

KARL RAHNER ON THE DEATH OF CHRIST

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Karl Rahner is one of the most popular and influential voices in Roman Catholicism today. He is a prolific writer with wide acceptance and a description of the direction in which he is headed gives some indication as to the likely direction of future Catholicism.

The death of Christ is the center of one of the most crucial and important doctrines of Christianity. Rahner's teaching on this subject is highly significant. He states: "The cross of the Lord is and remains the fork in the road of world history."¹ With these words Rahner suggests something of his estimation of the death of Christ. The purpose of this essay is to examine Karl Rahner's many references to the Cross and to give some critical evaluation of them.

In his *On the Theology of Death*² and also in the *Theological Dictionary*³ before the meaning of the death of Christ is discussed a basic theology of death is elaborated. Death is considered as an event concerning man as a whole and as the consequence of sin. After this preliminary study Rahner examines the salvific meaning of the death of Christ.

1. THE CLIMACTIC EVENT—DEATH

In the first part of his book on the theology of death, Rahner considers death as the decisive event for sinful man effecting the whole of man. Man is a totality, a union of nature and person. It is man's nature to exist antecedent to his free personal decision and subject to the necessary laws of material beings. On the other hand, man is a person spiritually free and able to make decisions. Thus death is at once a natural and a personal event.

Traditionally, human death has been described as the separation of the soul from the body. This is a description of death rather than a definition as it says nothing of death as a personal and specifically human event. A definition of death must not only include the separation of the soul from the body but also it must express the effects of death on the soul itself as well as death as the ultimate and definitive act of a person.

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1. Karl Rahner. *Spiritual Exercises*. Trs. by Kenneth Baker. New York: Herder and Herder, 1965. p. 234.

2. Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1961.

3. Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*. Ed. by Cornelius Ernst, Trs. by Richard Strachan, New York: Herder and Herder, 1965.

According to Rahner, when the soul leaves the body it does not lose its relationship to the material. Following Thomistic philosophy, Rahner argues that the soul after death retains a transcendental relationship to the body which it possessed in life and which it will one day possess again in the final resurrection. To this point few Christians would want to differ with Rahner. However, his next point is a delicate one for he seeks to travel between the doctrines of pantheism and immortality.

Rahner maintains that the relationship of the soul to the material world is more than the relationship of a soul to its body. In death, the soul becomes not acosmic, but pancosmic.⁴ Rahner writes:

Obviously this pancosmic relationship, which the soul always possesses, and to which it opens out in death, cannot be understood as meaning that at death the entire world becomes the "body" of this particular soul precisely in the way in which its own body was its own. The pancosmic relation does not imply a substantial informing of the world in its space-time structure by the soul. . . . Nor, of course, is it a case of the omnipresence of the soul in the whole cosmos. . . . Such a relation of the soul to the world, if it is not exaggerated into a repetition of its earlier relationship to its own body, might imply that the soul, by surrendering its limited bodily structure in death, becomes open towards the universe and, in some way, a co-determining factor of the universe precisely in the latter's character as the ground of the personal life of other spiritual corporeal beings. The individual person, once rendered pancosmic through death, by this real ontological and open relation to the whole cosmos, might come to have a direct influence within the world.⁵

This quotation illustrates the philosophical and speculative character of Rahner's writings, as well as the theological emphasis. Rahner here has gone beyond the revelation of Scripture. Scripture gives no indication that human beings after death, directly influence the course of this world. The analogy of Christ influencing the world today is insufficient grounds to support this idea. It is not valid to reason "that the moral quality of each individual human life, when consummated before God, becomes co-responsible for his attitude towards the world and towards all other individuals; in a somewhat similar sense, the individual person, once rendered pancosmic through death. . . might come to have a direct influence within the world."⁶ This may be reasonable but Scripture, in contrast, places the emphasis on the person having fellowship with God after death, not with the world. It speaks of a place separated from this world, a purer, and happier location—heaven (Rev. 21, John 14:2). It speaks of Christians belonging not to this world but to the commonwealth of heaven and thus they are pilgrims and strangers while here

4. Karl Rahner, *Death, op. cit.*, p. 21.

5. Karl Rahner, *Death, op. cit.*, p. 21-23.

6. Karl Rahner, *Death, op. cit.*, p. 23.

(Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:13-16; 13-14). Rahner would not deny this as is seen from the article on "heaven" in the *Theological Dictionary*⁷ but apparently he has not allowed the Scriptural statements to curtail his speculations.

