy of

⁶⁰. Ibid., pp.273–74.

⁶¹. Ibid., pp.241–44.

⁶². Ibid., pp.268–69.

self-communication. Jesus is received as the unsurpassable prophet, the definitive fulness of the revelation of God.⁶³

We must bear in mind here that his word as God's final word can be understood to be definitive not because God now ceases arbitrarily to say anything further, although he could have said more, and not because he "concludes" revelation, although he could have continued it had he just wanted to. It is the final word of God that is present in Jesus because there is nothing to say beyond it, because God has really and in a strict sense offered *himself* in Jesus....he is *the* Word of God which is spoken to us in everything which he was and said....Jesus, then, is the historical presence of this final and unsurpassable word of God's self-disclosure: this is his claim and he is vindicated in this claim by the resurrection. He is of eternal validity and he is experienced in this eternal validity. In this sense in any case he is the "absolute saviour."⁶⁴

In a sense we have come full circle. We have proceeded from an articulation of the human longing and need for an absolute saviour, a full and definitive revelation of God, to the historical considerations which allow us to trust that in Jesus Christ we have encountered the one we have longed for. As Rahner says, "(t)ranscendental Christology allows one to search for, and in his search to understand, what he has already found in Jesus of Nazareth."⁶⁵ Yet the question remains to be asked: What precisely does that mean for us, and for our lives? How is this definitive revelation of God related to the self-communication which has already been bestowed upon us, and continues to be bestowed upon us, in grace?

⁶³. Ibid., pp.279-80.

⁶⁴. Ibid. pp.280-81.

⁶⁵. Ibid., p.212.

Two Moments of a Single Gift

While the relationship between graced human existence and the event of Jesus Christ informs the structure of *Foundations*, Rahner never exclusively focuses on this relationship in a singular and comprehensive manner. It is a concern whose presence is frequently felt just below the surface, and is explicitly dealt with in several places, but never in its totality. Hence the present study necessitates a drawing together of the various components of this relationship in setting forth Rahner's basic thinking on this question. The pieces of the puzzle are all there, but they are scattered well throughout the diverse lines of Christological reflection within the text.

These different lines of reflection can be traced to the two fundamental approaches which emerged early in *Foundations*: *transcendental reflection* on the a priori conditions of the ultimate meaningfulness of God's historical revelation in Jesus Christ, and *historical inquiry* into God's transcendental self-communication within one unified framework of the history of revelation. From both sides there is a merging of God's self-communication in grace and the fulness of revelation in Christ, and the recognition that these are mutually conditioning modes of God's self-communication; but the former (transcendental reflection) clearly privileges grace, while the latter (historical inquiry) privileges the Christ event. Rahner's study would be incomplete if attention were given to one of these perspectives to the exclusion of the other, especially since in Chapter Six of *Foundations* the boundary between transcendental and historical inquiry becomes very fluid. In order to avoid becoming

too tangled in Rahner's transcendental and Christocentric webs, we will attempt to map out the key components of Rahner's unfolding of the relationship between Christ and grace firstly from the perspective of the fulness of revelation in Christ, then from the perspective of an ongoing revelation of grace in history. In so doing we will revisit and hopefully begin to bind together much of what we've been about thus far in this thesis.

It is within the context of Rahner's discussion on revelation in other religious traditions that the question of the relationship between Christ and grace in history emerges most clearly from a Christocentric perspective. Rahner has already argued that revelation in grace (through the Holy Spirit) is operative throughout humanity's religious and profane history, mediating an offer of salvation. When he proceeds to ask about the relationship between Christ and non-Christian traditions, he explicitly asks about the connection between the grace of the Spirit which is given in all times and places, and the historical event of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.⁶⁶

(T)he precise question is whether the Holy Spirit's supernatural grace of faith and justification as it is at work in the non-baptized can be called the Spirit of *Jesus Christ*, and if so, what exactly this means.⁶⁷

Rahner suggests that tradition has not grappled sufficiently with this question to give answers which will satisfy our present context; the question has never been as urgent as it is today. School theology did take up the question as formulated above,

⁶⁶. Ibid., p.316. To this point we have not explicitly discussed Rahner's identification of grace with the Holy Spirit, but his language here already makes clear that grace is an event of the working of the Spirit. The next chapter will deal with this identification more directly.

⁶⁷. Ibid.

and offered an affirmative answer by suggesting that the Spirit is given at all times and places "in view of the merits of Christ," that is, because of Christ's dying on the cross for sinful humanity; thus the Spirit everywhere can be called the Spirit of Christ.⁶⁸ Rahner asks somewhat skeptically about the implications of articulating the connection between Christ and grace that simply:

Can the event of the cross be understood to "influence" God either "physically" or "morally" so that, on the basis of this influence which comes from the world to him, as it were, and which is known antecedently, God already pours out the grace of the Spirit upon the world?⁶⁹

Even if the argument does not imply that God is moved to act because of the suffering of Jesus, the connection between the cross of Christ and God's salvific will – which must be understood as the Incarnation's "a priori cause" – is not at all clear in the scholastic formulations.⁷⁰

Rahner's own approach to the question unhesitatingly gives priority of place to God's universal will for salvation, salvation made possible only by God's self-communication. Keeping scholastic theology's language but not its formulations, Rahner suggests that the Incarnation and paschal mystery can be understood as the "final cause" of the self-communication of God in grace. Grace is the Spirit-empowered self-communication of God which *from the beginning* is oriented towards its goal, the event in which the saving will of God becomes historically tangible in an irrevocable way. The event of the absolute saviour is that goal, and

⁶⁸. Ibid., p.316.

⁶⁹. Ibid., pp.316–17.

⁷⁰. Ibid., p.317.

as such can also be understood as the "*causa finalis*" of the movement which leads to the goal.⁷¹

Insofar as a historical movement lives by virtue of its end even in its beginnings, because the real essence of its dynamism is the desire for the goal, it is completely legitimate to understand the whole movement of God's self-communication to the human race as borne by this saviour even when it is taking place temporally prior to the event of its irrevocable coming to be in the saviour....The whole movement of this history of God's self-communication lives by virtue of its moving towards its goal or its climax in the event by which it becomes irreversible....⁷²

Thus the Spirit which dynamizes this movement of grace can be called the Spirit of Jesus Christ from the outset of history.

Insofar as the universal efficacy of the Spirit is always oriented towards the high point of its historical mediation, in other words, insofar as the event of Christ is the final cause of the communication of the Spirit to the world, it can truly be said that this Spirit is everywhere and from the outset the Spirit of *Jesus* Christ, the Logos of God who became man. The Spirit who has been communicated to the world has himself...an intrinsic relation to Jesus Christ.⁷³

In commenting in an earlier reflection on an overarching theological framework which draws together the self-communication of God in human history with revelation in Christ, Rahner makes reference to an early "Christocentric" tradition in which the creative Word of God who establishes the world does so "to begin with as the materiality which is to become his own, or to become the environment of his own materiality."⁷⁴ While as a tradition it may have deep roots in the history of

⁷¹. Ibid., pp.195, 317-18.

⁷². Ibid., pp.194-95.

⁷³. Ibid., p.318.

⁷⁴. Ibid., p.197.

Christian theology, Rahner gives this model of descending Christology one of its definitive Twentieth Century interpretations. Expanding on this initial insight of a creation established by the Word of God, Rahner presents a fascinating understanding of the interconnectedness of Christology and anthropology from the very beginning of history. While it parallels the relationship between grace and nature set forth in the previous chapter, Rahner here casts the entire question within a Christocentric framework.

In our earlier discussion on grace then, we spoke of how Rahner understood the human person to be created with an emptiness in order that God could fill that emptiness with the communication of God's own self in grace; it was acknowledged that this interpretation was only possible in light of the Christ event. Here in his descending Christology, Rahner carries the same reasoning process to its natural conclusion, suggesting that the basic structure of human subjectivity anticipates from the beginning the full and irreversible self-gift of God in Jesus Christ. In other words, the human person is created from the beginning as the possibility of God's self-expression through the Logos, "the utterance in which God could empty himself."⁷⁵

In their innermost essential ground creatures must be understood as the possibility of being able to be assumed, of being the material for a possible history of God. God establishes creatures by his creative power insofar as he

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp.223-24. In this sense, whatever can be said of grace can be also linked to Christ; it can even be magnified in some instances, because of the definitive concreteness of revelation in Christ.

establishes them from out of nothing in their own non-divine reality as the *grammar of God's possible self-expression*."⁷⁶

This is what Rahner implies when he says that anthropology is really a "deficient mode" of Christology, or that "Christology is the beginning and the end of anthropology."⁷⁷ Any other understanding of Incarnation somehow becomes tangled in the mythological impression that God has put on the outward disguise of a human existence in order to "set things right on earth...because things could no longer be managed from heaven."⁷⁸

Rahner suggests that the Incarnation is superfluous if it has meaning only insofar as we can say that we ought to listen to Jesus of Nazareth because really *it is God speaking*.⁷⁹ Rather, the Word of God must be understood as "exactly identical with God's *ability* to express himself in history...."⁸⁰ In the second person of the Trinity, the eternal and immutable God is able to *become* in history by emptying of self; the human being is by definition the empty question which the Word of God assumes in the process of this self-emptying. Rahner says God "creates by emptying himself...(W)hen God wants to be what is not God, man comes to be."⁸¹ When God "expresses his very own self into the *emptiness* of what is not God," that is, into

⁷⁶. Ibid., p.223.

