

“So as not to Despise God’s Grace” Re-assessing Rahner’s Idea of the “Anonymous Christian”

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Abstract. — *Rahner’s idea of the “anonymous Christian” is the best known, most controversial and most often misunderstood aspect of his theology. It is important to re-visit the idea because it is not an “optional extra” in his work but rather represents the entire dynamic of his thought.*

The idea of the “anonymous Christian” is located in two contexts: wider theological discourse, and Rahner’s own theology of grace. In response to criticism that the idea relativises and erodes the significance of the historical Christ event it is argued that Rahner re-locates, rather than relativises the incarnation and cross within the totality of God’s plan of salvation.

Accusations that the idea of the “anonymous Christian” adversely affected the Church’s missionary activity, and that the terminology is inappropriate, are also considered. While it is accepted that the terminology is best jettisoned, it is argued that the substance of the idea is found in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, teaching Rahner himself influenced.

It is argued that Rahner’s unpacking of the absolute nature of God’s salvific will serves as an important corrective both to contemporary Church documents and to theologies, which, in an effort to underscore the uniqueness and indispensable nature of the Church’s role in God’s plan of salvation, tend to underplay the presence of divine grace in other religions and in the lives of non-Christians. At the same time, Rahner’s idea is a challenge to a culture marked by indifference, a position which according to Rahner’s theology, cannot be considered salvific.

I. Introduction

It is important to re-consider Rahner’s idea of the “anonymous Christian” for a number of reasons. The first is that the “anonymous Christian” is perhaps the best known and most disputed idea in his theology, and is frequently taken by liberals and conservatives alike as shorthand for what they consider respectively best or worst about Karl Rahner’s work. Where this happens, isolated sentences of Rahner’s are

often taken out of context and made into slogans to serve particular ecclesio-political purposes, and the theological substance of what Rahner is saying is seldom distinguished from the form and language in which he is saying it. When interpreting Rahner, context is key. This is especially true of *Theological Investigations*, as well as of the many interviews Rahner gave,¹ where he is usually addressing specific questions in particular contexts. It should be noted that almost all specific references to the “anonymous Christian” occur in one or other of these settings.²

Another reason for re-considering the idea of the “anonymous Christian” is that the heat has gone out of the debate between the extremes in Catholic theology, and a more balanced and accurate evaluation of the usefulness of the concept may now be possible. Why the heat is gone out of the debate is itself debatable. It could be because “Rahnerians” and “Balthasarians,” if we may speak of such types, are simply not talking to each other anymore and that an unhealthy caesura, a silent schism, pervades in Catholic theological circles. It could also be that the current predominance of one school over the other in leadership echelons in the Church restricts dialogue. On the other hand, the absence of heated debate could be a sign that younger theologians are more willing to seek points of confluence than of divergence in the legacies of the theological “giants” of the last century, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar to name but two. Thomas Krenski notes the work of a new generation of theologians that is attempting, as he sees it in the footsteps of Karl Lehmann, to bring Rahner and Balthasar into healthy dialogue with each other.³ No doubt post-modern unease with apparent all-embracing theological systems makes a certain theological ‘cherry-picking’ possible and perhaps even inevitable. In this regard, Rahner’s self-confessed “dilettantism” and “eclecticism,” often considered as a weakness but which he himself viewed as unavoidable for contemporary theologians, could in fact be a strength.⁴

1. See *Karl Rahner, Im Gespräch*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (München: Kösel Verlag, 1982- 1983); *Faith in a Wintry Season*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, 2 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

2. Beginning in 1960 with “Poetry and the Christian,” chap. 15 in *Theological Investigations*, 4 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966).

3. Thomas Krenski, “Aus Opportunismus auf beiden Schultern getragen?,” *Weg und Weite: Festschrift für Karl Lehmann*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 2001) 400.

4. See *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 18-19; Karl Rahner, *Vor dem Geheimnis Gottes den Menschen Verstehen: Karl Rahner zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Karl Lehmann (Munich: Schnell und Steiner, 1984) 114-115.

A third reason for re-assessing the idea of the “anonymous Christian” is perhaps the most compelling. The issue Rahner sought to address, namely, how Christians account for the presence and activity of God’s grace outside the visible confines of the Church and its sacramental life, is a perennial one for theology, and will always be fundamental in determining the Church’s practical relationship to non-believers, to those faithful to other religious belief systems, and to those who would consider themselves non-practising or even former Christians.

One example of Rahner being drawn into contemporary discussion on these issues is provided by Archbishop Angelo Amato of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in a lecture delivered earlier this year at the Lateran University’s commemorative conference for Rahner. Amato noted the pluralistic current in the theology of religions today that reduces Christ to one saviour among many, as represented by the work of the English Presbyterian, John Hick and the American Catholic, Paul Knitter (his examples). Their position, according to Amato, reflects the Kantian bias that God as such, the absolute, cannot reveal himself in history. He suggests that Rahner’s *Foundations of Christian Faith*, which stresses the unique experience of Christ in history as a necessary pre-condition for speculative theological reflection, can be employed to reject their view. However, this, he contends, would require “setting aside Rahner’s idea of the anonymous Christian.”⁵

It is true that Rahner himself considered *Foundations of Christian Faith* to contain his most important theological contribution.⁶ But is there a discontinuity between Rahner’s earlier writings and *Foundations of Christian Faith*? A recent work by Patrick Burke notes that in *Foundations* Rahner stresses more than previously the intrinsic priority of grace coming to expression in the church and the sacraments but argues that there is “the same fundamental structure” and a “clear continuity” in Rahner’s thought, albeit at times a continuity with regard to “unresolved tensions.”⁷

5. See John Allen, Jr., “The Word from Rome,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 12, 2004.

6. *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 39.

7. Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner* (New York: Fordham, 2002) 239, 255, 283-284. For a refutation of John Hick’s position that employs Rahner’s idea of the “anonymous Christian,” see Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992) 171.

The other question is whether or not the idea of “the anonymous Christian” can simply be “set aside,” as though it were in some way peripheral to Rahner’s work. Aidan Nicholls remarks in a recent essay that re-examines Balthasar’s criticisms of “anonymous Christianity” that concepts such as the “anonymous Christian” and “anonymous Christianity” “exhibit in a way no others do the inherent theological dynamic of Rahner’s thought.”⁸

The jury is still out with regard to the lasting significance, if any, of Rahner’s contribution to the question of the possibility of salvation for non-Christians and the Church’s relationship to non-Christian religions. In addition, account must also be taken of the fact that in Europe, the context for these deliberations has altered since Rahner’s death. Up to and including the last month of his life, Rahner was involved in debate and discussion with convinced atheists motivated by Marxist ideology.⁹ In terms of inter-religious dialogue, Rahner’s focus was mostly the religions of the east. Today, Christians in Europe have to contend more with religious indifference than convinced atheism, and with the prevalence of Islam than, say, the influence of Buddhism or Hinduism. Can Rahner’s idea of the “anonymous Christian” help the Church and theology to shape its response to these new realities?

