

Karl Rahner— a spiritual portent by Aelred Squire, O.P.

The way reputations get off the ground is nearly always something of a mystery, and the reputation of Fr Karl Rahner is a more than usually interesting case. It must by now be so internationally complex that some aspects of it deserve consideration in their own right. The appearance of an English translation of volume III of the *Theological Investigations* may perhaps be taken as an appropriate occasion to look at this reputation in the light of some of the diverse activities on which it is based. For the pieces collected in this volume on the *Theology of the Spiritual Life*, which range in interest and difficulty from a sort of exalted pamphlet on the 'Apostolate of Prayer' to an absorbing and exacting introduction for a book of verse by a fellow Jesuit, are a reminder of the many claims upon a theologian who has never been allowed, or at least taken, time to write a single sustained work of theology. The very fragmentary character of his written achievement, the limitations within which it moves, and the yawning gaps it leaves behind it are, granted Rahner's undoubted intellectual calibre, a singular testimony to the situation for the theology of the spiritual life today. It is a testimony all the more eloquent for being that of a man who, whatever his professional qualifications, establishes himself in the mind as first and foremost the dedicated priest. When, in an essay on the priestly existence reprinted in this volume, he says (p. 258) 'even leaving aside for the moment the general question whether it is not the case that every existentially significant truth cannot be genuinely transmitted from one person to another unless it is possessed by the teacher not merely intellectually as a proposition but as something existentially realized by him', we feel confident that this is the one question he is never really able to leave aside. This concern is too evidently the impulse behind his often painful struggles to make himself articulate, and it doubtless largely explains the occasional character of everything he has done.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized for those who read no German and have no day-by-day acquaintance with German-speaking Catholicism how intimately, in ways that are hard to evoke, Fr Rahner belongs to his own German-speaking world. These ties make much of what he has to say extraordinarily difficult to 'translate', if one understands that word to refer to the thought in the entire context of discourse and apart from the intrinsic difficulty of much of the writing itself. Yet this is doubtless the source of his strength that, as working preacher and teacher, he is endeavouring

to speak with integrity to different kinds of listeners in a language which accepts both his own limitations and requirements and theirs. To those who know him primarily as a preacher, he must necessarily look quite different from the author with a reputation for long and complex sentences. That he can, in a context where he has less 'explaining' to do, affect a style even more simple and direct than that which he frequently uses in writing, English readers may judge from a volume of abstracts of some of his sermons in Innsbruck.¹

For the rest, he is explicitly aware both of the defects and difficulties of communication, and discusses the very factors that must, incidentally, determine the immediate impact and permanent effect of his own work both at home and abroad. 'Men speaking different languages can understand one another and one language can be translated into another, just as the most diverse men can live together and even be born from one another. But this does not make languages into a row of external façades, behind all of which dwells simply one and the same thought. The *noche* of a John of the Cross and the *Nacht* of a Novalis or a Nietzsche are not the same. . . . There are words which divide and words which unite: words which can be artificially manufactured and arbitrarily determined and words which have always existed or are newly born as by a miracle.'² Words of the latter kind, which 'evoke the blinding mystery of things', Fr Rahner calls *Urworte*, primordial words. He recognizes that, according to the use man makes of them, words can rise to the ranks of primordial words or slide down to the level of utility words. Of this world, where the primordial word is the primordial sacrament of all realities, the poet is the minister.

What of that other kind of word which is entrusted to the priest? He might, inevitably, be speaking of himself when he says: His word, in so far as it is his word, is a sign-post pointing to the word spoken by another. He must be submerged and unseen behind the message he delivers. As priest he is not primarily a theologian, but a preacher. And because there is preaching for that reason there is theology—not vice versa. For the same reason it is the preaching Church with her demand for faith which is the norm of theology; it is not the 'science' of theology which is the norm of an *haute vulgarisation* which could be called preaching. But Fr Rahner has yet further to go in this essay, which might be taken as an expression of an ideal to which he himself clearly aspires, and he is his own best exponent of the steps by which he concludes that 'the priestly word demands of the priest that he should speak it through his existence'. There is much that is unexplored and inadequately developed in this attempt to discuss the possibility of being both priest and poet—as Fr Rahner explicitly admits—but there is much, too, that deserves to be retained when one comes to examine Fr Rahner's own *poiesis*.