⁷⁷. Ibid., pp.122, 224-25.

⁷⁸. Ibid., p.218.

⁷⁹. Ibid., p.224.

⁸⁰. Ibid., p.304.

⁸¹. Ibid., pp.221-22, 225.

the human being, then we have the hypostatic union of God and humanity.⁸² George Vandervelde summarizes Rahner's position this way: "human beings exist because God wishes to become incarnate, to express God's self in the world. Humanity is designed and projected as the medium of God's self-expression."⁸³ It is hard to imagine a closer correlation between Christology and anthropology.

There remains an "unbridgeable difference" between Jesus Christ and our own humanity: we are the infinite question, whereas he is the infinite question *and* the infinite answer which the Word of God speaks. But because the Word has become flesh, the relationship between God and humanity is forever engraved in our very being.⁸⁴

It could still be said of the creator with the Old Testament that he is in heaven and we are on earth. But we have to say of the God whom we profess in Christ that he is exactly where we are, and only there is he to be found. If nevertheless he remains infinite, this does not mean that he is *also* still this, but means that the finite itself has received infinite depths....If God himself is man and remains so for all eternity; if therefore all theology is eternally anthropology; if it is forbidden to man to think little of himself because he would then be thinking little of God; and if this God remains the insoluble mystery: then man is for all eternity the expression of the mystery of God which participates for all eternity in the mystery of its ground.⁸⁵

Given this Christocentric understanding of human existence, Christ can be understood as the definitive expression of God's grace given to humanity, the one

⁸². Ibid., p.223.

⁸³. VANDERVELDE, "The Grammar of Grace: Karl Rahner as a Watershed in Contemporary Theology," p.450.

⁸⁴. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.223–25.

⁸⁵. Ibid., pp.225–26.

whose existence informs us of what it is to be human, the one who reveals the ultimate depths of God's relationship to humanity. Through Christ, the "poor, questioning and in itself empty orientation towards the abiding mystery whom we call God" which constitutes human existence is revealed as opening into life with God.⁸⁶

As a result of the Incarnation, we can say:

The finite is no longer in opposition to the infinite, but is that which the infinite himself has become, that in which he expresses himself as the question which he himself answers. He does this in order to open for the whole of the finite of which he himself has become a part a passage into the infinite – no, I should say in order to make himself the portal and the passage.⁸⁷

Christ is also portal and passage insofar as he lives out the full human acceptance of God's offer of grace in his existence; his life reveals the contours of an existence in which the grace bestowed by God is fully embraced. In that he fully surrenders himself to the infinite term of transcendence, he becomes "the unique and *highest* instance of the actualization of the essence of human reality...."⁸⁸ His free acceptance of death, which opens out into God's salvation, is revealed as the path where the acceptance of grace will lead us as well: "our 'having' God must pass again and again through an abandonment by God in death, where God alone comes to meet us in a radical way."⁸⁹

Such is the basic structure of the relationship between Christ and grace from a

⁸⁶. Ibid., p.217.

⁸⁷. Ibid., p.226.

⁸⁸. Ibid., p.218.

⁸⁹. Ibid., p.305.

Christocentric perspective. In Jesus Christ, the fulness of God's revelation is made known in such a way that the relationship between humanity and God, indeed the essence of what it is to be human, is brought to light. In turn, the totality of Jesus' life and death reveals the shape of an existence where the grace of God is accepted in a radical way.

We turn now to the other side of the equation, to the emergence of the question of the relationship of Christ and grace from within a transcendental reflection on God's self-communication in history. Rahner's evolutionary worldview leads him to posit a dynamizing movement within history towards self-transcendence and towards the term of that transcendence. This movement of divinizing grace carries within it the hope and anticipation of an absolute saviour, one who would reveal the irrevocable offer of God's self as our absolute future. The question emerges as to the relationship between this absolute saviour, which Christianity has claimed to find in the hypostatic union of God and humanity in Jesus Christ, and the movement of grace which is already at work dynamizing all of history towards life with God.

Is the hypostatic union an absolutely higher level on which the bestowal of grace on a spiritual creature is surpassed, or is it a singular and unique moment in the universal bestowal of grace, which bestowal cannot even be conceived of without the hypostatic union of an individual person?....The precise question, therefore, is whether there is an intrinsic unity between the event of the Incarnation on the one hand, and the self-transcendence of the whole spiritual world into God through God's self-communication on the other.⁹⁰

If there is such a unity and a mutual conditioning between these two moments of revelation, then "the Incarnation does not appear simply as a higher realization of

⁹⁰. Ibid., pp.199-200.

God's self-communication which leaves the rest of the world behind."⁹¹

Rahner sets out to show that the movement of grace in history is the "efficient cause" of the Incarnation and paschal mystery, which is to say that this movement of grace leads up to, anticipates, and finds its peak in the self-communication of God in Jesus Christ. Such an understanding presupposes that the self-communication of God to humanity is the goal of the world. Creation and Incarnation are to be understood as related in the closest of all possible ways. Rather than originating out of "two separate initiatives of God," they are "two moments and two phases of the *one* process of God's self-giving and self-expression, although it is an intrinsically differentiated process."⁹²

Within the framework of a history of ongoing revelation through God's gracious self-communication, Rahner would situate the Christ event as this history's peak and its innermost center. God's gracious and salvific self-expression takes on a tangibility when God "lays hold of matter" in the Logos becoming flesh; it takes on an irrevocability and the character of an irreversible promise in this God-man's complete acceptance of his human orientation towards God, his surrender in life and death to the absolute mystery of God, and his resurrection from the dead.⁹³ But as the peak of a movement within history towards God, the Christ event must nevertheless be viewed as a "concrete moment within the process" by which the

⁹¹. Ibid., p.200.

⁹². Ibid., pp.192, 197.

⁹³. Ibid., pp.196-97, 211, 217-18.

divinization of the whole human race takes place.⁹⁴

The point of the thesis that we are trying to establish is this: although the hypostatic union is a unique event in its own essence, and viewed in itself it is the highest conceivable event, it is nevertheless an intrinsic moment within the whole process by which grace is bestowed upon all spiritual creatures....Grace in all of us and hypostatic union in the one Jesus Christ can only be understood together, and as a unity they signify the one free decision of God for a supernatural order of salvation, for his self-communication.

Such an approach does not intend to minimize or obscure the central significance or necessity of the Christ event; but it approaches Christology "from a universal pneumatology" rather than the reverse direction. A pneumatological approach takes as a given that the offer and reception of grace itself has a history, with its own stages and development, its own inner "entelechy" or dynamizing force, and that this history reaches its peak where God's self-communication "has been established victoriously and irreversibly" for humanity as a whole.⁹⁵

In that respect, Christ is, to my mind, the one who comes from the innermost center of the world and who is at the same time, the one in whom the innermost center of the world is experienced.....Christ is the one who is the fullness of time and also the fullness of revelation history. That is why he has a prehistory that is also already the history of God's grace.⁹⁶

History is thus constituted of "an ongoing revelation of God which has reached its climax in Christ."⁹⁷

It is at this point where the ascending and descending movements of Rahner's

⁹⁴. Ibid., p.200.

⁹⁵. RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.10; RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: God Speaks?," pp.76-77.

⁹⁶. RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: God Speaks?," pp.77-78.

⁹⁷. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.117.

Christology come together in a definitive way. The Christ event is that which allows us to interpret all of human history as graced by God's self-communication. It is the confirmation of our deepest hopes, and grounds our faith in giving us the confidence to believe in God's absolute and saving nearness. Here "historical experience and the innermost dynamism of human beings toward God meet each other and confirm each other."⁹⁸

(W)hen I ask: Where in their history do human beings make, with the absolute certitude of faith, the experience that God has actually promised himself to them in his grace, and that this self-pledging of God is irreversibly and victoriously given to humankind, then to this question a Christian answers: I make this experience in Jesus Christ, he who was crucified and rose from the dead. That is where I encounter the person in whose reality, in whose history, in whose actuality, in whose self-interpretation is really experienced that the innermost dynamism in me is really authentic, that it is reliable, that it is not a mere fiction of the mind. Therefore, in the concrete historical experience of Jesus Christ the innermost revelation of God's grace is experienced as undeniably certain and as irrevocable.⁹⁹

While these two movements within Rahner's Christology both invite a correlation of the Christ event with a graced human history, they privilege very different concerns. The ascending Christology privileges grace, and with it, an appeal to the mutual compatibility of faith and contemporary scientific worldview, an apologetic thrust, an interest in starting with the pluralism of our present human experience and moving towards a unity in Christ. Beginning from below, it privileges the world and history as the locus of God's activity, and presents a model of revelation and religion in which institutional concerns are decidedly not of a first order of importance. Its

⁹⁸. RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: God Speaks?," p.77.

⁹⁹. Ibid. Cf. RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Jesus is God?," p.83.

major thrust is that of a fundamental theology which arrives at Christian dogma. In the descending Christology, the reverse is true in a sense; although I would venture that Rahner is more of a fundamental theologian than a dogmatic one, hence even his dogmatic considerations are ultimately concerned with showing how Christian doctrine makes sense of human experience. In this approach from above, he privileges the fulness of revelation in Christ as the hermeneutic key to understanding both humanity and divinity. It begins with a unity of reality in the mind of God and spreads out into a pluralism, a pluralism which creates the possibility of relationship and love freely given. Where the Christology from below privileged humanity's intrinsic relatedness to God through grace, the Christology from above is keenly attentive to humanity's intrinsic relatedness to Christ.