That is the question to which this essay hopes to contribute at least a partial answer. In order to do so, we will begin by locating the idea of the “anonymous Christian” within the wider theological discussion on the matter at the time Rahner evolved the idea. We will also situate the concept within Rahner’s overall theological project, and especially his theology of grace. It will be argued that the idea of the “anonymous Christian” indeed exhibits the inherent theological dynamic of Rahner’s thought.

We will then explore three principal objections to the idea of the “anonymous Christian.” The most serious we associate primarily with Hans Urs von Balthasar, namely, that Rahner relativises and erodes the significance of the historical Christ event. According to Balthasar, Rahner’s account of the dynamics of grace means that the historical Christ-event can only be the “making known” of salvation in history and not its “bringing about.” The cross is robbed of its redemptive efficacy, and the difference between being a Christian in name and being a nameless one is no longer critical. In response to this objection, it will be argued

8. Aidan Nichols, “Rahner and Balthasar: The Anonymous Christianity Debate Revisited,” chap. VI in *Beyond the Blue Glass, Catholic Essays on Faith and Culture*. Vol. I (London: The Saint Austin Press, 2002).

9. *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 128-137.

that Rahner does not relativise the specific, historical Christ-event but rather relocates it and brings it into right relationship with the history of salvation and God’s eternal salvific will.

The second objection needing consideration is the way in which Rahner’s idea of the “anonymous Christian” is understood to have undermined the Church’s missionary activity. Here it will be argued in the first instance that it is not Rahner’s idea in itself, but the way in which it was misinterpreted and misused that seemed to undermine mission. More fundamentally, however, it will be suggested that it was the re-discovery of the Church’s own authentic teaching on salvation outside the Church that undermined a certain kind of missionary activity, activity which with hindsight we recognise as having been founded upon an unwarranted and theologically misguided pessimism regarding the possibility of salvation of non-Christians. Rahner’s theology merely contributed, along with the work of others, to the re-emergence of the Church’s hope regarding the salvation of all, as we find articulated in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

Finally, perhaps the easiest objection to deal with relates to concerns that the idea of the “anonymous Christian” is offensive to non-Christians. Hans Küng was among those to have voiced this particular objection and specific responses from Rahner indicate his awareness of the limitations of the terminology.

The third and concluding part of the paper will consider if the idea of the “anonymous Christian” has any continuing value both for Church and for theology.

II. Making Sense of God’s Desire

1. *Rahner Joins the Debate*

Rahner was not the first theologian in modern times to address the issue of salvation outside the Church, or even the first to use the term “anonymous,”¹⁰ and the criticism his articulation of the idea received seems in retrospect disproportionate. Already in the 1930s, de Lubac had already begun to consider the implications for explicit Christianity of *un surnaturel anonymement*, and *un christianisme implicite*.¹¹ A significant

10. Bert van der Heijden, *Karl Rahner: Darstellung und Kritik seiner Grundpositionen* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1973) mentions the use of the term by Pierre-Lambert Goossens and Auguste Dechamps around the time of the First Vatican Council.

11. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1947) 183. Coffele refers to the development from Blondel to de Lubac to Rahner. See Gianfranco Coffele,

landmark was the letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston in 1949, which, following the teaching of *Mystici Corporis* (1943), condemned Fr Leonard Feeney's restrictive interpretation of the formula *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* and emphasised the possibility of a *votum implicitum baptismi*.¹² In Protestant theology, Karl Barth was speaking of the need for "actual" Christians to come to terms with a *christianus designatus* or *christianus in spe*,¹³ and Paul Tillich of the existence of a "latent Church" and of "Christian humanism."¹⁴

Rahner's first specific article on the issue appeared in 1950, when he speaks of "Christian pagans" and "pagan Christians."¹⁵ The Christian path to God is "safer and shorter," Rahner says, but Christians by their poor witness must bear some responsibility for those who "walk in darkness." In 1954, Rahner addressed the topic of "The Christian among Unbelieving Relations." Here he tried to get the balance right between on the one hand stressing the importance of Christian faith and practice, and on the other, not allowing that same faith to be a source of anxiety with regard to the eternal fate of non-believing family members and friends. Rahner stressed that Christians are called to hope for salvation for themselves as well as for others. All people, "including the good Christians, enter silently into the darkness of God, and no mortal eye follows them there on their way, no earthly ear listens to the judgment of their eternity. But this uncertainty can be contained within the hope for all."¹⁶ Here Rahner attempted, with typical pastoral sensitivity, to reconcile teaching on the necessity of faith and of the Church for salvation, with

Apologetica e Teologia Fondamentale da Blondel a de Lubac (Roma: Edizioni Studium, 2004) 168.

12. "To gain eternal salvation it is not always required that a person be incorporated in reality (*reapse*) as a member of the Church, but it is required that he belong to it at least in desire and longing (*voto et desiderio*). It is not always necessary that this desire be explicit, as it is with catechumens. When a man is invincibly ignorant, God also accepts an implicit desire, so called because it is contained in the good disposition of soul by which a man wants his will to be conformed to God's will." Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston, Aug 8, 1949, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. J. Neuner and J. Dupuis (London: Collins, 1982) 240-242.

13. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/3* (Zurich: Zollikon, 1959) 927.

14. Paul Tillich, *Begegnungen: Paul Tillich über Sich Selbst und Andere*, Gesamelte Werke, 12 (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1971).

15. "K. Rahner, 'Die heidnischen Christen und die Christlichen Heiden – Matt. 8,1-13'," *Glaube, der die Erde liebt: Christliche Besinnung im Alltag der Welt* (Freiburg: Herder, 1966). English translation: Karl Rahner, *Everyday Faith* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968).

16. Karl Rahner, "The Christian among Unbelieving Relations," chap. 23 in *Theological Investigations*, 3 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967) 361-362.

the equally important obligation for Christians to refrain from judgment and to hope for the salvation of all.