¹*Biblical Homilies*, Karl Rahner (London, 1966).

²*Theological Investigations*, III, p. 259. All subsequent page references are to this volume.

The virtues of his writing are also bound up with his acceptance of its limitations in forging a language and discovering a satisfactory philosophical frame within which to speak. If the result rarely has the 'primordial' touch of the moments when the poet's question and the priest's answer meet and are satisfied, this does not mean that the effort was necessarily in vain. Perhaps in our own day there is nothing else to do but reach for something that has not yet found a voice that can be heard. Again, born as it is of his pastoral solicitude, it is that to which Fr Rahner aspires in the field of the theology of the spiritual life which has the significance of a spiritual portent. Not since the seventeenth century, the last period in which spiritual theology really came alive, have pastors and teachers felt themselves so constantly hampered for want of an adequate view of the Christian doctrine of man. The inclusion among the documents of Vatican II of a unique conciliar statement of the doctrine of the image of God in man recognizes this urgent awareness and asserts its fundamental justice rather than assuages it. The work which will reveal the implications of this doctrine as the unique effective basis of a sound contemporary theology of the spiritual life is still to be done.

A former student of Fr Rahner has just published what amounts to an account of his master's quite special contribution to our thought on the many difficult aspects of this subject.¹ It is a work of synthesis which, as Fr Rahner himself says in a foreword, must have presented quite special difficulties of its own, since it is an attempt to see as an organic whole what the master himself has never, in fact, put together in this way. Leaving aside for the present how far this well-signposted account may be regarded as satisfactory, it is sufficient to look back to Fr Rahner's own scheme for a treatise of dogmatic theology in volume I of *Theological Investigations* to appreciate of how many sections in this promising-looking programme he has been able to discuss only the guide lines. In the volume on the *Theology of the Spiritual Life* one feels particularly the want of a coherent aperçu in fairly extended terms of what Fr Rahner sees it desirable to do for the doctrine of man. It is true that volume II of *Theological Investigations* on man in the Church may be regarded as really presupposed to the section on fundamental questions in volume III, but how many important questions it still leaves unanswered. As it is, we are left with tantalizing hints and visions. The pieces in this third volume are indeed, as the author says, of very unequal value. Nevertheless, some very fundamental things do get said, and some very fundamental insights do come across. Thus, for instance, in 'Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas' we find a sense of perspective, to which Fr Rahner often returns elsewhere in his writings, admirably expressed in a single splendid paragraph:

'God is present to the one who is silent, who lets everything recede into its finite limitation and who looks towards its horizon

¹*The Achievement of Karl Rahner*, by Louis Roberts, Herder & Herder, New York, 1967.

in order to look beyond it despite the fact that there is not “anything” to be seen there. But God is present first of all, and perhaps only, in a nearness of distance. He is present at a distance which would seem to be about to consume and destroy us when it comes near to us; at a distance which keeps us and all other things bound within the bounds of our finite being, our fallibility and possibility of guilt. And yet man is precisely in this way open, one who does not possess within himself what he essentially needs in order to be himself. A stone could be expressed far more exhaustively than man by what it has and is within itself. Man can be expressed only by talking about something else: about God, who he is not. It is impossible to engage in anthropology without having first engaged in theology, since man is pure reference to God. Thus he himself is a mystery, always referred beyond himself into the mystery of God. This is his being; he is defined by the indefinable which he is not, but without which he is not even (nor realizes) what he is. If this absolute reference is closed to the sub-human, precisely because the latter is not spiritual, it follows that this reference is exactly the state man gets into when he does not want to bother about anything but himself, and for this he cannot help looking into the mystery which he is not. Now, *suppose* that this reference and self-transcendence were to succeed *absolutely*, without the human thereby being cancelled out but rather being fulfilled . . . (pp. 30-31).