As mentioned at the start of this section, the two fundamental approaches delineated here are not distinctly set apart in Chapter Six of *Foundations*, but are weaved together throughout. Rahner's aim is not to opt for one approach or the other, but to bring them together in a first level of reflection in order to give an account of our faith and our hope, in order to unify under one idea the heart of Christian faith; yet the unity is only arrived at and understood by working with both transcendental and historical perspectives.

The correlation of God's self-communication in Christ and in grace in Rahner's theology lives in the midst of this tension of unity and differentiation. They are united in their origins, and in their goal; they are differentiated in that they address two dimensions of human experience, two dimensions which are mutually

conditioning. The experience of transcendental grace allows us to search for, and to receive the revelation of God in Jesus Christ; the historical encounter with Christ allows a confirmation and an objectification of the hope within us borne of transcendental experience. The relationship between Christ and grace is dynamic, it unfolds through revelation history, through the intersection of transcendence and history. And it is stable, it is rooted in the heart of God.

CHAPTER FOUR

IMPLICATIONS OF A UNIFIED FRAMEWORK: THE NARROW GAP

In one of the final interviews that Rahner gave, he was asked whether there was one question that seemed to him as a theologian to be the most important. He answered:

Yes, there is such a question. It runs like this: Is human existence absurd or does it have an ultimate meaning? If it is absurd, why do human beings have an unquenchable hunger for meaning? Is it not a consequence of God's existence? For if God really doesn't exist, then the hunger for meaning is absurd.¹

For Karl Rahner, life has *ultimate* meaning only if it is connected at base with God, only if it is willed by God as a path to God. Alternately, theology and talk of God must address human life in its fundamental structure, human existence with its unquenchable hunger for meaning. Rahnerian theology is driven by the need to make connections between the human quest for meaning and God's quest for the human. It seeks to reflect on how human life necessarily and inevitably has to do with God, to articulate where meaning is to be found in the length and breadth and depth of human experience.

One critic refers to Rahner's penchant for ultimate connections as his "winner-takes-all syndrome,"² and indeed the comment is a valid one. At the foundations

¹. RAHNER, "The Future of the World and of the Church," in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, p.163.

². Bruno BRINKMAN, review of *Foundations* in *Heythrop Journal*, 20 (1979), p.197.

of his argument for ultimate meaning and over against absurdity, Rahner appeals to a unity in the mind of God, a center of meaning in which nature and grace, time and eternity, humanity, the world and Christ are connected at base. There is no pretentious claim to understand the depths of this unity, which is by definition grounded in absolute mystery now and forever. And whenever this unifying framework threatens to slide into monism or pantheism, Rahner does not hesitate to reflect on the gap between nature and grace, between humanity and God; he is quick to assert God's otherness, to insist that nature does not necessitate the free gift of God's self-communication.³ Yet the predominant thrust of Rahner's theology is to focus on the graced character of human existence, and the narrowness of the gap which separates humanity from God. Reflecting on the universality of God's offer of saving grace, an offer which can be unreflexively accepted at any time and place, Rahner writes:

In an *ultimate* sense God is equally near everywhere. The narrow gap can everywhere be bridged through faith, hope and love with the help of whatever aid the particular historical circumstances provide.⁴

In Rahner's understanding of Christian faith, the ultimate and unified source of meaning is God's desire to communicate self in redemptive love. It is the unified center which grounds that which has concerned us in this present research, the

³. See VANDERVELDE, "The Grammar of Grace: Karl Rahner as a Watershed in Contemporary Theology," p.458, on Rahner's tendency to privilege the *distance* between nature and grace when wishing to safeguard the otherness of God and the gratuity of grace, while privileging the *unity* of nature and grace in safeguarding the integral unity of creaturely life and the one desire of God for a saving self-communication.

⁴. Karl RAHNER, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol.16, p.204.

intrinsic relatedness of God's self-communication in Christ and the saving grace which is operative throughout human history. In this final chapter, we intend to look to the implications of this intrinsic relatedness of Christ and grace, implications which cannot easily be reduced to a simple list, as they are part of a network of connections and a merging of approaches. In the first section we look to Rahner's Trinitarian theology, which may have served as a starting point, but more fittingly comes at the end of the study as a reflection on the ultimate source of unity of these two modes of God's redemptive self-communication. In the middle section we will reflect on the way in which the relationship between Christ and grace impacts on the entire framework of revelation history, attempting to sketch Rahner's reflections on key moments of that history. In the final section we will reflect on how the close correlation between Christ and grace results in a very narrow gap separating Church and world, Christian and non-Christian, love of God and love of neighbour. We will conclude by identifying some of the key questions which have been addressed to Rahner's theology pertaining to the foundations and implications of his correlation of Christ and grace.

Trinity: The God of Absolute Closeness

In later reflecting on deficiencies in *Foundations*, Rahner suggests that his treatment of Trinitarian doctrine was "perhaps briefer than it might have been in light of the book's aim and structure."⁵ While his references in the text to Trinity are not

⁵. RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.13. He refers readers to his more comprehensive treatment of the subject in *The Trinity* (London: Burns & Oates, 1975).

abundant, they do reflect how his understanding of God's self-communication in Christ and grace is traced back to and decisively shapes his Trinitarian theology. Rahner states his intention to avoid simply restating catechetical Trinitarian formulations which are "almost unintelligible to people today, in that they almost inevitably occasion misunderstandings," and also vehemently argues against making unnecessary and illegitimate distinctions between God *in himself* and God *for us*.⁶ He wants to demonstrate how the doctrine of the Trinity "is not a subtle theological and speculative game, but rather is an assertion which cannot be avoided;" this is best achieved by taking seriously as starting point "the *historical and salvific* experience of the Son and of the Spirit as the reality of the divine self-communication to us...."⁷

It is Christian faith's decisive claim that in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit, we encounter nothing less than the living God:

(T)here appears in immediacy to us not some numinous powers or other which represent God, but there appears and is truly present the one God himself. In his absolute uniqueness, which ultimately nothing can take the place of or represent, he comes where we ourselves are, and where we receive him, this very God himself and as himself in the strict sense.⁸

God is able to communicate, indeed to give God's deepest self to human beings without ceasing to be God, and without our ceasing to be human.⁹ This self-

⁶. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.54-55, 135-37.

⁷. *Ibid.*, pp.135-37.

⁸. *Ibid.*, p.136. Cf. pp.124-25.

⁹. *Ibid.*, p.119.

communication and the relationship which it makes possible can only be understood with reference to the recognition that as Father, Son and Spirit, God is present to us in very different ways, which must be strictly distinguished although these different modes of presence belong to one and the same God.¹⁰

As Father, God is the holy mystery, the incomprehensible and primordial ground of the world and of history who remains at an infinite distance from the human being yet is present for us in immediacy in the Son and the Spirit.¹¹ The Son or Logos is the immanent self-expression and self-utterance of the Father, the possibility of the Father "offering his very own self to us in history;" only the Logos could become incarnate.¹² In the Holy Spirit God comes "as the salvation which divinizes us" in the innermost transcendental center of our existence.¹³ While it is not addressed directly in *Foundations*, Rahner's pneumatology is implicitly shaped by and draws together the Thomistic distinction between uncreated and created grace, such that the Spirit is both that which is given in grace and that which dynamizes grace and is the ground of its acceptance in history.¹⁴ As mentioned earlier, the transcendent

¹⁰. Ibid., p.136. Cf. VANDERVELDE, "The Grammar of Grace: Karl Rahner as a Watershed in Contemporary Theology," pp.447-48.

¹¹. Ibid., pp.124-25, 136. Cf. McDERMOTT, "The Christologies of Karl Rahner," p.103.

¹². Ibid., pp.136, 214-15, 223-24.

¹³. Ibid., pp.136, 240.

¹⁴. In some texts Rahner seems not to identify the Spirit and grace completely, as on p.275 of *Foundations*; in those instances, the Spirit is presented as that which dynamizes grace. Yet the basic thrust of the text is that in the event of grace God gives God's very self to the human being; the Spirit is precisely what is offered in grace. In a key summary formula (*Foundations*, p.125), Rahner says that in God's absolute self-communication, God is "at once giver and gift and the ground of the acceptance of the gift." The context suggests that it is as Father that God is the giver; the gift would refer to both Christ and the Spirit; the ground of the acceptance of

movement of the Spirit culminates in history in the Incarnation of the Logos, which in turn can be understood as the final cause of the history of grace.

In sum, the different persons of the Trinity in their modes of being present to humanity reveal the contours of God's relationship with us. There is indeed a correspondence in Rahnerian theology between the basic structure of human existence – as constituted by both transcendence and history, by both creation and God's self-communication – and the three persons of the Godhead in their different ways of being in relationship with human beings.¹⁵ Within this Trinitarian framework, God's self-communication in Christ and in grace can be closely correlated because they both find their ultimate origins in the one movement of the God who wills to draw near to us:

It is only through this doctrine (of the Trinity) that we can take with radical seriousness and maintain without qualifications the simple statement which is at once so very incomprehensible and so very self-evident, namely, that God himself as the abiding and holy mystery, as the incomprehensible ground of man's transcendent existence is not only the God of infinite distance, but also wants to be the God of absolute closeness in a true self-communication, and he is present in this way in the spiritual depths of our existence as well as in the concreteness of our corporeal history. Here lies the real meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁶

the gift clearly refers to the working of the Spirit.