Rahner’s first explicit use of the term “anonymous” occurred in a short essay entitled ‘Poetry and the Christian’, published in 1960:

There is such a thing as anonymous Christianity. There are men who think that they are not Christians, but who are in the grace of God. And hence there is an anonymous humanism inspired by grace, which thinks that it is no more than human. We Christians can understand it, better than it does itself. When we affirm as a doctrine of faith that human morality even in the natural sphere needs the grace of God to be steadfast in its great task, we recognise as Christians that such humanism, wherever it displays its true visage and wherever it exists, even outside professed Christianity, is a gift of the grace of God and a tribute to the redemption, even though it as yet knows nothing of this. Why then should we not love it? To pass it by indifferently would be to despise the grace of God.¹⁷

The idea of the “anonymous Christian” rests on the conviction that every human being has the possibility of accepting or rejecting God’s free, unmerited and forgiving self-communication. This possibility is realised in selfless acts of love, truth and goodness, acts which, being grounded in God who is Love, are implicit acts of acceptance of God’s gracious self-offer. These implicit acts of acceptance take place in the daily struggle to let go into the mystery of life in all its incalculability, unpredictability and unknowability. As salvation is realised in history in and through the Christ event, people who make such implicit acts of faith may be referred to as “anonymous *Christians*.”

2. *Why the Attention?*

The substance of what Rahner said seems hardly different from what had already been stated by the Holy Office in 1949, proposed by de Lubac, Barth, Tillich and others, and which found expression in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.¹⁸ Even Balthasar subsequently made a remarkable defence of salvation outside the Church.¹⁹ So why did the idea of the “anonymous Christianity” receive so much attention?

17. *Theological Investigations*, 4 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966) 366.

18. See especially reference to degrees of incorporation and relationship to the People of God in *Lumen Gentium* 14-16; also *Gaudium et Spes* 21-22.

19. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “that all men be saved”?* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1988).

In the first instance, because of the frequency with which Rahner spoke about the topic and the exceptional influence he enjoyed as a theologian.²⁰ The idea of the “anonymous Christian” also received prominence pastorally because it addressed a matter of genuine concern to Christians. Another reason is because it was controversial. Whereas in the original German, and in the sense Rahner intended it, “anonymous” connotes a neutral “hiddenness” or absence of recognition, in English, it tends to have sinister implications and can imply deliberate withholding of acknowledgment. The idea also introduced into wider discussion the claim that Christianity understands non-believers better than they understand themselves, which, though seldom so bluntly stated, is a consequence of the Church’s authentic teaching, not just of Rahner’s theology. However, some people, perhaps understandably, heard this as absolutist and imperialistic.

There is a more important explanation for the prominence that the idea of the “anonymous Christian” received, and it stems from Rahner’s distinctive understanding of the theologian’s vocation. The Second Vatican Council deliberately left open the matter of precisely how non-Christians experience salvific grace, and many theologians were content to leave it at that.²¹ But for Rahner, it is precisely when a matter such as this is left open that a theologian comes into his or her own. The theologian’s task is not merely to explicate doctrines, as Rahner sees it. The theologian has a responsibility to imagine new possibilities and explore new horizons. This is because theology concerns itself with a relationship, not just concepts.²² Its subject matter is the human divine encounter. Whereas concepts can be static, relationships are always dynamic.

The relationship, not just in theory but in practice, between the God of Jesus Christ and non-Christians, and especially the role played

20. There are four references to the “anonymous Christian” to be found in publications in 1960. We have already referred to the essay “Poetry and the Christian.” That same year, Rahner also refers in an essay entitled “The Theology of Power,” *Theological Investigations*, 4, 391-409, to “a Christianity which remains as it were anonymous.” M. Boutin, “Anonymous Christianity: A Paradigm for Interreligious Encounter?,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983) 602-609, notes that because of its more tentative nature, this could be the earliest reference. In “The Sacramental Basis for the Role of the Layman in the Church,” *Theological Investigations*, 8 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971) 51-74, reference is made to the baptised Christian being sent to “anonymous Christians” (63). Finally in 1960, when addressing the topic “On Truthfulness” at a conference in Passau, Rahner also referred to “anonymous Christianity ... a real Christianity which has so far simply failed to be recognised for what it really is...” *Theological Investigations*, 7 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967) 255. In all, there are sixteen references to “anonymous Christianity” in *Theological Investigations*.

21. As in *Ad Gentes*, 7.

22. See William Dych, *Karl Rahner* (London/New York: Continuum, 1992) 22.

in this relationship by non-Christian religions, was of concern to Karl Rahner. Even as the Council was being convened Rahner was calling (1960) for the recognition of other religions as containing grace-filled elements, and as “lawful” religions in the sense that they play a God-given, positive role in the mediation of grace and salvation to those who for various reasons either have not arrived or cannot arrive at an understanding and acceptance of Christianity’s absolute role in God’s salvific plan.²³ This was decidedly controversial then, and remains so to this day, partly because the Second Vatican Council is ambiguous on the issue.²⁴ Some conciliar texts convey the view that God reaches people in one of only two ways: either through the explicit ministry of the Church, or directly through the activity of the Holy Spirit.²⁵ Other passages seem to leave open to religions the possibility of some role in God’s salvific plan.²⁶ The most we can say with certainty regarding the Council’s position is, as Francis A. Sullivan puts it, that it “does not hesitate to acknowledge the divine origin of some elements in those religions.”²⁷ This was insufficient for Rahner.

Another example of Rahner, characteristically, as Balthasar would see it, stretching (*ausweiten*) the boundaries of Church teaching, relates to the issue of whether or not indefinite non-culpable atheism is a possibility. Could a non-believer live in “invincible ignorance” long-term? Scholastic theology thought not, given the clear and unambiguous nature of God’s knowability. Long-term non-believers were assumed to incur at least some guilt because of their obstinacy in refusing to accept the Gospel. However, surprisingly, Pius IX, in *Singulari Quadam* (1854) acknowledged that the “natural differences of peoples, lands, native talents and so many other factors” make it difficult to set limits to this ignorance and assume culpability in the unbeliever. The Second Vatican Council was, in Rahner’s view, deliberately silent on the matter. It spoke only of “those who without any fault do not know anything about Christ

23. “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” chap. 6 in *Theological Investigations*, 5 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966) 115-134.

24. See, for example *Dominus Iesus*, 7 (2000) which distinguishes more forcefully than any conciliar text between Christian “theological faith,” and the “belief” (*credulitas*) other religions can inspire, which is (merely) the “sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God...” For a critique, see Avery Dulles, *Pro Ecclesia* 10, n. 1, 5 (Winter 2001).