One of the emphases which is important to Rahner is his stress on death as a personal act, something which a man interiorly performs.⁸ Death is not only the end of the soul's self affirmation, not only an experience passively suffered but also "an active consummation from within brought about by the person himself, a maturing self-realization which embodies the result of what man has made of himself during life, the achievement of total self-possession."⁹ Death is continually present in a living person both as a biological fact and as an act of human freedom, "Man is a tension of person and nature and by this tension he is obliged, i.e., forced, to come to terms with death freely, to face it freely."¹⁰ This does not mean bowing to brute fact which is the opposite of freedom but rather accepting everything in a person's existence freely and understanding death as fulfillment.

Rahner maintains that death is not only the separation of the soul from the body but also at death a man's state of pilgrimage comes to an end.¹¹ After death a man is no longer journeying to God. He is either separated from God or is in communion with Him. Rahner declares: "the finality of the personal life-decision is an intrinsic constituent of death itself."¹² At death a person's decision for or against Christ is irrevocably secured. A man cannot "change his mind" after death.

Now, the fixation of a person's attitude to Christ in death is considered by Rahner as a man's personal judgment. Death is "a maturing self-realization which embodies the result of what man has made of himself during life, the achievement of total self-possession."¹³ What a man ends up being is his own responsibility. It is his own death and no one else, a personal event as well as simply a biological one.

The article on 'Judgment,' in the *Dictionary* adds further details of the last judgment, personal and general, which are not dealt with in Rahner's book on death.¹⁴ Judgment is not simply the consummation which a person ends up being when he dies. Certainly, after death some men will review their life with shame knowing that they ought to have lived differently. But there is another judgment for all men when they must stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, hear His declaration about their life and receive from Him their just deserts.

7. Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Dictionary, op. cit.*, p. 200.

8. Rahner, *Death, On Martyrdom*, p. 81 f.

9. Rahner, *Death*, p. 31.

10. Robert Ochs, *The Death in Every Now*. New York: Sheed and War, 1969, p. 69.

11. Rahner, *Death, op. cit.*, p. 26.

12. Rahner, *Death, op. cit.*, p. 30.

13. Rahner, *Death, op. cit.*, p. 31.

14. *Theological Dictionary*, p. 244.

2. THE CONSEQUENCE OF SIN—DEATH

Death is not only an event of personal fulfillment freely affirmed by the person as was discussed in the previous section and affecting every aspect of himself. Death is the consequence of sin, the sin of Adam. According to Rahner, if Adam had never sinned, he would never have died but he would have brought his life to a consummation, a perfection which the Christian looks forward to. Therefore the idea of "an end" to life is not connected with death alone and is not an aspect of death which ought not to have been. One comment on this thinking of Rahner is that it is hypothetical—"If Adam had never sinned. . . ." The trouble is Adam did sin and what might have happened otherwise is not certain.

Death has an obscure, hidden character which adds to man's fear of death. In death a man can either place himself in the hands of Christ or can face the experience alone. Death is thus an event of salvation or damnation. The man who experiences the darkness of death is experiencing the consequences of Adam's sin, even if he does not realize it.¹⁵

3. THE REVELATION OF SIN

There is no doubt in Rahner's mind that Christ lived on this earth and that he actually died on the cross. This death was like man's death, for example, Christ descended into hell which according to early belief was a constituent of human death. Rahner writes: "this accords with both Old and New Testament, for such a descent into hell was regarded as an essential element in human death, at least according to the situation in the economy of salvation then prevailing."¹⁶ Gelphi has misread this section of Rahner and refers to the descent as a factor different from human death.¹⁷ The point Rahner is making is that Christ experienced death completely; He experienced the obscurity, the darkness and "the deprivation of personal fulfillment in the void of his bodily dissolution."¹⁸

Sin leads to death while death reveals sin for what it is. Supremely this is seen in the death of Christ. Rahner expresses this well in the words:

The cross of Christ mercilessly reveals what the world hides from itself: that she, as it were, devours the Son of God in the insane blindness of her sin—a sin whose Godless hate is truly set on fire upon contact with the love of God. How could she have even a ray of hope when she kills this man, when she destroys Him and blots Him out right at the point where He came into His own?¹⁹

15. Karl Rahner, ed. *Sacramentum Mundi, An Encyclopedia of Theology*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1969, p. 60.

16. Rahner, *Death*, p. 57.

17. Donald L. Gelphi, *Life and Light, A Guide to the Theology of Karl Rahner*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966, p. 25.