¹⁵. McDERMOTT, "The Christologies of Karl Rahner," p.103.

¹⁶. Ibid., p.137. Rahner's grounding of the close correlation between Christ and grace in the unity of God's desire for self-communication did result in one fellow German theologian accusing him of *modalism*, an exaggerated defense of the unity of God which denies real distinction between the persons of the Trinity. It would be difficult to justify such an accusation, as Rahner is far too cautious a theologian to leave himself open to such an obvious charge. But the critique does reflect a concern with the way in which he has correlated Christ and grace, and the Trinitarian foundation he has sought for this correlation. Rahner neither names the critic nor cites the criticism, but does indicate that the accusation was refuted in a dissertation by Brazilian theologian M.de Franca Miranda. See RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith,"

Rahner identifies his Trinitarian reflections as "an initial approach" to the subject. In an interesting essay published in 1983, he indicates that the relationship between Christology and grace is anything but settled, and suggests that as we increasingly appreciate that we are a *world church*, this relationship and its Trinitarian foundations will need to be reflected on from entirely new perspectives.¹⁷ He proceeds to offer his own intimations of the renewed shape of this relationship in the future. Until recently, the claim that universal salvation was dependent on an event that took place in a particular place and time was not particularly problematic. Accordingly, Christology was accorded a place prior to pneumatology in dogmatics. But as Christianity must increasingly encounter anew and rethink its relationship with other religious traditions, for instance in the Asian context, the primacy of Christology over pneumatology may well be challenged in the future:

Perhaps an Eastern (Asian) theology will one day reverse this perspective. Because of the universal salvific will of God and in legitimate respect for all the major world religions outside of Christianity, it may perhaps make a pneumatology, a teaching of the inmost, divinizing gift of grace for all human beings (as an offer to their freedom), the fundamental point of departure for its entire theology, and then attempt from this point – and this is something that might be achieved only with considerable effort – to gain a real and radical understanding of Christology.¹⁸

Rahner's own efforts in this regard have certainly helped open the door for others who live in a predominantly inter-religious context to continue working towards such

p.13.

¹⁷. Karl RAHNER, "Aspects of European Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol.21, pp.78–98.

¹⁸. *Ibid.*, pp.97–98.

a renewed approach.

Christ and History

Earlier in the text we noted that in Rahner's critique of *Dei Verbum*, he suggested that the document might have opted for a presentation of the history of revelation which took Jesus Christ as its starting point, and from that vantage point offered an interpretation of revelation history.¹⁹ While this could be interpreted in different ways, *Foundations* suggests that Rahner is not interested in an exclusively Christocentric approach to revelation history so much as an approach which is grounded in the intrinsic relatedness of Christ to the history of grace. Rahner does not apply this hermeneutic principle to revelation history in a systematic or unified way, but it does govern his separate treatment of the various moments of revelation history. What we propose here is to look to certain key moments of revelation history – revelation in primeval history, in non-Christian religions, in the Old Testament and in the church – asking about the relationship of each of these moments to God's self-communication in Christ and in grace. This section is frighteningly grand in its conception and much less grand in its sketchy outcome. What is sought is simply an understanding of how the mutual conditioning which Rahner posits between Christ and the history of grace shapes his articulating of each moment in revelation history. Earlier we gave an indication of the contours of revelation history emerging out of Rahner's understanding of grace, and ended by

¹⁹. RAHNER, "On the 'History of Revelation' According to the Second Vatican Council," p.198.

asking what light God's revelation in Christ could shed on this history, given that it was already constituted from the beginning as a saving dialogue between God and humanity. Here we offer, in brief, his answer.

In Jesus Christ, the history of revelation reaches its unsurpassable climax. As such, this event of the fulness of God's revelation becomes "the only really tangible caesura in the universal history of salvation and revelation," and allows us to make distinctions within the history of revelation between distorted and authentic interpretations of God's gracious self-communication.²⁰

In Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen one, then, we have a criterion for distinguishing in the concrete history of religion between what is a human misunderstanding of the transcendental experience of God, and what is the legitimate interpretation of this experience. It is only in him that such a discernment of spirits in an ultimate sense is possible.²¹

Within the history of revelation, Rahner suggests that "basically we have only two fixed points and one dividing line which are really decisive and identifiable;" Christ is the dividing line, the fixed points are the beginning of God's gracious self-communication to human beings and the final vision of God.²²

Given our contemporary understanding of the vastness of human history, Rahner suggests that our theologizing about the history of revelation and salvation "requires an entirely new ordering in its structural principles," including renewed reflection on

²⁰. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.157, 174-75.

²¹. *Ibid.*, p.157.

²². *Ibid.*, p.168. Cf. pp.118, 167.

the relationship of Christ to the "almost structureless past" of primeval history.²³ Insofar as the Christ event reveals a God who draws near to us, and insofar as Christian doctrine thus allows us to speak of God's grace operative from the beginning of human history, we can begin by acknowledging that with humanity's origins, grace was operative; consequently human existence was constituted by freedom, and marked by guilt. The Genesis accounts are not to be understood as eyewitness reports, but as "an aetiology which infers back from the supernatural, transcendental experience of the present to what must have been in the beginning the historical ground of this experience of the present;" they are not "*merely* fantasy and mythology in a negative sense," but a "more or less successful" objectification of transcendental experience."²⁴

Within the categorical history of revelation, Rahner suggests that one can see a movement towards conceptual reflection on the transcendental experience of grace, and a social institutionalizing of this experience.

(T)he history of the transcendental revelation of God will necessarily show itself again and again to be a history which is taking place in an irreversible direction towards a highest and comprehensive self-interpretation of man. Consequently, it will be ever more intensely an explicitly religious self-interpretation of this supernatural, transcendental and revelatory experience of God.²⁵

The recognition of a direction within the history of revelation does not however allow

²³. Ibid., p.165; RAHNER, "Profane History and Salvation History," p.11.

²⁴. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.163-64. Cf. pp.106-15.

²⁵. Ibid., p.154. Cf. RAHNER, "The Experience of God Today," p.160.

any clear and unifying structuring of this history and its development.²⁶ What Rahner does venture is the suggestion that the one dividing line in the history of revelation from a Christian perspective, the Christ event, corresponds to a dividing line within a secular understanding of history.

If we look for the one most decisive caesura in man's two-million-year secular history, the moment of this caesura lies in those thousands of years in which, in a rapidly progressive acceleration, man developed from a being ensconced in nature and immediately threatened by it into a being who lives in an environment which he himself has created and no longer merely accepts; those thousands of years in which he developed into the man who makes himself the object of his own manipulation, has transformed his numinous environment into a rationally planned and demythologized site for his own plans.²⁷

Rahner ventures that we are nearing the end of this transition towards a period of history which human beings have opened up for themselves, creating a future in the world and for the world. Therefore the definitive break in history, from both a secular and a theological perspective, has occurred "in the same historical moment of transition, even if this moment lasts several thousand years."²⁸

Another aspect of a renewed understanding of revelation history pertains to the relationship between Christ and other religious traditions. Rahner suggests a restructured history of revelation "in which the great religions of the world could also be accorded a significant place...."²⁹ The Second Vatican Council, especially through the document *Nostra aetate*, opened up a space where other religious

²⁶. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.164–65.

²⁷. Ibid., pp.168–69.

²⁸. Ibid., p.169.

²⁹. RAHNER, "Profane History and Salvation History," p.11.

traditions could be taken seriously and dialogue with them could be fostered.³⁰ From a dogmatic perspective, the Catholic theologian must work within the framework of two binding doctrines: that salvation is offered to every human being, and that the salvation of all is dependent on (mediated by) Jesus Christ. Church doctrine offers no speculation on *how* this salvation through Christ occurs for one who has not encountered Christian faith; but that it can occur is explicit and official teaching of the church.³¹

In the previous chapter, we briefly touched on Rahner's understanding of Christ's presence throughout the history of revelation (including in other religious traditions) in and through the Spirit; Christ is the final cause of the movement of grace in history.³² In this context other religious traditions are not dealt with in their own right, but only insofar as they are part of human history and thus part of the historical context which transcendently mediates God's grace. The member of another religious tradition, just as any person who has not encountered the Christian message, can always find Christ "in his brothers and sisters and in his love for them."³³ But Rahner goes beyond this basic recognition of the possibility of encountering Christ to suggest that religious traditions other than Christianity can play a positive role in an individual's salvation.

³⁰. RAHNER, "On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation," p.289.

³¹. RAHNER, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," pp.200–203; RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.312–13.

³². RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.316–18.

³³. *Ibid.*, p.311. Rahner frequently cites Mt. 25 in this regard; see pp.252, 295, 410, 457; RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Jesus is God?," p.84.

