

The Responsibility of the Christian Faith in Today's Religious Pluralism: The Theology of Karl Rahner in an Asian Context

by
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In view of today's pluralism of religions and the worldwide fluctuation of traditional values, all Christians are called to question their faith and to render account of its foundation. Christianity, developed in the Western world, is still a somewhat foreign religion in most Asian countries. Why do some Asians nevertheless believe in Christ's teaching, despite their native familiarity with their own culture's religious tradition? How can we Asian Christians show ourselves responsible for our faith vis-à-vis fellow human beings in our respective countries? How are we to assess the religions of our own traditions and adequately integrate them into an interpretive framework shaped by our Christian understanding?

In an attempt to answer these questions, the theology of Karl Rahner can give useful suggestions.¹ Rahner was one of the leading Catholic theologians of the 20th century. He seriously pondered the challenge of the accountability of the Christian faith and often invited Christians and non-Christians to share reflection and dialogue. In the preface to the Japanese edition of his book *Grundkurs des Glaubens*,² which was published in 1981, Rahner writes: "The Catholic Church and theology are becoming increasingly aware that the non-European cultures of Asia, Africa, and South America may and must develop independent churches and theologies, which show that Christianity is not a European export article. [...] As great as the

¹ In 1975 and 1976 both Gerhold Becker, to whom this Festschrift is dedicated, and the author of this essay studied with Karl Rahner in Munich. We even lived under the same roof with him and benefitted greatly from his spiritual prompting. This time remains a particularly happy memory, which we share to this day.

² Cf. Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens. Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), published in English as *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. W. V. Dych (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

differences between human beings and cultures may be, all humans have the ability and the assignment to talk with one another. They can thus draw each other's attention to the final salvific truth that is shared by all and to its testimony in history. Especially if people refrain from attempting to indoctrinate others who are perhaps strangers to them, and instead strive for their own self-awareness, they will contribute to that great worldwide dialogue about the final goal, the one truth toward which we all move, which has sovereignly proven itself for us Christians as victorious and salvific in Jesus Christ."

In this essay, which is cardinally based on Karl Rahner's insights, I will seek to unfurl some thoughts on the accountability of the Christian faith in the Asian context.³ The concrete object of my deliberations will be limited to the situation in present-day Japan. I am aware that my home country benefits from the heritage of an old, highly developed non-Christian religion and culture while simultaneously living in a spirit shaped by modern science and technology. In such a country, the question of the accountability of the Christian faith is being asked in a particularly radical way.

As suggestions for what may be meaningful and fruitful for the future task of theology in Japan, I wish to select—albeit somewhat arbitrarily—the following three from among the subjects Rahner addresses: God's revelation, the Incarnation of the Logos, and the humanity of Christ.

I The Concept of God's Universal Revelation

One of Rahner's many creative insights, which has significant consequences for theological research and builds the foundation of his theological methodology, is his understanding of God's revelation. Revelation is traditionally understood as God's revealing to humans, through words and deeds within history, His salvific mystery. Christianity believes that Jesus Christ is the consummation of this revelation, which is passed on through the Holy Scripture and the tradition of the Church. Rahner, however, was more radical in questioning the conditions necessary for this revelation: he asked about the nature of the human who receives God's revelation, about how a human must be endowed in order to be able to accept God's revelation.⁴

³ In order to avoid unnecessary complications, all evidence will be taken from the above-mentioned work (referenced below as *Foundations*), Rahner's only systematic monograph, in which he summarizes his principal thoughts.

⁴ *Foundations*, Chapter I and II, 24-89.

For revelation to be possible at all, the addressee must a priori be endowed with the ability to perceive and accept it. If humans have been created by God, then God in the act of Creation must have made humans as recipients of His revelation. This is the transcendental thinking as it characterizes Rahner's theological method.

Rahner's point of departure is the existential analysis of humankind: humans experience themselves as transcending all categorial experiences, with an orientation toward the horizon of these experiences, toward being-as-such. Humans become aware that they are given this orientation from the very beginning. Such self-awareness is the transcendental experience that humans gain simultaneously with categorial experiences. In a transcendental experience, humans arrive at a knowledge of the whither and the whence of their orientation, independent of whether or not they gain this explicit knowledge through reflection. Christians refer to the whither and the whence of this orientation as "God."

If, however, humans reflect on and interpret their transcendental experiences, they do so necessarily in their own historical situation, in the spirit and the language of their society. Correspondingly, Christians will interpret their transcendental experiences in the Christian tradition, with the help of historical experiences of the Christian message. As Rahner understood it within the Christian tradition in which he had grown up, the human orientation toward God is nothing but the most existential condition of humankind as given by God.⁵ It is God Himself who wishes to communicate with humankind and who creates humans through His will of self-communication. Augustine describes the same state of affairs when he writes: "Quia fecisti nos ad te, inquietum est cor meum donec requiescat in te" (As thou madest us towards Thyself, my heart is restless, until it repose in Thee; *Confessions* I, 1).