Now this is a way of leading us, as it develops, into the contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation which really makes *evident* its integral connection with the entire theology of the spiritual life. It is, moreover, essentially the kind of global insight which seized and sustained Athanasius through a life-time of theological conflict and received such diverse, yet fundamentally harmonious, expression in the authentic spiritual doctrine of the undivided Church. It is too long since we heard a living voice saying so convincingly things like this, and ascetic theology has become a thing of bits and pieces for the lack of it.

It is not, of course, the case that Fr Rahner succeeds in having ‘moments’ like this on every page in his pursuit of the realization that ‘fundamentally there are only three absolute mysteries in Christianity: the trinity, incarnation, and sanctifying grace’.¹ Yet the fact that they are so firmly and surely there must affect our estimate of what he has to say even where it is speaking the kind of language which those trained in the theology of more recent centuries will more easily recognize. This is inevitably also true where he is writing something which comes much closer to the tone of the director. Take, for instance, these very fundamental remarks in the essay on the ‘Church of the Saints’:

The true nature of Christian holiness cannot be clearly and solely deciphered from a Christian theology of essences or, even less,

¹*Faith Today*, London, 1967, p. 31—a conveniently accessible expression of Fr Rahner’s aims as a theologian.

from a 'natural law' (with a supernatural goal), no matter how necessary and indispensable such philosophical and theological ethics may be. The nature of Christian holiness appears from the life of Christ and of his saints; and what appears there cannot be translated absolutely into a general theory but must be experienced in the encounter with the historical which takes place from one individual case to the other. The history of Christian holiness (of what, in other words, is the business of every Christian, since everyone is sanctified and called to holiness) is in its totality a unique history and not the eternal return of the same. Hence this history has its always new, unique phases; hence it must always be discovered anew (even though always in the imitation of Christ who remains the inexhaustible model), and this by all Christians. Herein lies the special task which the canonized saints have to fulfil for the Church. They are the initiators and the creative models of the holiness which happens to be right for, and is the task of, their particular age. They create a new style; they prove that a certain form of life and activity is a really genuine possibility; they show experimentally that one can be a Christian even in 'this' way; they make such a type of person believable as a Christian type (pp. 99-100).

Now the last time we heard a director of undoubted genius insistently saying things like this (and sometimes in almost identical words) was at the turn of the century in the letters of the Abbé de Tourville. But it may be doubted whether de Tourville, for all his sure theological instinct, could have provided his teaching with the background of theoretical acumen which Fr Rahner can bring to his.

Perhaps the most impressive example in this third volume of *Theological Investigations* of Fr Rahner at close grips with a specifically contemporary problem which reaches right down into fundamental matters of philosophical and theological principle is the essay on the 'Consecration of the layman to the care of souls'. As one might anticipate, much of what this essay has to say is, in fact, of universal application to Christians, and it is perhaps priests and, above all, religious, who most urgently need to ponder what it sets before them. The argument is a close one, but it may possibly be presented in Fr Rahner's own words something like this: 'An unveiling of the inner secluded being of each person in himself avoids profaning the sacred character of the personal mystery only if it be offered and accepted in a love which makes of the two so much one that it is not an indifferent stranger who is allowed to enter into the sanctuary of one's being, the community of those who reveal themselves to one spoken word refers us of itself to the community of love and must be conceived as its development. . . . Here the basis of community is no longer a third term in which men meet one another: in the love of person for person they meet one another in themselves. (So far, so good. But now comes the rub.) But does this mean that in this highest form of human community man can carry his own being over into the inner sanctuary of another to such an extent that he is

able to surround with loving care everything there? Or are there spheres in man which are beyond the reach even of such love? Or, to ask the question this time from the viewpoint of the 'beloved': are there in him spheres whose essential meaning is such as to withdraw them from immediate, intimate sharing by another? Yes: death—to begin with the clearest case—is a matter for each in himself alone with no reference to anything outside him. . . . But if it be true that all life points of itself constantly forward to death, that it is all the time a process of dying, then clearly death is merely a more obvious indication that there is present in the existence of every man a deeper region in which everyone is left to himself, a line of being pointing to himself alone. In death it just becomes unavoidably evident in all its clearness that everyone has to make sometime of himself, to do and suffer something by himself alone. . . . Everything that is done to a man, everything that happens to him, remains subject to the ultimate pronouncement of his liberty, in which he is still capable of understanding and accepting his lot. . . . Only to a being that is not free is its 'lot' really its destiny; for the free being his destiny lies in himself. (Students of St Thomas will recall what he says about 'fate' in the *Summa*.)

