

The Transcendental or the Political Kingdom?—I

Reflexions on a theological dispute

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I. *The Argument*

It is no longer possible to speak as if Catholic theology were a self-evident unified whole. There are many Catholic theologies now being constructed within the Church community, and there are correspondingly many philosophies being presupposed by this pluralism of theological languages. Neoscholastic philosophy and theology, despite the still considerable authority behind them, now form just one language among many: the evidence mounts that this 'privileged' language is increasingly a dead language for students of theology. The refusal to face this pluralistic situation is dangerous, the inability to face it tragic: one need only reflect on recent papal encyclicals to see what occurs when the ideology of the one language gropes and flails about in the room of the many languages like Nabokov's blind man.

The existence of a theological pluralism merely poses the problem, it does not solve it. The problem is that of theological meaning generally. How can theology perform its task of communicating between Church and world, gospel and life, when organized religion appears to many increasingly irrelevant and atheism has become less a particular mode of thought than a normal mode of existence? This question, if taken seriously, would bring the various emergent theologies out of that peaceful coexistence with each other which is often just the other side of their encapsulation from the real problems of life. Certainly, the kind of confrontation envisaged here presupposes certain rules. The language of the opposed and opposing theology would have to be *understood*—the lack of this understanding vitiates, to my mind, the attacks of Maritain and Von Hildebrand on the so-called 'new theology'. Further, the *intention* of the other theology would have to be grasped of providing, for instance, a hermeneutic, or mediating horizon, for the encounter between Church and world, without necessarily describing this encounter in detail—the failure to see this is, in my view, the weakness in Barth's critique of Bultman, Balthasar's critique of Rahner, and in the objections of Ratzinger and others to Metz's political theology. (Cf. K. Barth, *Rudolf Bultmann. Ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen*, 1952. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*, 1967. J. Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum*, 1968, p. 42.) There is certainly a legitimate criticism of these theologies to be made, but it can be made effectively only on their own *ontological* level. Any particular (ontic) answer to the question of the meaning of life (even the answer:

Jesus of Nazareth), must be made intelligible within a horizon of ontological meaning (here the meaning of God and man for each other as the meaning of Being itself). These theologies are concerned with the 'preunderstanding' for Revelation: a critique which failed to criticize this preunderstanding and to provide an alternative for it, would be itself contradictory and finally impotent. (*Contradictory*, because there is always some philosophy implicit even in the most 'biblical' attack on the 'non-biblical' system, a philosophy all the worse for being undiscussed—the platonist elements in Balthasar's concept of history and in Ratzinger's *Gottesbegriff* are good examples of this contradiction. *Impotent*, because the question of theological meaning (the preunderstanding) has become the inescapable, central, definitive theological question.)

In this context, the theological dispute between Rahner and Metz about the transcendental and the political kingdom has a particular significance. Each understands the other's language—Metz's earlier work, especially his *Christliche Anthropozentrik*, was part of the systematic unfolding of a Rahnerian theological anthropology. They have a common intention—to exploit theologically the 'turning to the subject' characteristic of modern thought. Metz, therefore, follows Rahner in rejecting neoscholastic theology as fundamentally restorative: despite the energy and intelligence that went into it, the return to Thomas was not at the same time a communication between Church and modern culture: it failed to assimilate critically philosophical thought post-Kant: it had no answer to Bultmann's programme for an existential interpretation of Scripture: it was incapable of grasping the awareness of human historicity operative not only in modern art, literature and communications media, but also in the method of modern science.¹ Rahner, aware of this cultural gap, worked out his Thomistic metaphysic of knowledge (*Geist in Welt*), and his philosophy of religion (*Hörer des Wortes*), as a conscious, critical assimilation of the transcendental turning to the subject. He then laid the systematic basis, in many hundreds of articles (Schriften I–VIII; L.Th.K), for a theological anthropology which would be capable of entering into a fresh discussion with the anthropological sciences (*Quaestiones Disputatae* series) and of providing at last a Catholic non-reductionist form of existential interpretation (v. *Mysterium Salutis* II, 411–413). Rahner became thereby the symbol of a movement, and—in the early postconciliar euphoria—almost a new orthodoxy. The 'anthropocentric' structure of his theological system came as a watchword for the new-found 'opening to the world': its 'transcendental' structure—though perhaps often

¹On Neo-thomism as an ideology, see the fascinatingly instructive, if perhaps a little too one-sided, analysis of Adrian Cunningham, 'Culture and Catholicism: an historical analysis', in *From Culture to Revolution* (SW 1968), 111–147. *The Revue Thomiste* provides continual evidence of the schizophrenic gap between precritical and postcritical Thomism, and between biblical analysis and scholastic speculations.

only partly understood—could articulate again the universality of Christianity and provide a key to the discussion with Marxists, humanists and the non-Christian religions.