According to Rahner, God in creating humankind offers His self-communication as the inner principle of humans' existential structure. Rahner calls this a "supernatural existential". It is an existential since it is a principle universally given to all human beings at the moment of their creation and determining their essence. It is supernatural since this determination is directed toward the goal that surpasses human essence as such, and is given in an act of free, unconditional grace.

⁵ *Foundations*, Chapter IV, 116-133.

If humankind is understood as what is created through God's will of self-communication, then the concept of revelation is at once given.⁶ God's revelation is not a communication about God's truth or mystery, given to humankind from outside, but rather God's self-communication addressing the innermost depth of human existence. We arrive at the knowledge of God not through a message brought to us from an external source, but through the original, personal, and transcendental experience of our orientation toward God. In the transcendental experience we know God, albeit without having explicitly reflected on Him. This original knowledge of God is accorded us by God, exclusively through His grace. It can therefore be called "original revelation."

God initially reveals Himself in humans' transcendental experience of their orientation toward God. This knowledge of God, which is exalted by underserved grace, can be perceived as "God's supernatural self-revelation." It is an original, universal revelation given to all peoples and cultures, conveyed through innerworldly categorical experiences and not necessarily limited to religious experiences as such. The transcendental nature of humankind, which always strives toward God's immediacy, is carried out in the mediation of everyday activities and social dealings, and here above all God reveals Himself.

In the context of this understanding of God's revelation, Rahner considers the so-called Revelation in the narrower sense, of which Christendom claims to have full possession, as the most successful case in which universal revelation is being reflected explicitly and interpreted as God willed it.⁷ From this must follow, for example: God's particular self-revelation to Mose, described in the third chapter of the Book of Exodus, can be understood (independently of the question to what degree its historicity can be ascertained or how its transmission up to its current form has unfolded) as communicating that a specific prophet by the name of Mose explicitly reflects on, correctly interprets, and conceptualizes his personal, transcendental experience, and that his disciples have passed his testimony on to later generations and submitted it to writing. That the testimony was a correct interpretation, one that God has willed for humankind, was corroborated in diverse signs accompanying it. The "sign" means here that the faithful may take a particular constellation of historic events as God's message to them.⁸

⁶ *Foundations*, Chapter V, 138-152.

⁷ *Foundations*, Chapter V, 153-161.

⁸ On the term "miracles" cf. *Foundations*, 255-264.

In this way, the Holy Scripture is understood as the prophets' and apostles' testimonies of the experiences of God as they have reflected on them and interpreted them, testimonies that are then passed on among the faithful, written down, and compiled. This understanding neither contradicts the belief that God is the ultimate author of the Holy Scripture, nor does it negate the conclusiveness of Christian revelation. Instead, this understanding of the revelation allows us to take for granted that the Holy Scripture, as something that has been experienced, interpreted, and attested in human history, is historically conditioned. While Christians believe that it can be the norm for all of humankind, it must in fact always be newly interpreted in all times and by all cultures.

This view of God's revelation enables us to adequately comprehend the so-called private revelations experienced within Christianity by saints and mystics as well as the possibility of authentic revelations in religions outside Christianity. It opens a door for an important future task, a task especially for the Christians of Asia whose horizon of thought and faith is defined by the traditions of non-Christian religions and cultures. Authentic supernatural revelations of God can also occur outside the history of the Old and New Testaments. Religious words and symbols thematized and expressed in a non-Christian spirit may at first look completely alien but can nevertheless present authentic testimonies of transcendental experiences of God. Of course one has to be cautious in view of the possibility that the situation of the world, aggravated as it is by original sin, leads to a wrong interpretation of a personal transcendental experience of God. But attentive listening to these testimonies and ready learning from these experiences and their interpretations in the dialogue with other religions will certainly lead Christians in Asia to a deeper understanding of the Christian revelation itself. Their interlocutors might have better grasped the other sides of the truth, or they may have interpreted, expressed, or realized it in a way that is more adequate for the spirit of Asians. By learning from them, Christians can possibly grasp the Gospel and its salvific mysteries from new angles and in a new way, comprehending their depth, breadth, and height more fully.

II The Incarnation of the Logos

We now turn to the theological center of Rahner's thinking, his thoughts on the Incarnation of the Logos, which provide our theological reflection with rich incentives and tasks. If we admit, as has been expounded above, that the original and universal revelation is given to all humans, then this

leads to the question of how this universal revelation relates to the specific revelation in which Christians believe. How is one to understand the connection between this universally given revelation and the specific revelation which, according to Christian believe, has been communicated within the history of the Old and New Testaments and climaxed in the event of Jesus Christ?