(W)hen a non-Christian attains salvation through faith, hope and love, non-Christian religions cannot be understood in such a way that they do not play a role, or play only a negative role in the attainment of justification and salvation.... (T)here is no reason why we would have to, or even could, deny a priori and in principle at least a partial positive function to non-Christian religions for people who have not yet been reached by the Christian message in a way which would constitute an immediate obligation for them.³⁴

Rahner dismisses outright theological arguments which suggest that God offers non-Christians the chance of salvation principally through "extraordinary illuminations" or death-bed revelations, insisting instead that God communicates self through means which correspond to human beings' transcendental, but also historical and social existence.³⁵ People learn to be attentive to and articulate their transcendental experience of God from within a community of persons;³⁶ thus religious traditions do mediate that original experience of God in a decisive way for the individual believer. Furthermore Rahner suggests that in all religions there are moments when that mediation of God's gracious self-communication is successful, and becomes self-reflexive.³⁷ There are even moments within the history of religions (and outside of the Old and New Testaments) where the interpretation of God's self-communication knows itself to be willed and directed by God:

(T)here can be...brief and partial histories within this categorical history of revelation in which a part of this self-reflection and reflexive self-presence of

³⁴. Ibid., pp.314-15.

³⁵. Ibid., p.314.

³⁶. Rahner writes: "The historical self-interpretation of one's own religious existence is not a solipsistic affair, but takes place necessarily in and through the historical experience of the religious self-interpretation of one's own world, of one's own 'religious community.'" Ibid., p.159-60. Cf. pp.49-50.

³⁷. Ibid., p.173.

universal revelation and its history is found in its purity.³⁸

Needless to say, Rahner does not understand this to be the case in all situations; he suggests that such moments where God's self-communication is truly understood will lack "tangible continuity" with other efforts at interpreting their experience of God.³⁹ The history of revelation is a history of successful, inadequate and depraved interpretations of transcendental experience. While non-Christian religions are not to be regarded as a strictly "human invention," neither does a Christian interpret them as the full objectification of God's self-communication; only in Jesus Christ does the history of revelation reach its fulness, and only in him is the history of God's grace fully objectified.

In Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen one, then, we have a criterion for distinguishing in the concrete history of religion between what is a human misunderstanding of the transcendental experience of God, and what is the legitimate interpretation of this experience. It is only in him that such a discernment of spirits in an ultimate sense is possible.⁴⁰

Other religious traditions can, however, be the historical means which lead people to salvation, the way "by which human beings approach God and his Christ."⁴¹ And to whatever extent God's self-communication is interpreted correctly within these traditions, it "must be understood as positively willed and directed by God because

³⁸. Ibid., p.156.

³⁹. Ibid.

⁴⁰. Ibid., p. 157. Cf. RAHNER, "On the Importance of Non-Christian Religions for Salvation," p.295.

⁴¹. RAHNER, "On the Importance of Non-Christian Religions for Salvation," pp.293, 295; RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.146, 155, 314.

of his real salvific will."⁴²

Rahner suggests that the Judeo-Christian Scriptures themselves give witness to God's salvific activity outside their own boundaries. The Old Testament is aware of God's presence beyond the covenant of God with Israel, and acknowledges "a real covenant between God and the whole human race;" while the New Testament speaks of the presence of Christ and of the Spirit beyond the visible witnesses historically authorized by Christ.⁴³ The question naturally emerges, then, as to the relationship between the *particular and official* history of revelation of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the universal history of religion and revelation. Working from Rahner's understanding of the fulness of revelation in Christ, an accompanying question concerns the relationship between Christ and Old Testament revelation history.

Rahner suggests that the particular history of revelation which can be equated with Old and New Testament history is to be understood as "the valid self-interpretation of God's transcendental self-communication to man, and as the thematization of the universal categorical history of this self-communication...."⁴⁴ Old Testament prophets, for instance, are believers who articulate their transcendental experience of God correctly, and in such a way that "it becomes for others too the correct and pure objectification of their own transcendental experience

⁴². RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.156. Cf. RAHNER, "Courage for an Ecclesial Christianity," p.6.

⁴³. *Ibid.*, p.148.

⁴⁴. *Ibid.*, p.158.

of God." The notion that one person's expression of transcendental experience can be definitive and normative for another presupposes that interpersonal communication is constitutive of human existence, and thus also constitutive of the way in which revelation is passed on.⁴⁵ An event of revelation which has significance for others will necessarily stand in continuity with other moments within the particular history of revelation:

(T)hese events have sufficient continuity among themselves, and sufficient causal connections and relationships. Their individual self-interpretations, which are therefore limited in their theme and in their depth, form a unity with others, and hence form a structure which is consistent and which binds the individual interpretations together.⁴⁶

The particular and universal histories of revelation thus mutually condition each other. The universal history of revelation reaches its full objectification in the particular history, while the latter contains "an intrinsic dynamism towards universalism, towards the mediation of an ever more adequate religious self-understanding for all...."⁴⁷

While Old Testament faith forms part of the particular and official history of revelation, for the Christian it is only the revelation of Jesus Christ which enables us to distinguish this particular history from the universal history of religions and revelation.⁴⁸ In itself, the Old Testament offers an understanding of a dialogical

⁴⁵. Ibid., pp.158-60.

⁴⁶. Ibid., pp.160-1.

⁴⁷. Ibid., p.161.

⁴⁸. Ibid., pp.157-58, 175.

partnership with God which is open to "an unknown but salvific future," but does not present an ultimate perspective from which to distinguish successful and inadequate interpretations of God's self-communication; this ultimate perspective is only possible in view of Christ.⁴⁹ Indeed Rahner suggests that given the vastness of history prior to the coming of Jesus Christ, the whole of Old Testament history from Abraham to Christ "shrinks into the brief moment of the inauguration and of the event of Christ" and forms a unity along with this event.⁵⁰ It is precisely as the "final and immediate pre-history of Christ" that Old Testament revelation gains a normative status for Christian faith.

The church which emerges out of the encounter with Jesus Christ also takes on a normative status precisely because of its connection to the Christ event. It is self-evident that if Christ is joined to the whole history of revelation which anticipates his coming, he will in turn be joined to the history which follows his saving revelation; but the shape of that connection is not theologically unambiguous. The notion of an *ongoing revelation* also suggests that God's self-communication to the world in grace did not cease after the Christ event even though it had reached its fulness in him.⁵¹ The question which concerns us here is whether the contours of God's self-

⁴⁹. Ibid., pp.157-58, 167-68.

⁵⁰. Ibid., pp.165-66.

⁵¹. While it is an axiom of Catholic theology that public revelation ended with the death of the last apostle, Rahner suggests that this must be understood in a way which does not "deprive history" of its ultimate importance. He thus interprets the axiom to mean that in the Christ event God has irrevocably promised God's own self to the world as its salvation and its absolute future, and this revelation is unsurpassable. The future is not thereby closed, but rather is opened out to an infinity of promise. See Karl RAHNER, "The Death of Jesus and the Closure of Revelation," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol.18, pp.134-35.

communication to humanity are changed as a result of this event: Is the grace which is co-extensive with human history modified in any way by the Christ event, and how is Christ related to the history of grace – both inside and outside the church – which is subsequent to his Incarnation and resurrection in history?

The ecclesiology presented in *Foundations* (Chapter Seven) is somewhat enigmatic, in the sense that large sections seem to correspond to what one might have expected in a pre-conciliar Rahner text on church rather than from the rich creativity of his later writings.⁵² David Tracy states that this section of the text is "surprisingly disappointing," and not well connected to the Christology which precedes it.⁵³ Although it is not our task here, one could set forward a solid argument showing how Rahner's later ecclesiological writings outside of *Foundations* are built precisely on the foundations of that text's first six chapters, whereas much of the ecclesiology of the seventh chapter ironically reflects an earlier stage in Rahner's thinking, a stage where he had not yet drawn out the radical ecclesial implications of an intrinsic correlation between Christ and grace. Without speculating on why this is the case, it is within the contours of this project to

⁵². In the section on "Scripture as the Church's Book" (pp.369–78), for instance, Rahner draws much more heavily on the theology of the schools than on *Dei Verbum*; the references to the latter read as later additions to an earlier text. This stands in contrast to the principle sources he draws on in the rest of *Foundations*, and stands out all the more because Rahner's ecclesiological writings are characterized by a more significant transition than his writings on most other subjects. See VACEK, "Development Within Rahner's Theology," pp.41–43.

⁵³. David Tracy, "Exploring the Horizon of Absoluteness," p.694. Herbert Vorgrimler adds that the section makes no reference to the frequent Rahnerian theme of the sinfulness of the church; Rahner acknowledged Vorgrimler's criticism, noting that the text's ecclesiology "has turned out to be perhaps too innocuous, even somewhat triumphalist." See RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.14, citing Herbert VORGRIMLER, "Nachdenken über Jesus und seine kirchlichen Nachfolger," in *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*, 38 (Sept.19, 1976).

complement the ecclesiological reflections of *Foundations* with references from essays of the same time period which are more representative of his post-conciliar views; in so doing we will indicate where there is a major divergence between the two perspectives, and how that divergence pertains to the way in which Christ and grace are correlated.

Rahner's ecclesiology in *Foundations* begins with a definition of the church as the "historical continuation of Christ in and through the community of those who believe in him, and who recognize him explicitly as the mediator of salvation in a profession of faith;" it is the "institutional constitution of the religion of the absolute mediator of salvation."⁵⁴ If God's self-communication has a history, and this history has reached its climax and point of irreversibility in Christ, then God must will this point of irreversibility to be mediated to subsequent history. The church is *founded* by Jesus to be the continuity of this event of the fulness of revelation, to be the ongoing objectification of God's self-communication in history. His death became "the foundation of a new and divinely bestowed order of grace."⁵⁵ Guided by the Spirit, the early church was the "object of God's activity in a qualitatively unique way," and thus assumes a normative character for the future.⁵⁶ This normative character also extends to scripture, to the primacy of the bishop of Rome, and to the teaching authority of the church, precisely because they are willed and authored by

⁵⁴. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.322.