But there seems to be a point in the arrival of a theologian when the very acceptance of his ideas provokes a theological shift which calls these ideas in question. So Bultmann's programme of existential interpretation requiring the work of a whole generation of theologians, was taken up by his own disciples in a way that called the Bultmannian philosophical and theological presuppositions in question. And Rahner's project for a transcendently structured theological anthropology has met its most radical opposition where it was expected to find its most interesting speculative developments. Where Rahner continued to work out his theological *anthropology*, Metz broke away towards a theological *eschatology*. Rahner advocated a turning to the *transcendental* subject, Metz began to speak of the *political* subject. The question of the transcendental or the political kingdom, a dispute marking perhaps the parting of the ways in postconciliar theology, is worth being discussed in detail after this historical sketch. There is a great deal at stake.

II. *Theological Anthropology and the Transcendental Kingdom*

What is the transcendental kingdom? The transcendental kingdom, in Rahner's theological system, is God's self-communication and man's self-transcendence. (Only Rahner's 'system' will be considered here—and this in its inner structure—not the multitude of theological questions he has explored independently of the system.) The two are interrelated. God's self-communication is man's self-transcendence and vice versa. This is the primal statement in Rahner's theological anthropology, providing the key to all his central dogmatic investigations—Trinity, Christology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology, etc. It explains also how Rahner's theology can be anthropocentric without this causing a false *reduction* of theology to anthropology—theology is not absorbed in anthropology, but finds in anthropology its starting-point, its context of meaning and *enracinement*. One sees also, from this primal statement (self-communication = self-transcendence), that the primordial idea of a theological anthropology is given in Christology, in which anthropology becomes theology and vice versa: in this context—but only here!—'anthropocentric' is not opposed to, but rather necessarily *implies*, 'Christocentric' and 'theocentric'. (v. *Schriften* VIII, 43 sq.)

The hermeneutical context in this theology is the '*transcendental experience of the subject*'. This transcendental starting-point relates Rahner to a philosophical tradition concerned with the subjectivity of the person, and the historicity of the subject, as the precondition for knowing any particular object: this shift from 'situation' to the 'possibility of situation' marking the transition from a cosmocentrism

and a philosophy of essence to an anthropocentrism and a philosophy of existence.¹ The starting-point in Rahner's system is the *subject*, not in a monadic isolation, but in its fundamental and interpenetrating structures of presence to self, presence to world, and intercommunication as the precondition for all ontic and psychological experience.² The subject, as 'spirit in the world', is studied in its experience of knowing and willing, intentionality and freedom, and this experience is shown to be *transcendentally orientated*, to have an unrestricted dynamism going beyond all particular objects and relating them to the *a priori* horizon of being and ultimately to God as the original ground and absolute future of all reality. (This philosophy of transcendence is presented by Rahner within a theological programme especially in his articles in L.Th.K., *Mysterium Salutis, Sacramentum Mundi*, and most explicitly in *Schriften zur Theologie VIII*, 43–65 (Theologie und Anthropologie).) This openness to God of the subject in its transcendence is at the same time—given the interdependence of transcendence (historicity) and history—an openness to a revelation of God in history. Man is, in Rahner's system, essentially 'hearer of the word', and 'listener for a word': he is the open question whose answer can only be God's self-communication. Mankind, in its history and historicity, necessarily seeks Godmanhood and is ordered towards the Christ. The Christ-event, when it occurs, cannot be deduced from this transcendental experience of the subject; it can be articulated without appearing as mythology, however, only in terms of this experience. Of course this analysis is not purely philosophical—it considers man in his concrete historical situation and therefore within the 'supernatural existential'. (The problems which arise here, and the various distinctions to be made, cannot be discussed in this short article. For further reference see the *Schriften* and, especially, L.Th.K. I (1967), 618–627. Anthropologie, theologische (Rahner).) Nevertheless, in starting with the transcendental experience of the subject, this analysis can indicate the reference in human nature to the event of revelation. Without destroying the gratuitousness, imprevisability and uniqueness of the particular revelation which we call the 'history of salvation', it shows this history to be the explicit, categorical manifestation of a universal, but implicit and anonymous revelation given as unthematic horizon in the transcendental experience of the subject. This 'transcendental revelation', as

¹This global description is suitable here. The philosophical background of Rahner is complex, and insufficiently studied, for a judgment to be possible on his relationship, not only to Kant and to Heidegger, but also to Fichte and Hegel. The critique of Rahner's philosophy by McCool, Lakebrink, Simon, Gerken cannot be properly discussed here, nor the whole problematik of Maréchal Thomism.