18. Ochs, *The Death in Every Now*, op. cit., p. 84. (cf. *Death*, p. 61.)

19. Rahner, *Exercises*, op. cit., p. 240.

Not only is the sin of man manifest in the Cross of Christ. Here is also seen the love of God. "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Rahner writes "The salvation of the world grows out of the strangely incomprehensible, even paradoxical, unity between the death-dealing revelation of sin which inflicts a terrible paroxysm on God Himself who came into the world in order to destroy death by His own death, and between the ineffable outpouring of His love which did not hesitate to sustain sin and death."²⁰

THE SATISFACTION THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT

This theory of the atonement can be briefly expressed as follows: the sin of man a free creature is an infinite offence as it is an offence against the majesty of God. Man ought to give back the honor he has taken away and because of the insult ought to give back more than he has taken away. In other words, he must make satisfaction for his sin or be punished. But man is unable to make satisfaction for his sins as he already owes God everything including complete obedience and the amount to pay is infinite. Only the Word of God is capable of offering due satisfaction in virtue of his personal dignity and humanity. This he does freely in his death, thereby meriting a great reward which is given in the form of salvation to those for whose sake the Word had become man.

Rahner points out there are good qualities in this theory.²¹ Scripture too sees the redeeming act of Christ in his obedience, his love, in his free acceptance of death. But why is salvation, on this theory, achieved through death? Rahner writes:

Scripture obviously considers this death as redemptive precisely under the characteristics which are proper to death alone and not to any other moral act. It asserts that we were freed and redeemed precisely through the blood which Christ shed for us and through his body which was given for us and it insists that the redeeming act was a bloody sacrifice in the ritual sense, which essentially presupposes the death of the victim. . . . The theory of satisfaction, however, leaves open precisely why we were redeemed through Christ's death.²²

This theory also is weak in that it takes death to be purely a passive experience. Rahner then says: "On this tacit but in reality questionable assumption, the redeeming act of Christ will not reside in His death as such, but only in His patient and obedient submission to the suffering which caused His death, and this does not do justice to the statements of Scripture."²³

20. Rahner, *Exercises, op. cit.*, p. 241.

21. Rahner, *Death*, p. 59.

22. Rahner, *Death*, p. 60.

23. Rahner, *Death*, p. 61.

Another criticism of this theory as popularly explained, is that it is too monotheistic. The act of redemption is directed towards God and need not incorporate any reference to "the fact that the satisfaction was given precisely by the Word incarnate, and not simply by the *Deus-homo*; that therefore one would imagine another divine person as man offering a *satisfactio condigna* to the triune God; and that indeed, we could conceive of such satisfaction even if there were no question of the Trinity as the condition or presupposition at all."²⁴

So Rahner finds the satisfaction theory weak on three important points. It does not make clear why salvation is achieved by the death of Christ. Is it not possible that the perfect moral quality of the life of Christ would be more rewarding than a voluntary death?²⁵ Secondly the theory locates the merit of Christ's act not so much in His death, but in His obedient submission to the cause of death. In both these points death is not really essential and lacks any salvific content. Thirdly, the theory is too monotheistic.

Rahner offers "a slight positive complement" to the satisfaction theory, by applying the conclusions previously discussed on the nature of death.²⁶ When Christ became man he entered life which only reaches its fulfillment by passing through death in all its obscurity. He took upon himself death which is an expression of the fallen state of creation. He enacted death which is the revelation of sin in the world. He did this in absolute liberty. "What was the manifestation of sin, thus becomes, without its darkness being lifted, the contradiction of sin, the manifestation of a 'yes' to the will of the Father."²⁷ Christ's death became the expression and the embodiment of his loving obedience. Yet His greatest act on the cross is not only His "yes" to abandonment and suffering. According to Rahner, it is also His "yes" to the incomprehensibility of God. With love for God, Christ chose to place Himself under the consuming judgment of God and in love accepted that judgment.²⁸

Man's death, seen as his own personal act, extends throughout his life. This being so, "it makes it easier to comprehend how the life and death of Christ in their redemptive significance also form a unity. His life redeems, inasmuch as His death is anologically present in His entire life."²⁹ This statement of Rahner seems to be going beyond the statements of Scripture. New Testament writers were aware that each day

24. Karl Rahner. *Theological Investigations, More Recent Writings*. Tr. by Kevin Smyth, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate,'" Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966, Vol. IV, p. 80.

25. Karl Rahner. *Theological Investigations, God, Christ, Mary and Grace*. Tr. by Cornelius Ernst, "Current Problems in Christology," Vol. I. Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961, p. 190, 193.