Christianity's fundamental dogma of the Incarnation of the Logos, has its origin in the Gospel of St. John and was philosophically conceptualized in the Council of Nicea. Rahner begins by using his transcendental method to newly assess and explain this dogma in a manner that is accessible to modern humanity.⁹ He understands that human essence, striving toward immediacy with God, finds its ultimate consummation in the event of the Incarnation, in which God takes upon himself the reality of human life and thereby realizes the immediate union between Himself and humankind. In this event, God's self-communication to humankind is irreversibly promised within history. As shown above, the human orientation toward the immediacy with God is a supernatural existential of humankind, universally given as grace, the universal offer of God's self-communication. Humans reply to this offer with their history of freedom and strive for God's immediacy, which in the tradition of the Holy Scripture and the Church is called "visio beatifica" or "deification." Christians understand that in the person and the life of Jesus of Nazareth, in his worship, obedience, and self-sacrifice unto death on the Cross, this divine self-communication, both as God's offer and as humankind's acceptance, has achieved its consummation and has been publicly announced as such. For Christians, Christ's Resurrection means nothing other than the event in which God accepts Jesus' sacrifice of his life and gives the final and definitive validity of his person in eternal glory¹⁰ and reveals it as such. Through this event, God's self-communication is promised to all humans.

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 has closely scrutinized this union of God and humankind and defined that Jesus Christ is "the same one in being (homoousios) with the Father as to the divinity and one in being with us as to the humanity."¹¹ The Council further decreed that in the person of the Logos, divine and human natures are united "without confusion or change, without division or separation," a state that is referred to as the "hypostatic

⁹ *Foundations*, Chapter VI, 176-203 and 311-321.

¹⁰ On the meaning of Jesus' Resurrection, cf. *Foundations*, Chapter VI, 264-285.

¹¹ Joseph Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (New York: Alba House, 1998), no. 614-615.

union.” While this metaphysical definition does not at first glance seem explicitly to express the salvific importance of the Incarnation for humankind, the wording is the fruit of a long theological discussion among the Church Fathers, who were existentially considering human salvation. On this basis, Rahner opined that the Incarnation, or the hypostatic union in which the Logos takes on human nature brought to humankind what all humans regard as their goal and completion: God’s immediacy as the elect savor it in eternity. The event has not happened exclusively to a specific human being, Jesus, but represents an anticipation of the deification of all humans, a moment of universal grace allotted to the world, the inner foundation and the condition of the world’s salvation.

Accordingly, Rahner held that the universal offer of God’s self-communication toward humankind, i.e., God’s universal salvific will, aims from the beginning at the consummation in the hypostatic union. The hypostatic union, then, is the climax of God’s salvific history and the goal driving the history of God’s self-communication – the “final cause” in the scholastic tradition. In other words, God’s universal self-communication is from the beginning headed toward the event in which it becomes irrevocable in history both as a divine offer and as human acceptance. Christians believe that this event is Jesus’ life, Crucifixion, and Resurrection.

If, therefore, the offer of God’s self-communication is universal, and if the original revelation is thereby given to all humans, it will find its place in the history of salvation and revelation whose climax is the Jesus event. Moreover, if we understand God’s self-communication as an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then it will be correct to say that the spirit guiding the salvific history is given with Christ in view and will therefore be called the spirit of Christ. If the guidance of the spirit makes it possible for the transcendental experience of God to be correctly interpreted and verbalized also outside the Christian revelation, then it should be said that this has been made possible through the Christ event.

Rahner thought, then, that God’s universal revelation, which is equally possible in other religions, is based on the official revelation culminating in Jesus Christ, and that this official revelation serves as the norm of its authenticity. In a religiously pluralistic society like that of present-day Japan, this thought provides crucial suggestions. It also poses a difficult task with regard to the question how Christians can in intellectual candor retain Christianity’s fundamental faith in Jesus Christ’s Incarnation and his role in universal salvation, while simultaneously engaging in an honest dialogue with other religions.

III The Eternal Significance of Jesus' Humanity

For those engaged in the practice of theology, the works of Karl Rahner—particularly his thoughts on spiritual theology, on the dogmatic foundation of Christian spirituality, and on the salvific significance of Jesus' humanity—offer rich and useful suggestions.¹² During the above reflections on the theology of the Incarnation, observations were confined to one angle: the significance of the Incarnation in salvific history. Beyond this, however, faith in the Incarnation concretely determines the nature and essence of individual Christian existence. What positions can individual Christians adopt vis-à-vis the event that is referred to as “Incarnation” or “hypostatic union”? What meaning does the hypostatic union have for the concrete existence of our faith?