25. *Ad Gentes*, 7; *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

26. Examples: *Gaudium et Spes*, 41, *Lumen Gentium*, 17, *Nostra Aetate*, 2. For a thorough presentation and interrogation of these texts see Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 164-170.

27. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 167.

and his Church” and set no limits to how long they could remain in that state.²⁸ This led Rahner to conclude that

it is safe to say that the Council ... actually assumed ... that it is possible for a normal adult to hold an explicit atheism for a long period of time – even to life’s end without this implying moral blame on the part of such an unbeliever.²⁹

This meant that it could be possible to live in a Christian milieu and still not recognise Christ and the Church as the ordinary, God-given means of salvation, without being responsible for one’s ignorance. However, it also made it all the more urgent to account for *how* non-believers could accept and respond to God through Christ, and explain it in a way that it did not undermine explicit faith and practice. Rahner was well placed to provide such an explanation because of his distinctive theology of grace, which we will now briefly elaborate.

3. *What Is Distinctive about Rahner’s Theology of Grace?*

Those who have not been formed in the world of manual or neo-Scholastic theology might not realise how much is owed to Rahner’s work, work which was always as courageous as it was ground-breaking. Along with de Lubac and the French school of *la nouvelle théologie*, Rahner was concerned about extrinsicism: God’s grace understood as structurally superimposed on human nature with the emphasis on its otherness and remoteness, an emphasis intended to protect its gratuitousness. But what others saw as peripheral, Rahner saw as lying at the heart of the problem. The principal practical effect of extrinsicism was that grace was understood to be beyond consciousness, lying completely outside human experience. In this view,

Supernatural grace is a reality which we know about from the teaching of the faith, but which is completely outside our experience and can never make its presence felt in our conscious personal life.³⁰

Christians were entirely dependent for an authoritative view of their state before God upon teaching concerning their faith. Unless among the very few chosen and destined by God to be mystics, they were not expected to experience love and intimacy in their relationship with God,

28. *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

29. *Theological Investigations*, 9 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972) 146-148. See *Gaudium et Spes*, 19-21, 22; *Lumen Gentium*, 14, 16, and *Ad Gentes*, 7.

30. Karl Rahner, “Nature and Grace, Dilemmas in the Modern Church,” in *Karl Rahner, Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1992) 97. The article was written in 1957.

which in any case had more the character of a contract than a relationship. Church teaching was considered the only reliable marker with regard to where Christians stood. The sacraments mechanically and imperceptibly transported people back into states of grace from which their sins, usually equally as mechanically and imperceptibly, had removed them. The personal faith experience of Christians carried no authority, and was even viewed as deceptive and suspect. It followed that the religious experience of non-Christians was of even less consequence.

Considered from this perspective, Rahner’s theology of grace was quite subversive. What was needed, according to Rahner, was

... to “experience” the reality of grace in our own existence where we experience ourselves; we want to see and feel its power at work in us. And in accordance with modern tendencies, we shall not only want to see grace as it concerns the individual, but also consider more explicitly its ecclesiological aspects, grace in the history of salvation not only within the church, the possibility of grace and its highest manifestations in the world of non-Christian religions.³¹

The effect of Rahner’s work was to let the genie of grace out of the neo-scholastic bottle:

Just because grace is *free and unmerited* this does not mean that it is rare (theology has been led astray for too long already by the tacit assumption that grace would no longer be grace if God became too free with it).³²

In retrospect one has to ask if at least some of the opposition Rahner’s theology of grace encountered was resistance to the empowerment of people with regard to their personal relationship with God, with a consequent loss of power for those in church authority. Loss would also have been experienced by those addicted to tidy systems of thought, ill at ease with the messiness of human-divine encounter. There may also have been resistance to having to take personal responsibility for seeking and responding to God in the uncharted and often choppy waters of one’s quotidian existence at a distance from the safe haven of doctrinal statements.

The texts we have been considering are from the mid-1950s, by which time Rahner’s theology of grace had already developed a clear sense of direction and he was established enough to be able to speak forthrightly and with confidence. Yet his earliest academic work on the theology of grace, lecture notes for the tract *De Gratia Christi*, from Innsbruck in 1937, reveal most clearly the distinctiveness of his approach.

31. Rahner, “Nature and Grace,” 100.

32. *Ibid.*, 104.

As Rahner understood it, one could not first account for the salvation of Christians, then subsequently append a second or substitute plan of salvation for those outside the Church. As Batlogg, Rulands et al show in a recent important work, Rahner was considerably out of line with his contemporaries as well as his predecessors by beginning the tract on grace with a clear statement of God's salvific intention for *all* people: *Existit in Deo voluntas obligans et operosa quoad omnium hominum salutem naturalem*.³³ In contrast, other theologians began by emphasising the necessity of grace for salvation and its unmerited nature, referring to the universality of God's salvific intention only later in the tract.

Rahner's distinctive contribution, which Roman Siebenrock has described as a radical change (*Umbruch*) in terms of the theology of grace,³⁴ lay both in prioritising God's salvific will, and in unpacking what it must logically mean. God's saving will is understood by Rahner to be "absolute" (lat. *absoluta*). By this he does not mean that it is absolutely effective in all cases; its effectiveness depends upon human free will. Humans are not bound to co-operate with God's salvific will. They are bound, however, absolutely and unconditionally, to seek salvation. This must be the case if God's salvific intention is to be both sincere (lat. *sincera*) and effective (lat. *operosa*), in other words, not just a vague aspiration on God's part.

Two points follow from this. The first is that the understanding of nature as equipping humans in their fallen state with at best a *potentia obedientialis*, would have to be rethought. Neo-scholasticism understood this as merely a passive non-repugnance towards grace. God's universal salvific will could not be taken as sincere and effective if the most human nature could show was that it was not adverse to God's grace. In 1950, Rahner introduced the concept of the "supernatural existential," a concept which inhabits the shadow land between nature and grace. More than a merely natural desire for the supernatural, and "prior to grace," it is a real determination, a binding and indissoluble ordination to the supernatural end intended by God for human beings. It means that all humans as they are found, in their concrete reality, regardless of the effects of Original Sin, hunger and thirst for God, have the capacity to

33. See Andreas R. Batlogg, Paul Rulands, et al., *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners: Quellen – Entwicklungen – Perspektiven* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 2003) 113. I am relying here on this important work, summarizing briefly 106-144. See also the article by Roman Siebenrock in this volume (Section 2.5), as well as Nikolaus Schwerdtfeger, *Gnade und Welt: Zum Grundgefüge von Karl Rahners Theorie der "anonymen Christen"* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982) 71-72.