²Rahner does not himself use the term 'transcendental kingdom'—if understood properly (not spiritualistically), it does, however, I think, hit off what he means. It remains true that 'intercommunication' (intersubjectivity) is *explicitly* developed far more in Rahner's theological writings than in his philosophical work: there is a philosophical development in Rahner's later theological work which would have to be examined here: whether this development answers Metz's critique is, however, doubtful.

God's self-communication, gives the dimensions of the transcendental kingdom.¹

Self-communication|self-transcendence

The transcendental kingdom is, first of all, God's *self-communication* (*Selbstmitteilung*). The analysis of the transcendental experience of the subject shows human existence already referred, consciously or unconsciously, in acceptance or rejection, to the holy Mystery (*das heilige Geheimnis*) as the ground of all being. Revelation announces this holy Mystery to be originally self-gift and love, and to have communicated itself to man in absolute proximity, as salvation and forgiveness: this is called in theology the gift of divinizing grace. God does not cease to be mystery in this self-gift: he communicates himself as mystery. Rahner continually points out, this is the only mystery in Christianity, because in it is contained the manifestation of the Father as the holy Mystery in his Word and in his Spirit. What God is for us, he is in and for himself—in theological language: the 'economic' Trinity is the immanent Trinity. The transcendental kingdom is therefore the mystery of grace, God's self-gift as incarnation (Christ) and sanctification (Spirit). (On Rahner's concept of Mystery (*Geheimnis*), see especially *Schriften* IV, 51–102, and *Schriften* VIII, 153–164: on the Trinity, elaborating the above—I, 91–168; IV, 103–136, 275–312; MS II, 317–404.)

The transcendental kingdom is therefore man's *self-transcendence* (*Selbsttranscendenz*). Creation is a freely constituted moment within God's self-communication, and is ordered, in a movement of transcendence, towards this self-communication. God creates a world which transcends itself towards him. The science of evolution can enumerate the stages in this process of becoming—the complexification in the various forms of life, hominization, planetarization. A theological anthropology will grasp in this process the fundamental tendency of matter to become living and to become conscious: hominization is the place where matter becomes spirit and so present to itself. But with the appearance of spirit, there appears at the same time, necessarily, the transcendence towards that horizon which is God's self-communication as mystery. Man is therefore essentially ek-centric, God-centred. The more he grows in his humanity, the more he becomes centred on God, though on God as mystery.²

The Christ-event

It follows from this that the transcendental kingdom has its centre in the *Christ-event*, and only there. For this primal statement

¹On the relationship between 'transcendental' and 'categorical' revelation, see especially Rahner/Ratzinger, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung: Quaestiones Disputatae* 25 (1965), esp. 11–24: also, *Schriften zur Theologie* V, 115–182.

²Rahner develops the notion of a self-transcendence or a self-surpassing (*Selbstüberbietung*) especially in *Das Problem der Hominisation Quaestiones Disputatae* 12/13 (1965): cf. *Schriften* VI, 185–214, 'Die Einheit von Geist und Materie im christlichen Glaubensverständnis'.

in a theological anthropology, that God's self-communication is man's self-transcendence, is essentially a *Christological* statement, and its meaning is given in the unique historical event of Christ. But the way to grasp this event is, in Rahner's system, via the transcendental experience of the subject. For the fundamental tendency of man (and through him of the world), to become centred on God as mystery in a movement of ek-sistence (transcendence)—this movement succeeds in Christ, and through him (by grace), for other men who are not Christ. As the absolute gift of self to God on the part of man, he is at the same time the absolute gift of self from God to man. The Christ-event can be formulated either in terms of man's self-transcendence or in terms of God's self-gift, for each implies the other. One can say: he is the man who lives this total and absolute abandonment of himself to God, and so reveals what man fundamentally is—but then one must add, this gift of self to God implies and presupposes an absolute gift of God to man, creating this ek-sistence. Or one can say: when God freely communicates himself in absolute proximity, when God goes out of himself in his Word, what comes to be is the Christ-event, that is, someone who in his presence to self, existence in the world and intersubjectivity is radically open to this self-communication by God: the self-communication, however, creates this openness. In either case, the Christ-event reveals what man is, and what he tends towards in his transcendental experience. Christology is anthropology which surpasses itself. And since man exists essentially in an intersubjective community and in an evolutionary world, then the meaning of their development and their experience is given radically in the Christ-event. The more man grows in his humanity, the more he enters into the Christological mystery. The Christ-event is therefore the origin, the measure, and the fulfilment of all anthropology. Man is the possible brother of Christ, and mankind the preordained community (Church) around Christ (v. Rahner's Christological essays: v. *Schriften* I, 169–222, III, 47–60; IV, 137–157; 275–312; V, 183–221, 222–248; VIII, 213–217, 218–235 for necessary distinctions, and corrections to this précis).