26. See p. 2f.

27. Rahner, *Death*, p. 62.

28. Rahner, *Exercises*, p. 238.

29. Rahner, *Death*, p. 62.

death was present in their bodies. Each day they could face the fact that they were approaching the end. For St. Paul the situation was even more acute as there were those who wanted him dead. He wrote "I die every day" (I Cor. 15:31 cf. II Cor. 11:23; Rom. 8:36) and "While we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake" (II Cor. 4:11). Here is a good example of free acceptance and affirmation of death. St. Paul even looked forward to death as it meant fulfillment for him. He wrote "to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). It is these same writers, especially Paul, who emphasize not so much death present in the life of Christ as procuring redemption but the death of Christ at a particular time and place. In fact, it would be consistent with the New Testament approach to argue that if Christ had not died but ascended into heaven, there would be no salvation for man. This is not to say His life was unimportant and without significance. It does mean that the cross is central to Christianity.

Previously Rahner developed the idea that in death man enters into an open, unrestricted relationship to the whole cosmos.³⁰ Applying this to Christ Rahner writes "through Christ's death, his spiritual reality, which he possessed from the beginning, enacted in his life, and brought to consummation in his death, becomes open to the whole world and is inserted into this whole world in its ground as a permanent determination of real ontological kind."³¹ Rahner correctly calls this speculation. Surprisingly he next demythologizes the teaching of the Old Testament and the Creed on "Sheol" in order to gain support for his view. He reasons that the concept of sheol and descent into hell have the idea associated with them of "depth," "underneath," "background" and thus of the "ultimate and deepest level of the reality of the world." Consequently an affirmation of the Old Testament and/or the Creed can be an affirmation that through death Christ established an "open, real ontological relationship to the world in its unity."³² Another way of expressing this is "Through Christ's death the spiritual being which was his from the beginning, and which he gave active expression to in the life that was completed by his death, became open to the whole world, has been inserted into the totality of the world and has become a permanent, ontological modification of the world in its root and ground."³³ These quotations cry out for clarification. Perhaps another could be added before some poignant questions are asked: "Part of the innermost being of the world in what we call Jesus Christ in His life and death, that which was poured forth upon the whole world at the moment when the vessel of His body broke in death and Christ really became, even in His humanity, what of right He always was, the heart of the world, the innermost center of all created being."³⁴

30. See p. 1f.

31. Rahner, *Death*, p. 63.

32. Rahner, *Death*, p. 64.

33. *Dictionary, op. cit.*, "The Death of Christ" p. 118.

34. *Dictionary, op. cit.*, p. 118.

Many problems arise in reading this section of Rahner. One wonders about the relevance of this section to the satisfaction theory and how these ideas make the theory more complete. What is meant by the spiritual being of Christ has become open to the whole world in his death. If this means that through the incarnation and the continuing work of the church the world can now come to know Him in a way unavailable before Calvary, then there is little to dispute, but the sentence goes on to say that Christ has become "a permanent determination of a real ontological kind." If this means that humanity is different because Christ has come and indwells His followers then this is correct. What exactly is meant by the "root and ground" of the world?³⁵ What is the "innermost being of the world" which partly is the life and death of Christ? What is meant by Christ becoming "the heart of the world, the innermost center of all created being?" Are all these expressions synonymous? In what sense does this last expression apply to animals and vegetation? In what sense has the spiritual reality of Christ in his death been "inserted into this whole world in its ground as a permanent determination of real ontological kind"? Does this mean that a devout Buddhist struggling with life problems is in reality struggling with Christ, whom he does not know or does it simply mean that when a person has made a correct, truthful decision about life, then he has taken Christ into consideration.

An example of how Rahner can avoid the Cross in some essays and yet speak about matters which are vitally connected to the Cross according to Scripture, is found in these words:

Anyone therefore, no matter how remote from any revelation formulated in words, who accepts his existence, that is, his humanity—no easy thing!—in quiet patience, or better in faith, hope and love—no matter what he calls them, and accepts it as the mystery which hides itself in the mystery of eternal love and bears life in the womb of death: such a one says yes to something which really is such as his boundless confidence hopes it to be, because God has in fact filled it with the infinite, that is, with Himself, since the Word was made flesh. He says yes to Christ, even when he does not know that he does.³⁶

This is not the good news proclaimed by the Apostles. Similar statements and a definite inclination towards universalism by Rahner could also be quoted.³⁷

CONCLUSION

Rahner puts the emphasis where Scripture does, namely, on the death of Christ being efficacious for the redemption of mankind. This

35. Rahner, ed. *Sacramentum Mundi*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

36. Rahner, *Investigations: On the Theology of the Incarnation*, Vol. IV, p. 119.

37. Rahner, *Investigations: The Comfort of Time*, Vol. III, p. 148. "Thoughts on the possibility of belief today," Vol. V, p. 7, 11, 21. *Spiritual Exercises*, *op. cit.*, p. 241. *Death*, *op. cit.*, p. 60, 67.