34. Cited in Batlogg, Rulands, et al., *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners*, 114.

receive God’s love, and yet at the same time, when they accept it and surrender to it, experience that same love as pure “unexacted” and unexpected gift. The “supernatural existential” though prior to grace, is grace’s bridge-head, and as such “only allows grace to be unexacted grace when it is itself unexacted...”³⁵

The second point relates to the fact that if God’s universal salvific will is to be understood as sincere and operative, it must enjoy concrete historical expression. Rahner locates the historical realisation of God’s universal salvific will in Christ and the Church: *Haec dei voluntas salvifica nos attingit in Christo Jesu et Ecclesia*.³⁶ Batlogg, Rulands *et al.* see this as another *novum* in terms of the theology of grace at that time. Rahner is quite specific: he is not thinking of some cosmic Christ. Rahner means Jesus Christ made flesh and crucified. All grace, according to Rahner, bears the form of Christ. This is what it means to say that Christ is the one, sole mediator of salvation for all of humankind. It follows that all experiences of grace, even those of non-Christians, are addressed by Christ and invited into Christian discipleship, and all positive responses to God’s grace are implicit acts of Christian discipleship. For Rahner, it is not just that God’s plan of salvation touches all people in and through Christ and the Church. All people, in so far as they respond to God’s grace, are also doing so through Christ and the Church. Christ, and the Church as Christ’s abiding presence, taken together are a “great sacrament of grace” (lat. *magnum sacramentum gratiae*).³⁷ Here we see the seeds of the trinitarian and sacramental structure of grace which Rahner will develop in the course of his theological career.

Batlogg, Rulands *et al.* make three further points worth noting with regard to Rahner’s approach to *De gratia Christi*. It was common at that time to speak of the unequal and differentiated nature (lat. *inequalitas*) of God’s salvific will. Some were predestined to be more favoured with God’s grace than others; precisely why was a mystery known to God alone. Influenced by Ignatian spirituality, Rahner interpreted this as recognition of the unique, precious, and impenetrable nature of each individual’s personal relationship with God.³⁸ A second point relates to Rahner’s emphasis on Christ as the mediator of God’s grace, and grace as an invitation into Christian discipleship. These were themes common

35. The original article appeared in *Orientierung* in 1950. An expanded version was published in *Schriften* in 1954. See “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” chap. 9 in *Theological Investigations*, 1, 297-317, esp. 311-313.

36. Cited in Batlogg, Rulands, *et al.*, *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners*, 116.

37. *Ibid.*, 140.

38. *Ibid.*, 115, 132.

at that time in mystical and ascetical theology, with special emphasis on redemption as the fruit of the incarnation and passion of Christ. From the very beginning, therefore, any over-distinction between spirituality and systematic theology was alien to Rahner's thought.³⁹ The final point worth noting relates to the distinction between created and uncreated grace. In scholastic theology, uncreated grace referred to the bestowal of God's self, what Rahner would later refer to as God's "self-communication," whereas created grace was the term used to describe supernatural gifts given by God but not identical with God. The account of created grace was quite systematized and complex, and in Rahner's view, misleading. The emphasis on created grace(s) tended to parcel out God's self-giving, making it more difficult to understand grace as an invitation into relationship and discipleship. Subsequently, Rahner transformed Catholic theology of grace by underlining the unity and radicality of God's free, personal total self-communication to each human being.

In his last formal lecture, delivered shortly before his death in 1984, Rahner identified as one of four hallmarks of his theology his conviction that what distinguishes Christianity as a religion, what makes it more than a kind of "Jesus movement" and, in fact, the *absolute* religion, is the reality that it holds the pledge of salvation for all humankind. Christianity holds this promise because in and through Jesus, "God's very self, with infinite reality and glory, with holiness, freedom and love" penetrates the "finite and the contingent," and "can really and without any holding back enter the creatureliness of our existence." It is in Jesus alone that "the actual self-communication of the infinite God, transcending all creaturely reality and any finite divine gift, is given."⁴⁰

Thus we can see that the theological substance behind the idea of the "anonymous Christian" is core to Rahner's thought and that the idea is a logical and unavoidable consequence of his theology of grace and salvation.

III. Objections

1. *Did Rahner Subsume Theology under an Alienating Philosophical System?*

One of the first and most determining voices to object to Rahner's theology was that of Hans Urs von Balthasar, and it is his criticisms that

39. Batlogg, Rulands, *et al.*, *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners*, 117.

40. Karl Rahner, "Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 7-8.

we find re-echoed in many of the later challenges to his work.⁴¹ It should be noted that in 1939, Rahner and Balthasar together drafted a proposal for the restructuring of dogmatic theology.⁴² However, fault lines began to emerge that same year in a critical review by Balthasar of Rahner’s *Geist in Welt (Spirit in the World)*.⁴³ It is clear from this review, as well from a summary of Rahner’s position on nature and grace in Balthasar’s book on Karl Barth (1951),⁴⁴ that Balthasar had technical problems with Rahner’s transcendental theology and in particular with Rahner’s attempt to “baptise” or appropriate certain philosophical categories.⁴⁵

Yet Balthasar’s position was inconsistent. When he perceived that Rahner was under Roman fire he came to his defence, claiming that Rahner’s transcendental method was yielding “a new fruitfulness,” finding its centre in Thomas Aquinas and its actuality in addressing the questions of German idealism and Heidegger.⁴⁶ Balthasar’s explicit criticisms of Rahner, even his later polemical writings such as *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*,⁴⁷ should not be considered his most serious rejection of Rahner’s approach. Instead, we should consider in this context Balthasar’s own overarching system: his theological aesthetics. Balthasar was able to approach things differently from Rahner. He came late to Jesuit formation and already had a PhD in *Germanistik*; as he was not a theology professor he did not have to don the scholastic mantle in the same way Rahner had to. The result was that Balthasar enjoyed both the inner and outer freedom required to evolve a system that was neither a reaction to nor an attempted renovation of scholasticism. His study of Karl Barth

41. See Sections II and III of Paul Murray’s paper in the present volume for a succinct account of and response to more recent criticisms. See also Nichols, “Anonymous Christianity,” 115, where he suggests that Rahner, is “in a way typical of Idealism, attempting to deduce the reality of the absolute from the human spirit’s openness thereto.” James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 91.