⁵⁵. *Ibid.*, pp.328-30, 347-48.

⁵⁶. *Ibid.*, p.374. Cf. pp.341-46.

God to be the continuity of the Christ event in history.⁵⁷ On the normative character of scripture, for instance, Rahner writes:

(I)f God wills the original church as an indefectible sign of salvation for all ages, and wills it with an absolute, formally pre-defining and eschatological will within salvation history, and hence if he wills with this quite definite will everything which is constitutive for this church, and this includes in certain circumstances scripture in a preeminent way, then he is the inspirer and the author of scripture, although the inspiration of scripture is "only" a moment within God's primordial authorship of the church.⁵⁸

This extension of the irreversible and authoritative character of the Christ event to *everything* which is constitutive of the church, an extension grounded in the absolute and pre-defining will of God, eclipses or at least seriously compromises the mutually conditioning relationship between the Christ event and God's self-communication in grace. The tension between Christ and grace is almost entirely removed in this framework, because the grace operative in the church, in its scriptures and teaching authority, is burdened with an absolute and definitive character. Phrased alternately, the distance between the original transcendental experience and the objectification of that experience is in jeopardy of being collapsed utterly, as God speaks *thematically* in the church. While Rahner certainly safeguards his reflections against a biblical or ecclesiological fundamentalism, the tension between Christ and grace which beautifully dynamizes his theology is not carried forward with any consistency in the ecclesiology of *Foundations*.

In decided contrast, the basic thrust of virtually all the other writings of Rahner

⁵⁷. Ibid., pp.371-81.

⁵⁸. Ibid., p.375.

on the church from this time period preserves this tension by speaking of the church as sacrament of the world's salvation, a metaphor which restores a genuine importance to God's self-communication to the world in grace. The focus in these writings is much less concerned with the authority of the church and the divine justification for that authority, and turns instead to the relationship of the church to the world, and the church's fundamental openness to be led by God into the future. In a 1977 essay entitled "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," Rahner defines the church as follows:

In its ultimate nature the Church is the sociologically and historically tangible and structured community of those who believe in Jesus Christ crucified and risen as the definitive and victoriously prevailing self-promise of the one and living God to the world. Hence this Church is the basic sacrament of the salvation of the world: of the world, and not only of those who belong to the Church itself expressly and in a sociologically tangible way. The Church is the historically perceptible assurance of the victory of God's self-promise as the ultimate meaning and absolute future of the world.⁵⁹

Rahner also introduces a subtle but pivotal shift in his language in suggesting that the scholastic insistence that Jesus founded the church be interpreted as a *provenance*, a deriving from; the church *comes forth from*, has its origins in the death and resurrection of Christ.⁶⁰ If Jesus is the definitive promise of God's gift of self to the world, then the church is the community who inherits the task of speaking that promise of God's grace, giving objective form to its offer and witnessing to its

⁵⁹. Karl RAHNER, "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol.20, p.104. Cf. RAHNER and THUSING, *A New Christology*, p.26.

⁶⁰. RAHNER and THUSING, *A New Christology*, pp.23-27.

ultimate victory.⁶¹ Leo O'Donovan suggests that the shift to the language of provenance marked "a considerable advance over *Foundations* in terms of scriptural, sociological, and ecumenical perspectives."⁶² I would add that the transition in Rahner's ecclesiology introduces a much more critical understanding of the church's historicity, and thus allows it to be defined less exclusively as the extension of the fulness of revelation in the Christ event. The grace side of the equation is allowed to re-emerge into the revelatory configuration, carrying with it the unthematic self-communication of God, the ambiguity of interpreting that experience, the need for dialogue and self-criticism, the openness to the future. The church does not simply carry forward the irreversibility of the Christ event in an incorruptible way, but it does so in history: in seeking to receive and embrace God's self-communication as it continues to be offered in grace, in seeking to be faithful to the fulness of God's self-communication which it has encountered in Christ. The language of God's "formally pre-defining and eschatological will" gives way to a more historical and more authentically human (thus graced) understanding of church, as is evidenced in the 1979 essay "Courage for an Ecclesial Christianity," where Rahner writes:

I heard of him (Jesus Christ) only through the Church and not otherwise. Hence I cannot be content with a purely private Christianity which would repudiate its origins. Attachment to the Church is the price I pay for this historical origin.⁶³

⁶¹. Ibid., p.26; RAHNER, "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," pp.104-5.

⁶². O'DONOVAN, "A Journey Into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," pp.630-31. He doesn't bother trying to explain that the advance from what is said in *Foundations* came five years before the publication of the latter.

⁶³. RAHNER, "Courage for an Ecclesial Christianity," pp.9-10.

The recovery of an understanding of church mutually conditioned by the fulness of revelation in Christ and God's continued self-communication in grace also results in a creative tension between the church's rootedness in tradition and its openness to the future. The church must remain centered on its basic message, which Rahner articulates as follows:

(the Christian) sees the church as a circle of believers who on the level of explicit reflection and of the official church really and ultimately profess only one thing in faith, hope and love, namely, that the absolute and living God is victorious in his self-giving love throughout the whole length and breadth of his creation.⁶⁴

While this primary message of the church will remain constant, change may come to the shape of the church's ministries, its relationship to other Christian churches, its social organization and structure. Rahner states that we do not know what the church of the year 2000 or 2500 will look like, but he spends a great deal of energy in his late writings dreaming and speculating about its future shape.

Will there still be a pope in Rome or elsewhere?Will the Church still possess the great Roman bureaucracy that we recognize and perhaps endure with sighs today? Perhaps there will be many other things which we cannot even imagine today. The Church may by then have learnt, for example, that women can be admitted to the priestly office....⁶⁵

(T)he Church's future will be different in many respects from the present, in which we ourselves live and which we therefore know. Nevertheless, the future is that of the one and enduring Church in which we believe and live. Change and endurance belong equally to the nature of the Church, while it is obvious that we cannot distinguish so completely in human reflection the changeable from the permanent in this historical factor as to know in advance of its concrete history precisely and conceptually where the dividing line lies between the perishing and the permanent: we must always experience in history the

⁶⁴. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.401.

⁶⁵. RAHNER and THUSING, *A New Christology*, p.30.

unforseeable miracle that the Church changes to a quite unforseeable extent and yet discover that it has remained the same.⁶⁶

Drawing this overview of revelation history to a close, one can see where the mutually conditioning relationship between fulness of revelation in Christ and God's self-communication in grace shapes decisively Rahner's understanding of each moment within the history of revelation. Perhaps what is most basic to this relationship is that it allows and invites an explicit faith stance which nevertheless remains open to mystery. The acknowledgement of the fulness of God's revelation in Christ is definitive of ecclesial Christianity, and allows the Christian to interpret all of history as being marked by saving self-gift of God. But it is God's ongoing self-communication in grace, a self-communication which can be received but never fully understood or thematized, which necessitates that faith always remain oriented to mystery, and to an open future. When in certain ecclesial writings the unthematic revelation of grace was in a sense overwhelmed by an ecclesiology marked by heavy claims of authority, I believe the reference to the mystery of God, and consequently to the mystery of human life, was correspondingly minimized. Upholding a mutually conditioning relationship between fulness of revelation in Christ and ongoing revelation in grace creates a dynamism where faith can live in the promise of God's nearness while being ever reminded that God is always beyond our best theological speculations, surrounding us as a horizon of benevolent mystery.

⁶⁶. RAHNER, "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," p.109. Cf. Karl RAHNER, "Structural Change in the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol.20, pp.115-32.

The Narrow Gap

If *Foundations* is the text Karl Rahner's refers to as being most reflective of his theological concerns, the essay "Ignatius Speaks to a Modern Jesuit" is the corresponding text which he identified as his personal legacy. In describing Ignatius' conversion experience at Manresa, Rahner has Ignatius write:

God himself: I knew God himself, not simply human words describing him. I knew God and the freedom which is an integral part of him and which can only be known through him and not as the sum total of finite realities and calculations about them. I knew him, even if knowing him "face to face," as I do now, is again something different (and yet the same). I have no theological lecture to give on this difference. I simply tell you that this is how it was; I would even say: if you were to let your scepticism about such an assertion, sharpened as it is by an underlying atheism, go to the very limit, not just in cleverly expressed theory but in the bitter practice of life too, then you also might have the same experience....This experience is grace indeed and basically there is no one to whom it is refused. Of this I was sure and convinced.⁶⁷

The text expresses beautifully Rahner's confidence that God is experienced at the depths of human experience, the same (yet different) God that we hope to encounter *face to face* in the beatific vision, the same (yet different) God that we encounter in history in Jesus Christ.

A key thrust of Rahner's theology is the effort to awaken people to this experience of God in grace, and to explicate how this experience is closely linked to the Christ event.⁶⁸ This Rahnerian mystagogy serves well as an introduction to the correlations which will concern us in this final section of our study: the

⁶⁷. RAHNER, "Ignatius Speaks to a Modern Jesuit," pp.12-13.

⁶⁸. Ibid., pp.14, 16; RAHNER, "The Theological Dimension of the Question About Man," p.67.

relationships between ordinary experience and experience of God, between explicit and anonymous Christian, between church and world. The presentation will be very brief here, as the relationship in each of these cases has already come to surface quite explicitly already; but they represent the most concrete implications of Rahner's understanding of the experience of God in grace and its intrinsic relatedness to Christ. Hence the chapter would be incomplete without them.