But when man with his whole being is called to a free decision about himself, he finds himself without intermediary before his God. For He is the beginning and end of this being, the norm of every decision, and also its ideal and exemplar, even when it is a case of that supremely personal actualization of the individual's being which is outside the uniformly regular and therefore not to be brought within the compass of any humanly accessible rule. . . . Every influence brought to bear upon a man from outside founders powerlessly before that ultimate sanctuary wherein that which is meant to be influenced takes place. . . . Therefore, if the 'influence' really enters into the ultimate decision, then it is always something dependent upon the person 'influenced' himself, something already transformed by him, therefore *his* own. (An observation by no means to be omitted from the argument, which leads to an evident dilemma.)

Is there then no such thing as care of souls? . . . We have already said that this inner inaccessibility of a man as freely deciding his own fate does not of its nature exist for God. Consequently if we are to exercise any care for a man, then the shortest way into his innermost sanctuary will be that which leads through the infinitely distant God; any shorter route would not, in fact, get us there at all. . . . Whoever loves such a God, whoever casts his whole being into God, in love and adoration and submission is by that very fact in the innermost kernel of the loved man, because he has reached where God is. . . . It is just because the care of souls is thus essentially prayer that pastoral love, particularly when it softly enters into that abyss where a man is alone with the God of his heart, remains humble and pure and leaves the other alone with the living God in spite of

the loving proximity with him thus discovered (pp. 264-271).

It is really inconceivable that mature communities of adult Christians should come into existence where these inexorable principles are either traduced or in effect evaded and no apology is, in fact, needed for presenting them at some length as an illustration of how the best of Fr Rahner's writing rises above every intervention of fashion.

It is true that this particular essay comes notably early in Fr Rahner's career as a writer, but it retains its essential validity in the company of his later thought. Indeed one or two pieces of somewhat later date in this collection, as that on the 'Problem of the Gradual Ascent to Christian Perfection' and that on the 'Passion and Asceticism', which have important and necessary points to make, are really less sure and unassailably persuasive. Yet if, since those earlier days, Fr Rahner has acquired a reputation which suggests that he is a figure of contradiction, this is perhaps less certainly founded on what he actually says than on what he is reputed or imagined to have said. Thus it was intriguing to see the reviewer in one of the national weeklies expressing initial bafflement before this volume on the *Theology of the spiritual life*. Was it really credible, he appeared to be saying, that Fr Rahner could have written so much that could be made to sound so awfully *vieux jeu*? The oldest essay in the volume, for instance, a lively yet impeccable performance on frequent confession of devotion, reaches conclusions we were all brought up on by routes everyone ought to recognize. There are, of course, things like the unhappily too brief 'Spiritual dialogue at evening' to remind us of our period, but is this all? Yet perhaps if one stood on one's head one might catch the Fr Rahner of legend chipping away at the foundations. It is a mark of Fr Rahner's stature that he is too seriously demanding, too subtle and too astute to be plausibly submitted to treatment like this. If he is often rightly felt to be disturbing, it may appropriately be asked if this is not because he has himself first felt the Christian message, the message of the living Church, to be as disturbing and demanding as it genuinely is. It is neither dead, nor will it lie down, as long as there are those to receive it, and work away at the obstacles to its being received by others. This is surely the proper work of the theologian, and it augurs well for some unforeseeable future in the renewal of the theology of the spiritual life that someone in our own day should thus be doing it in so vital a manner that it draws others after him. For as Fr Rahner himself says in the essay on the care of souls already referred to:

Only he who has in some way heard the last word that the world has to tell him—and that is the word which speaks of the distant God beyond every world—has the ears to hear the first word of God when he approaches, should this God deign to come. And so every preoccupation with the realm of the spirit, every opening of ways into it, means clearing away obstacles in the way of God when he comes in his revelation.