42. “The Prospects for Dogmatic Theology,” *Theological Investigations*, 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961) 1-18. See esp. footnote on p. 14.

43. *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 63 (1939) 372ff.

44. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976) esp. 303, 308-310.

45. In particular with Rahner’s concepts of pre-grasp (*Vorgriff*) and *natura pura* as a remainder concept (*Restbegriff*). See Eamonn Conway, *The Anonymous Christian – a Relativised Christianity?* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993) chaps. 2 and 3.

46. See his review of the first two volumes of *Theological Investigations* in which he defends Rahner’s transcendental method: Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Grösse und Last der Theologie heute,” *Wort und Wahrheit* 10 (1955) 533.

47. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1966). Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 176, notes that in the later French edition, Balthasar significantly moderated his criticisms.

had impressed upon him the damage that flirtation with any philosophical system was likely to do to the integrity of the presentation of Christian revelation; as he saw it, necessarily reducing revelation to the fulfilment of an already existing framework. In many ways, Balthasar's *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation* is the sharpest and most succinct criticism of the "anthropological turn," in theology, which, for Balthasar, Rahner's theology represented, and which was doomed to be reductionist regardless of how carefully it was executed.⁴⁸

A few points may help us to evaluate if Rahner's transcendental approach proposes or presumes a prior philosophical framework. The first is that *Geist in Welt* was prepared as a philosophy dissertation for a philosophy faculty. *Apart* from this work, Rahner noted, all his other supposedly philosophical undertakings, including *Hörer des Wortes*, were written at the service of theology.⁴⁹ In other words, Rahner did not claim that *Geist in Welt* was intended to be at the service of his theological project as such. This must qualify any consideration that Rahner himself, whatever about others, viewed this work as foundational for his theology, even if traces of its influence are still to be found, for example, in *Foundations of Christian Faith*. It also supports the case for a "non-foundational" reading of Rahner's work, though it is somewhat puzzling that such an approach to reading Rahner is considered novel or innovative.

It is puzzling because arguably Rahner himself pioneered a "non-foundational" reading of his writings, not only by the implicit methodology of loosely collecting articles into *Schriften*, and his explicit references to his work as *dilettante* and eclectic, but because in his view "foundational" systems, whether in philosophy or theology, had run their course, at least in so far as they were helpful in communicating Christian faith in contemporary culture.⁵⁰ In the introduction to Peter Eicher's philosophical evaluation of his work, Rahner comments:

Leaving aside a couple of essays on the history of penance, everything else I have written is not scientific theology and certainly not (professional) philosophy. It is all too *dilettante* for that. Rightly so, however, and for that reason I am not embarrassed. I do not consider such a judgment as devaluing what I have written. I am even of the opinion that when one wants to speak today to people who want to

48. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968).

49. *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 16. See Karl Lehmann's endorsement of this view: Karl Lehmann, "Introduction," in Karl Rahner, *Content of Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 24.

50. See Karl Rahner, "Philosophy and Philosophising in Theology," *Theological Investigations*, 9 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972) 46-63.

know something “existential” one cannot write any other way ... than in this unscientific manner.⁵¹

Writing in the voice of Ignatius, Rahner also speaks of eclecticism as unavoidable in any system that would seek to comprehend God.⁵² Statements by Rahner such as these have too often been mistaken for false humility rather than serious evaluations both of his own method and of how in his view theology can and must proceed in a post-Enlightenment context.

We should not be surprised by claims that Rahner did not ground his theology in a philosophical system for a second reason: this view has been accepted for some time, even by those who are in other respects critical of his work. Take, for example, Joseph Ratzinger, who has acknowledged that Rahner’s “transcendental method does not pretend to deduce Christianity purely from itself.” It is, he recognized, “a presupposition of understanding’ (*Verstehensvorgang*) that becomes possible because the faith has already opened up the field of thought.”⁵³ As Ratzinger views it, Rahner’s entire philosophical-system is a worthwhile and necessary blending (*Verschmelzung*) of philosophical categories with divine revelation. Karl Lehmann also dismisses the idea that Rahner “first developed a philosophical system which he then imposed, from without, on theological questions.”⁵⁴

Despite claims to the contrary, Rahner’s primary sense of responsibility was not to the (German) academy but to the Christian community.⁵⁵ His first concern was “the contemporary person’s need for and understanding of faith.”⁵⁶ To summarise, taking into account these observations, as well as the earlier account of the evolution of Rahner’s theology of grace, it can be said with certainty that while at times Rahner’s writings wore the livery of philosophy, they did not come from a philosophical stable. As Leo O’Donovan has put it:

... it is not only a short-circuiting but also simplistically false to understand him only as a transcendental thinker ... He was above all

51. Karl Rahner, “Zum Geleit,” in Peter Eicher, *Die anthropologische Wende* (Freiburg/Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1970) xiii (trans. mine). See “Some Clarifying Remarks about My Own Work,” *Theological Investigations*, 17 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981) 245.

52. Karl Rahner, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit,” *Ignatius of Loyola*, ed. Paul Imhof (London: Collins, 1979) 32.

53. Joseph Ratzinger, “Vom Verstehen des Glaubens: Anmerkungen zu Rahners *Grundkurs des Glaubens*,” *Theologische Revue* 74 (1978) 184 (trans. mine).

54. Lehmann, “Introduction,” 24 [first published as *Rechenschaft des Glaubens* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979)]. See also Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus the Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1982) 53.

55. See George Weigel, “The Century after Rahner,” *Arlington Catholic Herald*, February 10, 2000.

56. Lehmann, “Introduction,” 34.

a theologian who lived out of the experience of the Holy Spirit, and out of this experience concerned himself with the understanding of the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.⁵⁷

Rahner did not subsume theology under philosophy; he did not “reduce” Christianity to anthropology. Rahner’s anthropology was *Christian* anthropology before it adopted or adapted philosophical categories. We cannot detail here with the perichoretic nature of his understanding of the relationship between the “transcendental” and the “categorical.” However, Rahner’s theology of symbol⁵⁸ is perhaps the best guide to grasping how he argues that the cross is “the ‘final cause’ of God’s universal self-communication”⁵⁹ and “the universal primary sacrament of the salvation of the whole world.”⁶⁰ The origins of Rahner’s theology of symbol have been carefully examined, including its philosophical presuppositions, and Rahner himself endorsed the view that it has its roots not in philosophical categories but in early theological reflections on the Sacred Heart (Jn 19:34 *E latere Christi*) in which Rahner considers the pierced side of Christ both as signifying and effecting the outpouring of the Spirit into the world.⁶¹

2. *Did Rahner’s Idea of the “Anonymous Christian” Relativise Explicit Christianity?*

It is fair to hold Rahner accountable only for his own ideas and not for the uses they were put to by others.⁶² Clearly, a relativisation was never Rahner’s intention, and it is also difficult to see why it should be judged as an unintended consequence of his theology of salvation.