Harvey Egan notes that it is interesting to observe "how often the words 'ordinary,' 'banal,' 'humdrum,' 'routine,' and the like show up" in Rahner's writings.⁶⁹ Because of God's self-communication at the depths of human experience, the ordinary is forever the bearer of grace; hence there is something akin to a mysticism of the ordinary in Rahner's writings. The encounter with other persons is certainly given a privileged place in this mysticism, and in the mediating of grace. In the 1974 article "Experience of Self and Experience of God," Rahner shows the interconnectedness between the experience of self, other persons, and God.⁷⁰ Love of neighbour and love of God can of course be distinguished in categorical reality, but they are ultimately intertwined, such that love of neighbour can be identified as "the actualization of Christian existence in an absolute sense;" conversely, "(h)e who fails to discover his neighbour has not truly achieved realization of himself either."⁷¹

The relationship between love of God and love of neighbour, just as between

⁶⁹. EGAN, "Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Spiritual Exercises," p.263.

⁷⁰. RAHNER, "Experience of Self and Experience of God," pp.124–29.

⁷¹. Ibid., pp.127–28; RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.309.

experience of God and ordinary experience, pertain more to Rahner's understanding of the relationship between nature and grace than to his understanding of the relationship between grace and Christ; but Rahner is interested in showing how Christ himself is connected to the ordinary, and to the neighbour. The systematic foundations for this connection are precisely those which connect Christ to grace, as set forth in the previous chapter; we needn't go into the arguments again. Outside of the more direct reflections upon the link between Christ and other persons, or Christ and ordinary life – reflections which Rahner sees as having an important place in Christian spirituality – he is especially interested in the implications of the relationship between Christ and those who have not encountered the Christian message. He proposes a "searching Christology," wherein he suggests that there is an unthematic searching for the person and event of Jesus Christ already implicit in acts such as the love of neighbour, hope in the future, or readying oneself for death.⁷² He also proposes the notion of the anonymous Christian, a proposal which has received more attention, and more criticism than any other concept or endeavour within Rahnerian theology.

Again, the theoretical foundations for the claim have already been presented. Anonymous Christianity basically affirms that there is "real yet anonymous" relationship between each human being and the event of Jesus Christ, and that one who has not explicitly encountered the full and authentic message of Christ can

⁷². RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.296–98.

nevertheless anonymously accept and receive him and be saved through him.⁷³

Hence Rahner reasons:

Consequently, anyone who, though still far from any revelation explicitly formulated in words, accepts his existence in patient silence (or, better, in faith, hope and love), accepts it as the mystery which lies hidden in the mystery of eternal love and which bears life in the womb of death, is saying "yes" to Christ even if he does not know it....Anyone who accepts his humanity fully, and all the more so of course the humanity of others, has accepted the Son of Man because in him God has accepted man.⁷⁴

In essay after essay, Rahner insists that the term as such is not important; that it is not a concept intended for direct apologetic use, or for inter-religious dialogue; that if it is misunderstood as minimizing explicit Christianity, then another term should be found.⁷⁵ Yet he is insistent that in any alternative formulation, the dogmatic theologian must be attentive both to the God's will for universal salvation, and the dogmatic assertion that salvation is always mediated through Jesus Christ.

While Rahner clearly posits a difference between anonymous and professed Christianity, he suggests that at times the boundary between them is "fluid." While the anonymous Christian is one who has not yet had the concrete and full experience of Jesus Christ yet has accepted him through saving grace, the explicit Christian is forever engaged in "the ever unfinished task of slowly incorporating existentially into the history of his own existence what he knows at first in a more conceptual faith...." A person, notes Rahner, "is always a Christian in order to

⁷³. Ibid., pp.176, 227-28, 306. Cf. "Anonymous and Explicit Faith," pp.52-59.

⁷⁴. Ibid., p.228.

⁷⁵. RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.10; RAHNER, "Anonymous and Explicit Faith," p.54.

become one...."⁷⁶

The relationship between church and world has been introduced in the previous section. In brief, for Rahner, church and world are both the recipients of God's saving gift of self; while not two entirely separate entities, they are in a sense partners in an ongoing dialogue and conversation in history. The world is created by God, set free to be independent and autonomous; it is also graced by God's self-communication. The church is in the world, and shares in the task of the world's humanization, though this task is not under the church's direct guidance.⁷⁷ The church is present in the world to bear witness that "God loves the world and that God's love does not fail because of our guilt;" it is to be a visible sign that God's saving and victorious love is operative in all the world and through all of history.⁷⁸ In practice, this means offering to the world an understanding of its profound identity, task and future.

It must be recognized that the whole of human existence, and so the entire world in all its dimensions, ultimately reaches out to the life of God;...that it is only through God's grace that we are set free in such a way as to be able to use and enjoy the world, and open ourselves unreservedly to our neighbour without becoming enslaved by this social and material environment of ours, without having to idolize it in order to be able to endure it. All this is a message which must be preached to the world ever anew.⁷⁹

While the basic thrust of Rahner's theology is to show the close correlation

⁷⁶. Karl RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.306.

⁷⁷. Karl RAHNER, "The Church's Commission to Bring Salvation and the Humanization of the World," p.311.

⁷⁸. RAHNER and THUSING, *A New Christology*, p.31.

⁷⁹. RAHNER, "The Church's Commission to Bring Salvation and the Humanization of the World," p.312.

which exists between the church and the world, the sacred and the profane, the explicit and the anonymous Christian, he does not totally identify them. The Christian message always "aims to make real, explicit Christians;" the acceptance of grace in the ordinary can always "be accepted more profoundly, more purely, and with greater freedom" when it is identified as an experience of God; the church always wills that the world comes to know its own deepest self.⁸⁰ The faith knowledge that God is present in another or in the world in an unrecognized and unthematic way does not dispense either the Christian or the church at large from attempting to help others objectify their transcendental experience of grace. But it does shape decisively one's relationship to the other and to the world. The texture of the relationship between explicit and anonymous for Rahner comes through nicely in an interview on German television, where Rahner was asked if Mt. 25 did not in fact say that love of neighbour was what was decisive for salvation. He introduces his answer by speaking of the mutually conditioning relationship in all of life between theory and praxis, then says:

That is why one should say: Love your neighbor, and, if you do that radically, you have already loved a hidden Jesus Christ, as Jesus explicitly demands in Matthew 25. Yet this does not forbid me to know what I am doing. Nor does it forbid me to know that, by loving Jesus in my neighbor, I have really encountered him. So when you fully accept that in every human being I encounter Jesus, then you have understood an assertion about Jesus that is so radical, so deep and wide, that means something quite different from some cheap rationalistic chatter, something which everybody can quite simply know and understand.⁸¹

⁸⁰. RAHNER, "The Experience of God Today," p.152; RAHNER, "Religious Feeling Inside and Outside the Church," pp.231-32.

⁸¹. Karl RAHNER, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Jesus is God?," p.84.

Undoubtedly there remains more to be said here, there are many things which could have been said better. One of the most decisive statements of Rahner's theological career was that the Council of Chalcedon was not only an end but also a beginning; that indeed every truth of God, every mystery of faith was a beginning, an opening, a point of departure for further questions and deeper understanding.⁸² So it is with Rahner's own theology, which has given rise to a virtual cottage industry of commentaries, critiques, and discussions. His work has been the beginning of much that is good in the effort to articulate an intelligent faith at the end of the 20th Century.

Rahner has attempted something which was grand in its conception, and I would argue that it is also grand in its end result. The text embodies a genuine coherence in its attempt to offer a first level of reflection, in its interaction between fundamental and dogmatic theology, between transcendental and historical approaches; structural tangles in Chapter Six notwithstanding. In addressing the relationship between Christ and grace, Rahner's text lays comprehensive philosophical and theological foundations with which to face the question, he grapples with it from different perspectives, and lays out corresponding implications. His seventh chapter on ecclesiology did not consistently build on the foundations he had laid, and the text suffers as a result; but other writings of the same time period served well in complementing our principal text, reflecting the kind of ecclesiological implications which the early chapters of *Foundations* gave one reason to expect.

⁸². Karl RAHNER, "Current Problems in Christology," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol.1, pp.149-150.

It is more difficult to evaluate the text in terms of its meaning. Rahner says at the beginning of *Foundations* that his aim is to give an account of Christian faith, and that "the reader himself must decide whether this goal is reached." The reader, in turn, must also be self-critical in allowing the text to confront her or him with new understandings.⁸³ In the church and in the academy, Rahner's text has found readers who have received it as a meaningful understanding of Christian faith. For many, including myself, he has given a framework for thinking through faith questions, and has shown a way of struggling to reconcile Christian faith and human experience within contemporary horizons of understanding. I think one can safely say, of his text as a whole and of the relationship he posits between Christ and grace in particular, that Rahner has attempted what few others have attempted or could reasonably attempt. That is not to say that he has fully *succeeded*, or that his interpretation does not have considerable weaknesses. In commenting on his text, Rahner said he hoped only that his book would be read "not in an exclusive, but in a positive sense."⁸⁴

As a way of drawing the research to a close, and as a way of carrying forward the question of meaning which it has raised, I would like to draw from the body of commentaries and critiques on Rahner to identify some of the questions which have been addressed to his Christology, his theology of grace, and the implications of their correlation: questions which his work has opened up, questions which point

⁸³. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.xii. Cf. p.25.