is an important emphasis for today as so many would attempt to avoid the Cross of Christ. Rahner sees redemption as something "more than a small repair job."³⁸ Rather, Christ became "himself what was in need of redemption"³⁹ in order that he could redeem. The Lord Jesus became completely and in every sense, a man except without sin so that he could achieve redemption by his death. Rahner is correct in maintaining that the sufferings of Christ preceding His death was not to be highlighted and so describe death as a release from these sufferings. The Scriptures state the sufferings of Christ in the most matter of fact manner with little attempt to stir the emotions with gory descriptions. A right balance must be achieved between His sufferings and His death so as not to give the sufferings salvific quality.⁴⁰ It was not His fine moral life, not His horrible sufferings, but His death which was effective.

It follows then that a theology of death is necessary. Rahner stresses death as a consequence of sin, as does the Bible (Rom. 6:23). For the person in whom sin reigns death affects the totality of that person, physical as well as spiritual. When Christ became sin, took upon himself the sin of the world, "bore in His own body our sins" (I Pet. 2:24) what happened is difficult to explain. Rahner expresses it thus:

The characteristic feature of his death is not that in some vague and general sense he died lovingly, self-sacrificing, **obedient in the ordinary sense**, that is, in which any other event might just as well have been effected and endured in the right spirit and with the right attitude. What truly distinguished His death, is that death, as the manifestation of sin, became in Him an expression of grace; the emptiness of man the advent of God's plenitude (which death certainly cannot of itself be).⁴¹

The New Testament refers to the death of Christ when it uses the term "the Cross" (Phil. 2:8). It is through the Cross that the Christian has been reconciled to God (Eph. 2:16). The Cross occurred at a particular time and place. Rahner's idea of the death of Christ being present throughout His life thus incorporating the moral quality of His life with His death is not taught by Scripture. It weakens the Cross from being the one sufficient act of redemption and empties it of its power (I Cor. 1:17).

An aspect of death largely neglected by Rahner is found often in the writings of the Apostle John. For the Christian, death has become incidental. He lives now in this world in fellowship with him who said he was "The Life" (John 14:6). He has already passed from the state of death to the state of life (John 5:24). The Lord of Life can say

38. Rahner, *Investigations*, Vol. I, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

39. Rahner, *Investigations*, Vol. I, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

40. Rahner, *Investigations*, Vol. IV, *op. cit.*, "Dogmatic Questions on Easter," p. 127.

41. Rahner, *Death*, *op. cit.*, p. 70. See also p. 8f, 20f.

authoritatively to his follower that he will never see death (John 8; 51, cf. 1 John 3:14). Scripture places the emphasis not so much on accepting freely the presence of death but on accepting the free gift of eternal life (Rom. 6:23).

When Rahner leaves the clear statements of Scripture, he becomes extremely speculative. Previously vague and perhaps pantheistic tendencies were pointed out in Rahner's description of the death of Christ. In fact, with regard to the article on "Christmas," it can be asked "What is there in this whole article which is peculiarly Christian besides the word 'Christmas' and the phrase 'the birth of the Lord'?"⁴²

It appears from a survey of the writings of Karl Rahner that he, like so many of the foremost theologians of the Roman Church is interpreting traditional theology with universalistic and pantheistic tendencies. He is highly speculative; frequently starting with Scripture but developing the truth beyond the clear statements of Scripture.

APPENDIX*

Karl Rahner was born at Freiburg in Breisgau in 1904. At the age of eighteen he entered the novitiate of the North German province of the Society of Jesus, at Feldkirch, Vorarlberg, Austria. On December 19, 1936, he graduated doctor of theology at Innsbruck.

His doctoral dissertation, still unpublished, is on the subject of the Church's origin from the wound in the side of Christ as portrayed in the writings of the Fathers. A bibliography of Rahner's works, which includes reprints and translations, lists over two thousand entries. These works are philosophical, theological and devotional in character.

During the second world war he was known for his pastoral concern for the people of Vienna and Lower Bavaria. Today, Karl Rahner is professor of dogmatic theology and the history of dogma at the University of Munster. He is editor of *Concilium*, an international journal of theology while serving as a member of the international commission of theologians, appointed by Pope Paul. In 1969, he visited the U.S. and received an honorary degree from Yale University.

*Vorglimler, Herbert. *Karl Rahner. His Life, Thought and Works*. Trs. by Edward Edward Quinn. London: Burns and Oates. 1965.

42. Rahner, *Investigations*: "Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas." Vol. III, p. 24.