Rahner believed that it was possible for someone to live indefinitely in a Christian milieu, perhaps even to receive instruction in Christianity, and yet fail to grasp the essence of Christian faith, and so be inculpable for the fact that one’s faith remained at the implicit level. Yet he

57. Leo J. O’Donovan, “Zwei Söhne des Ignatius,” *Weg und Weite: Festschrift für Karl Lehmann*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 2001) 373 (trans. mine).

58. Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” *Theological Investigations*, 4 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966) 221-252.

59. Karl Rahner, “Jesus in the Non-Christian Religions,” *Theological Investigations*, 17 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981) 46.

60. Karl Rahner, “The Universality of Salvation,” *Theological Investigations*, 16 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979) 215.

61. Joseph H. P. Wong, *Logos-Symbol in the Christology of Karl Rahner* (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1984) 42-43. See also the Foreword by Karl Rahner.

62. See J. A. DiNoia: “Although the work of some of his popularisers merits it, the inevitable charge that his theology subverts the traditional claim of the Christian community to be in possession of a definitive revelation seems unjust when pressed against Rahner himself.” “Karl Rahner,” Chap. 7 in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 130-131.

also held implicit faith to be deficient, lacking the perfection of historical expression which was to be found only in the Christian community. For this reason, implicit faith, while salvific for the believer who held it, was nonetheless preliminary and transitory in character, and had a dynamism towards its fullest and most appropriate historical expression in Church membership. One image Rahner offered to explain this was of a seed having no right to refuse to grow into a plant.⁶³

If people came to recognise the Christ event as God’s total self-giving in history, and the Church as the God-intended community witnessing to the radicality of divine love, they could not simply relapse into a hidden or “anonymous” expression of their faith without disrupting their relationship with God. Rahner made this very clear in an interview in 1983:

If God had not encountered you in the concreteness of history, that is, in Jesus Christ and in the Church, then, of course, you could be saved on the basis of a life of fidelity to your conscience and of a true, if rudimentary faith. Then you would find your eternal salvation “outside” the officially constituted, visible, and organised Church. But the moment it becomes clear to you, in a binding way, that the confession of Jesus Christ is precisely the concreteness of the ultimate relationship to God, then you can no longer say: Christianity does not concern me, I am going to seek my salvation in another way ... The person who has concretely encountered Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen One, must also confess him in order to reach the salvation which the “anonymous Christian” has reached in a preliminary way, to be sure, but in a form which nonetheless guarantees his or her salvation.⁶⁴

Occasionally, Rahner also spoke of the explicit Christian as advantaged, and as having supports in faith denied to “anonymous Christians.”⁶⁵

What has been depicted as a relativisation of explicit Christian faith, blame for which has sometimes been laid at Rahner’s door, is a necessary *re-location* of the historical event of the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the mission of the Church within the totality of God’s gracious movement to humanity, and humanity’s graced response to God. It is a broadening of the Christian community’s understanding of the mystery of salvation, and a centering of this on the historical Christ

63. Karl Rahner, “Observations on the Problem of the ‘Anonymous Christian,’” *Theological Investigations*, 14 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976) 291; see Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” chap. 23 in *Theological Investigations*, 6 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969) 391-398.

64. *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 102.

65. Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” 395.

event. What is meant by the idea of the “anonymous Christian” is found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and it is difficult to see how anyone can take issue with Rahner without at the same time taking issue with conciliar teaching.⁶⁶ Given Rahner’s considerable influence on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, of course, this should not surprise us.⁶⁷

3. *Did Rahner’s Theology Undermine the Missionary Activity of the Church?*

This accusation was levied at Rahner more than once and he took it quite seriously.⁶⁸ To some extent we have already addressed this concern. The reality is that the theology of the Second Vatican Council demanded a whole re-think with regard to the basis for the Church’s missionary activity. For fallen human nature, fear is often a more powerful motivation than love. By emphasizing the sincerity and efficacy of God’s salvific will, Rahner helped to replace fear not with certainty, but with genuine Christian hope, hope that God’s salvific will would not be eternally frustrated. At the same time Rahner, more than Balthasar, took care to avoid postulating a general *apocatastasis*.⁶⁹

In any case, it is worth noting that independent of Karl Rahner, missionaries themselves had begun to question their self-understanding and their approach to their missionary task.⁷⁰ Rahner’s theology of the “anonymous Christian” offered what many had to accept as the most authentic effort to explain, how “those who do not know the Gospel of Christ ... are nonetheless living in the grace of Christ”⁷¹ before they ever

66. Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” 397; “Observations on the Problem of the ‘Anonymous Christian,’” 284-285.

67. See *The History of Vatican II*, Vol. 2, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Leuven: Peeters, 1996) 454-456 (“[Rahner] ... was to become undoubtedly the most influential theologian at the Council”); *The History of Vatican II*, Vol 3, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak (Leuven: Peeters, 2000) 375 (Rahner’s contribution on revelation is described as “decisive”). Walter Kasper recently rated Rahner’s influence on Council Documents in the following order: *Dei Verbum*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Lumen Gentium*. “Kein Zurück hinter Rahner,” *Katholischer Mediendienst*, www.kath.ch, March 1 2004. Accessed June 11, 2004.

68. Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church,” *Theological Investigations*, 12 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974) 161-178; “Anonymous Christians,” 396-397; *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 103. See also Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 173-174.

69. Karl Rahner, “Salvation,” *Sacramentum Mundi*, 4 (London: Search Press, 1970) 407; Biallowons and Imhof, *Im Gespräch*, vol. II, 56; Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “that all men be saved”?*, 225-254.

70. See, for example, Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* (London: SCM, 1982).

71. *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

meet a missionary, without at the same time making missionary activity superfluous.