Rahner, as shown above, understands the event of the Incarnation as the climax and ultimate foundation of God's relationship to humankind. In this event, the human reality as God has created it, human nature, has received God's promise that it is invited into union with God. In this sense, Jesus' humanity, having been adopted by the divine Logos, becomes the necessary mediation for humanity's union with God. As Augustine says about this relationship between Creation and Incarnation (“*assumendo creat, creando assumit*”), God creates human nature by accepting it as His own reality, and vice versa: God assumes human nature as his own reality by creating it.

In the teaching of Chalcedon that divine nature and human nature are united “without confusion or change, without division or separation” in the person of the Logos, we often understand this human nature only in an abstract way. According to Rahner, however, one should not forget to grasp it quite concretely as the human reality of Jesus. For Jesus was a distinct and free subject who throughout his life stood before God in faith and worship. His faith in God was permeated not only by prayer and the sacrifice of his life, by his dealing with humankind, by his fortune and misfortune, but also by the death which he freely accepted in ultimate obedience and love of God. In resurrecting this Jesus, God raised this creaturely existence to immortal glory and endowed it with the most blessed validity.

The event of the Resurrection, then, signifies that Jesus' person and earthly life are raised to God's eternal glory. Jesus' person as a historic existence is constituted by all his deeds among humankind. The person

¹² *Foundations*, Chapter VI, 305-311; also “The Eternal Significance of the Humanity of Jesus for our Relationship with God,” in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Volume III (Baltimore: Helicon Press/London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 35-46.

Jesus is he who has lived out his life in freedom. His whole earthly life is now exalted and transfigured, and as such forms his eternal life. According to the Pauline metaphor of the resurrection body, the person Jesus as it is constituted by innerworldly deeds among humankind is like a seed that, owing to God's creative intervention, has brought fruit.

In this Jesus, God has irrevocably promised Himself as a gift to humankind. Thus God no longer remains in the absolutely inaccessible distance of transcendence, the destination of transcendental longing, but gives Himself in this tangible closeness and intimacy. Jesus is quoted as saying: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). We know who God is when we see Jesus near us, when we listen to him and touch him. By meeting Jesus, we meet God. Jesus' person, deeds, and words as we encounter them concretely impart to us the invisible God.

Therefore the definition of Chalcedon speaks not only of the Jesus who once lived historically, and the mediation of salvation by his humanity is not confined to his historically limited life. No, Jesus as the resurrected Lord remains with us beyond the temporal-spatial condition and continues to impart God to us. We honor and serve God through him, with him, and in him, our Lord. In our praise and service of God we Christians turn always and everywhere to this concrete person Jesus as the Lord and mediator. We turn in faith to Jesus, who shares our human nature, who bears our suffering and our sorrows, our happiness and our joy with us. This is the "incarnatory structure" of the Christian faith.

In other words: if we turn at all to God "in the name of Jesus" or "in Jesus Christ," his humanity has for us the eternal significance of mediation. This is the reason why Christian spirituality always reflects and meditates on Jesus' concrete person, deeds, and words as we know them through the Holy Scripture. Similarly, in the teachings of the mystics who have experienced the intimate closeness of God, the contemplation of Jesus' concrete humanity remains indispensable for an approach to God. This creates a manifest distinction between Christian mysticism and other mysticisms. While Hinduist and Buddhist mysticism, for example, stress the experience of being absolutely transcendent beyond all visible objects and concepts, Christian mysticism does not admit an unmediated experience of God without the mediation of the concrete humanity of Jesus.

The same holds true without modification in the "visio beatifica" of humans' ultimate consummation. The salvation of humanity, for which Christianity hopes, is the immediacy of God realized through Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus. The words, "no one knows the Father except the Son

and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt. 11:27) and “When he looks at me he sees the one who sent me” (Jn 12:45) are valid not only in our innerworldly life, but also in eternal life. For us, the Logos will always remain Christ.

As Rahner observed, traditional Western theology has often neglected the reflection on the significance of Jesus’ humanity. But the faith relation toward Jesus’ humanity seems to be commensurate with the religiosity of the Japanese, who often relate to God through concrete objects rather than through abstract concepts. This reflection should therefore not be overlooked in the process of the inculturation of the Christian faith. This will perhaps prepare the way for further investigation into the mediating figures in other religions, for instance into the vows of Amida. The Christians in Japan are assigned to explore different forms of religious worship and piety and to classify them in the right order of adoration and veneration (from “*dulia*” for the numinous that is not divine to “*latria*” for God in the Catholic tradition).

Conclusion

In the above paragraphs, I have attempted to take up three of the theological subjects with which Karl Rahner grappled—the concept of original universal revelation, the transcendental understanding of the Incarnation, and the eternal salvific significance of Jesus’ humanity—in order to derive from them and to unfold a few serviceable suggestions for challenges and assignments. I am well aware that they are only short, sketchy accounts and questions for future theology. Nonetheless I hope that they may constitute an appeal to Christians in Japan for further reflection about how to take intellectually honest responsibility the Christian faith in a situation of religious pluralism.