Death and Resurrection

The transcendental kingdom is entered through a *death and resurrection*. The access to this truth, in terms of a hermeneutical context, is once again the transcendental experience of the subject.¹ This is the experience of an incarnate subject, determined by an

¹It is in this area of the 'redemption' that the objection is most often made against a transcendental method in theology that it surrenders the 'historical', and especially the Cross in favour of a non-historical, idealist and indeed unconsciously gnostic and docetic 'system'. (Balthasar's *Cordula, passim*.) To this it can be said: 1. The transcendental method, at least in Rahner's usage, is a reflection on the uniqueness of historical event, *a fortiori* the Christ-event, and affirms throughout that God can be truly encountered only in history. 2. An event of the past can be witnessed to effectively, i.e. without 'mythology', only when it is shown to be universally present, accessible in human experience—hence the need for a hermeneutic, a context of meaning.

intercommunication, assuming a particular historical situation. This concrete situation is one of alienation, division, guilt and death. The transcendental reference to God's self-communication is opposed by an existential alienation from God. Man, who is 'essentially' ek-centric and God-centred, is 'existentially' centred on himself and therefore has a false centre. The saving assumption of this human situation would demand its transformation, the dying to this false centre in the actual achievement of an abandonment of self to God as the holy Mystery. Mankind, in seeking Godmanhood, is seeking an absolute bringer of salvation, who will transform the human situation of guilt and death. In the witness of revelation to the death and resurrection of Christ, as the event of salvation, it is being announced that this radical abandonment of man to God has taken place and been accepted for all. The Christ-event is the *dynamic* self-communication of God to the world: it is the assumption of a history and a human situation determined by death as the concrete manifestation of sin: it is the event (death and resurrection) which transforms this human situation from within. As the definitive (eschatological) event of salvation, the death and resurrection of Christ is the beginning of a new world and a new community. This indicates how the *Church*, as intersubjectivity with Christ, is constituted by God's self-communication in this passage through death and resurrection and through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, which make this *transitus* present. (On 'Redemption', cf. the essays in final parenthesis, p. 810, with IV, 157–172 and *Zur Theologie des Todes* (QD 2) 1958.)

It follows that the transcendental kingdom is universally present in human experience. For the Christ-event is not simply a phenomenon of the past, but the inner meaning of every human life and of every human culture, as well as the secret entelechy of human history generally. The pattern of human self-realization is given in the Christ-event as God's eschatological self-communication to the world.

The preaching of the Gospel, therefore, is not the bringing of Christ into a situation which would otherwise not include him. The events of human life have an inner reference to Christ—the experience of solitude, suffering and death, the experience of bravery, loyalty to conscience, love—when radically accepted and endured, is an implicit acceptance of the Christ-event, and is achieved through the grace of Christ. The preaching of the Gospel would be the deciphering, in a kind of 'depth-psychology', of this unconscious implicit Christianity: or the unmasking of the explicit or implicit unbelief which would be the rejection of the Christ-pattern in human experience. (cf. Rahner, *Mission and Grace*, 157–161: also, *Schriften* VIII, 153–164, 'Die Forderung nach einer "Kurzformel" des christlichen Glaubens'.) This opens up the way to preach Christ explicitly as new life and future hope. For Christianity, in Rahner's system, is not simply an interpretation, even if a definitive one, of

human life or of world history. The Christ-event implies a radical *transformation* of human existence, a new centering of human existence on God as the ground and absolute future of all reality. And the pattern of the Christ-event, as one of death and resurrection, is meant to permeate all human relationships and all levels of human consciousness. The transcendental kingdom has a history and drives history on: it manifests itself historically and explicitly in a Church community and a sacramental institution. But this 'categorical revelation' is the visible vanguard of an implicit 'transcendental revelation' universally operative, ordered towards the recapitulation of all human experience and all human cultures in the Christ-event.¹

(To be continued)

¹The phrase, the 'Christ-event', is used to bring out the *eschatological* significance of what took place in Jesus of Nazareth—together with the need to articulate this in terms of an evolutionary Christology, an existential and ontological Christology, etc.

N.B. *All references to the eight volumes of Schriften are to the German original, since they have not yet all been translated into English. Vol. VI of Theological Investigations has, however, just been published by Darton, Longman & Todd, and the interested reader will need to make his own adjustments.*