4. *Unfortunate Terminology*

The term “anonymous Christians” is unfortunate, and has caused difficulties in two respects. On the one hand, it seems a contradiction in terms. At the heart of Christianity is witness; there can be nothing “anonymous” about being a Christian. If one has genuinely encountered the forgiving, self-giving transformative love that pours into the world in the incarnation, proclamation must follow as a matter of integrity. Rahner did not disagree with this. From the very beginning he accepted that the terminology was not ideal, and he showed no great attachment to it. Nonetheless he was impatient with people criticizing the idea without proposing better alternatives.⁷² However, the overall effect of usage of the term was to compound the impression that Rahner had sold out on the radical discipleship Jesus had identified as “the one thing necessary.”⁷³

On the other hand, the term was viewed as arrogant, imperialistic, and disrespectful to non-Christians, members of other religions, and atheists alike. It is important to note here that for Rahner, the concept was only intended as part of the vocabulary of Christianity’s self-understanding; it was never intended as a dialogical tool.⁷⁴ With few exceptions it was Christians who were upset at the perceived disrespect to non-Christians implied by the term, rather than non-Christians themselves. If there is any disrespect, then arguably it is caused by the substance of the teaching rather than by the language, a substance that is not simply a dispensable part of Church teaching.

IV. Contemporary Significance

The term “anonymous Christian” is beyond redemption. It has led to too many misunderstandings and inappropriate applications. However, its theological underpinning still has merit and provides some crucial contemporary correctives.

72. *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 103, 133; “Observations on the Problem of the ‘Anonymous Christian,’” 291; Imhof and Biallowons, *Im Gespräch*, vol. II, 275.

73. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “In Retrospect,” 2 *Communio* (Winter 1975) 200.

74. See John P. Galvin, “Salvation Outside the Church,” *The Gift of the Church*, ed. Peter Phan (Minnesota, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) 265-266.

In a culture marked by greater choice but less freedom, Rahner's theology of grace underlines the importance of personal commitment. Indifference is not salvific, and can be an implicit rejection of divine grace.

Some postmodern theologies judge that the tide has gone out for approaches such as Rahner's that accentuate the role of human experience. They underscore the difficulties in seeking to speak of a "correlation" between experience and revelation. Such theologies, it is claimed, cease to function when the overlap between faith and culture becomes too narrow.⁷⁵ How would Rahner have reacted to this observation?

We can speculate that he would have been ill at ease with any implied pessimism regarding the openness of even the most secularized of people to divine encounter. Rahner would have reiterated: "It is possible for man [*sic*] to know God."⁷⁶ Admittedly, God's salvific will can be frustrated by human freedom. Yet Christians are faith-bound to remain hopeful, that is, to remain confident that God's grace can touch each human heart and find hospitality there. As Rahner understands it, it is a given of Christian anthropology that humans are determined to seek God, a consequence of the "absolute" nature of God's salvific will. He would have continued to agitate strenuously for Church reform, but he would have been critical of any "pastoral panic" at the failure to initiate new generations. Instead, he would probably have called for a little pastoral *naïveté*, a trusting docility. Above all, he would have urged Christians "to lay bare the wellsprings" of their own experience of God "in the secularized desert where the God question is taboo."⁷⁷

Rahner's approach to grace stressed the individual uniqueness and inviolability of each person's relationship with God, and this should find an echo in postmodern consciousness sensitive to personal autonomy. At the same time, his emphasis on the historical and ecclesial nature of God's self-giving protects proper recognition of the unique nature of the human-divine encounter from becoming diminished, and from shriveling up into something that is self-serving and unaccountable. The Church as an institution can also become self-serving, and Rahner's emphasis on its central but servant role in God's ever greater plan of salvation is an important corrective to the danger of institutionalism.

75. For an overview, see Lieven Boeve, "Theology and the Interruption of Experience," Paper to the Fourth Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology, 2003. See also Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition* (Louvain: Peeters, 2002).

76. Rahner, "Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit," 14.

77. *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 115.

One can detect in recent Church documents a tendency to stress the privileged place of human-divine encounter that the Church undoubtedly is at the expense of acknowledging generously God’s presence outside the Church’s re-erected walls. *Dominus Iesus*, for example, tends to underplay the role of other religions in the mediation of salvation. This is not without its dangers. To argue that religious beliefs and practices play little or no part in the salvation of non-Christians is to imply that such people achieve their salvation by non-social and a-historical means. But this calls into question, as Rahner observed, the historical and social character of Christianity itself.⁷⁸ Moreover, in today’s climate unwarranted and unjustifiable pessimism regarding the role of other religions in God’s plan of salvation can only serve to nurture hostility and intolerance.

For Rahner, salvation has to be appropriated in daily struggle and surrender. Although towards the end of his life he spoke increasingly of the mystical, Rahner would have denounced theologies or spiritualities that imply some privileged or elite *locus* for the divine-human encounter, and he would have been suspicious of any account of grace that smacked of neo-extrinsicism.

The loss of shared epistemological presuppositions would not have presented the same problem for Rahner as it might for other “correlationist” theologians. As we have argued, these concepts were his adopted rather than his native tongue. Rahner “knew God himself, not simply human words describing him,”⁷⁹ so he would still have been able to speak *of* God. Having argued at the Council for recognition of the scriptures as the ultimate norm for the Church’s magisterium,⁸⁰ however, he would have stopped short of claiming that either the magisterium, or indeed theology can claim, at least in any unnuanced way, to speak “*from* God.”⁸¹

The spirituality and theology that lies behind Rahner’s idea of the “anonymous Christian” offers a profound *lectio divina* on the scripture text from 1 Timothy:

God our Saviour ... wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth. For there is only one God, and there is only one

78. Rahner, *Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions*, 43.

79. Rahner, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit,” 12-13.

80. *The History of Vatican II*, Vol. 2, 238.

81. See Stijn Van den Bossche, “From the Other’s Point of View – The Challenge of Jean-Luc Marion’s Phenomenology to Theology,” Paper to the 4th Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology Conference, 2003: “theology can speak ‘from God’ because it knows God, and not only from the human subject about God.”

mediator between God and humankind, himself a human, Christ Jesus, who sacrificed himself as a ransom for them all.⁸²

In conclusion, the theological substance behind the “anonymous Christian” is still of value. Rahner’s understanding and prioritising of the “absolute” nature of God’s salvific will can be usefully transposed into hope-filled pastoral planning and action, enabling positive dialogue with members of other faiths and non-believers alike without fear of relativising the unique and indispensable role of the Church. At the same time, Rahner’s emphasis on the inviolable and radical nature of human freedom provides a timely antidote to indifference and complacency, and underscores the importance for all to realise God’s truth in patient acts of love.

82. 1 Tim 2:3-6.