⁸⁴. RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.15.

out difficulties in the correlation, questions which suggest other approaches which could potentially complement Rahner's own work.⁸⁵

A first set of questions pertains to Rahner's Christology. While Rahner is clear that in his transcendental Christology he is not trying to deduce the Christ event, would it be possible to complement his transcendental hope for an absolute saviour with a recognition of the underivable newness of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?⁸⁶ How can Rahner's approach to the historical Jesus be made more convincing? Rahner's text does not really deal with the way in which a person encounters the Christian message, but it does make a good contribution as a reflection on how such an historical encounter correlates with our own transcendental experience. Could his Christological framework still remain intact if it were to be used as a companion text to Edward Schillebeeckx' *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*,⁸⁷ in the sense that Schillebeeckx's whole focus is on encounter (by way of the Christian community) with the person and message of

⁸⁵. The possibility of incorporating outside critiques into the text beyond this raised a number of difficulties. Much of the critique which has been addressed to Rahner pertains to questions which touch on our present research, but are not its focus: his transcendental method, his philosophical anthropology, the relationship between nature and grace. Few of them deal exclusively with *Foundations* and the later writings; addressing them properly would have meant changing the contours of the project entirely. Then there is the reality that Rahner was a theologian who loved to enter into dialogue. There are large bodies of literature dealing with his dialogue with Johann Baptist Metz, with Hans Urs von Balthasar, with Hans Kung; to deal properly with such critiques would mean engaging in studies of these other authors. Since this study is intended primarily as a critical reading of *Foundations* on the question of the relationship between fullness of revelation in Christ and grace in history, a study of the critiques of Rahner's theology has not been incorporated. This has nothing to do with the value or need of these critiques, and everything to do with limitations of time and space.

⁸⁶. Walter KASPER, *Jesus the Christ* (London: Burns & Oates, 1976), pp.50–52, 57–58.

⁸⁷. Edward SCHILLEBEECKX, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

Jesus? To what extent might such divergent methodologies remain compatible?

A second pair of questions addresses Rahner's theology of grace and the anthropology it is structured upon. Johann Baptist Metz suggests that transcendental theology posits an idealized subject and does not grapple sufficiently with experiences of contradiction or suffering.⁸⁸ Contextual schools of theology would be cautious of any theology built on the notion of a universal common human experience. While Rahner's notion of the subject goes beyond the accusation that it was fabricated in German universities, would it be possible to broaden the contours of his understanding of common human experience to better incorporate experiences of oppression, or of being faced with evil? Hermeneutic theology asks a broader question of Rahner's understanding of God's self-communication at the depths of human experience in grace: Does he sufficiently account for the way in which that experience is appropriated? And if not, once again could his framework for understanding grace withstand and benefit by a rigorous dialogue with a hermeneutical approach in order to better address the moment of appropriation in transcendental experience?

A final pair of questions pertain to the implications Rahner has drawn from the relationship between Christ and grace. Hans Urs von Balthasar critiques Rahner's frequent identification of love of God and love of neighbour, and calls into question

⁸⁸. Johann Baptist METZ, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), pp.13, 65, 227.

Rahner's scriptural justification for putting them on equal footing.⁸⁹ Indeed Rahner's theology sometimes reads like an extended theological commentary on Mt.25:31–46; yet it allows him to set forth a very incarnational spirituality. One senses a deep truth in what each of the dialogue partners here is saying, hence it might be worth asking again: In what way is it legitimate to correlate love of God and love of neighbour, and how ought the former be given a primacy? Finally, pertaining to the notion of an anonymous Christian, it is difficult to accept that one of the key aspects of Christian doctrine pertaining to non-Christians be expressed in language which *ought not be used* in dialogue with non-Christians. Perhaps it served a purpose in educating Catholics after the Council that a real change in understanding towards non-Christians had taken place. What language can we use today to communicate the church's belief that non-Christians can be saved through Christ?

Rahner's theology has shown itself to be resilient in the past, able to enter into dialogue with others and expand its own contours and perspectives in response. If his understanding of the relationship between the fulness of revelation in Christ and God's self-communication in grace is to serve as a meaningful interpretation for the future of the church and of theology, these are among the many questions it will need to grapple with in the years to come.

⁸⁹. Hans Urs von BALTHASAR, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Newman Press, 1969), pp.65–67.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the end of his book *A Brief History of Time*, theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking notes how both scientists and philosophers deal with the universe in its totality. He suggests it is unfortunate that scientists today are too busy describing *what* the universe is to ask *why* it bothers to exist in the first place; philosophers for their part have not been able to keep up with scientific reflection on the origins of the universe. Hawking wants to know, wants scientists and philosophers to work towards discovering, what was in "the mind of God" in creating the universe. While for Hawking the phrase is loaded with an intended ambiguity, it remains a metaphor for ultimate meaning; and he accuses philosophy of no longer daring to ask about it, abandoning the pursuit of ultimate meaning altogether:

in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,....(p)hilosophers reduced the scope of their inquiries so much that Wittgenstein, the most famous philosopher of this century, said, "The sole remaining task for philosophy is the analysis of language." What a comedown from the great tradition of philosophy from Aristotle to Kant!⁹⁰

Asking the ultimate questions, inquiring into the mind of God, was a passionate enterprise for Karl Rahner. While he did not wish to be called a philosopher, he certainly stands in the great tradition of those who have grappled with the great questions. Rahner believed that contemporary theology had the task of "establishing contact" with the self-understanding of our age, situating Christianity "within the

⁹⁰. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), pp.174-75.

intellectual horizon of people today." That meant dealing with a context of fragmentation and deconstruction of meaning, addressing students who lived "in a situation of crisis for their faith," people who carried "a willing but troubled faith."⁹¹

The principal text we have been studying is, I would propose, very aptly called *Foundations of Christian Faith*. It attempts a first level reflection which thinks through a basic interpretation of Christian faith, proposing foundations by which a Christian could intelligently live out her or his commitment. Rahner was keenly aware that even in a context where meaning is deconstructed on all sides, life still places exigencies on us: we are still responsible, we must still act and make decisions; as Christians, we must still try to speak our hope. It is in this context that Rahner offers a framework which is at times disheartening in its complexity, at other times disarming in its sublime simplicity.

Undertaking this project meant encountering both the complexity and the simplicity, and finding them to be cut of the same fabric; but that is in retrospect. There were moments of frustration in sorting out the complexities of his method where the only consolation to be found was the quaintly amusing thought of bewildered first year theology students from Munich attending a certain course entitled "An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity" being taught by a certain well-respected "Professor Rahner." A critical reading of *Foundations* involved spiralling a path to the heart of the text's meaning, a task which I have not yet completed. There are limitations to this sort of project centered around one classic text; many

⁹¹. RAHNER, *Foundations*, pp.xi, 5-6, 8; RAHNER, "Grace as the Heart of Human Existence," p.35.

questions arose which were not answerable within the text itself, and the reliance on other essays and interviews of the same time period became more extensive than initially anticipated. Other questions remain unanswered, philosophical foundations remain hazy in places and would have required a much more extensive corpus of primary and secondary works to grasp fully.

But spiralling into *Foundations* also meant being immersed into a whole theological world and tradition, a rare and wonderful education. Rahner was a teacher in the best and most comprehensive of ways. His thinking is rigorous, because it seeks to present a credible account of the heart of Christian tradition in a language which is at once intellectually responsible and addressing contemporary horizons of thought. Rahner insists on lifting his readers out of any small thinking, any narrow little expression of faith. Small thinking is not going to carry out the theologian's task in today's context, and so though he tells you otherwise, he expects you (in one of his favourite expressions) to *break your head over it* in gaining an ever deeper understanding of who we are, who God is, what we can hope in.

Working with Rahner's writings, one gets the sense that he is a tremendously honest theologian. I do not think that he makes claims for his work which are unfulfilled. He articulates the parameters of his projects, and if anything understates their achievement. Of *Foundations*, he writes:

I would not like this book to be regarded as a systematic, all-integrating presentation of my theology....But on the primary plane of reflection it offers a survey of Christian doctrine as a whole. This is difficult and involves many more risks than are involved in a theological study, however exact, within a

particular field. The greater the task, the more likely is it that the result will fall short of complete fulfillment. But we must have the courage to make the attempt, even though the accomplishment of the task remains almost hopelessly inadequate.⁹²

Finally, Rahner is tremendously at ease with the unknown, with the limits and the possibilities of human reason, and the place of both in the life of faith. In the end, one gets the sense that Rahner himself, as well as the theology which is his life's work, is remarkably comfortable with mystery, which is the center and end of every endeavor. It would be right and good, then, to end this work where Rahner would have it end.

What is made intelligible is grounded ultimately in the one thing that is self-evident, in mystery. Mystery is something with which we are always familiar, something which we love, even when we are terrified by it or perhaps even annoyed and angered, and want to be done with it. For the person who has touched his own spiritual depths, what is more familiar, thematically or unthematically, and what is more self-evident than the silent question which goes beyond everything which has already been mastered and controlled, than the unanswered question accepted in humble love, which alone brings wisdom?⁹³

⁹². RAHNER, "Foundations of Christian Faith," p.15.

⁹³. RAHNER, *Foundations*, p.22.

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