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Karl Rahner's Ecclesiology

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Abstract

For reasons of academic fashion and ecclesial politics, Rahner is often dismissed as a liberal. Though elements of his thought on the church/world relationship do not date well, and others have been so thoroughly absorbed into the mainstream as to lose their interest, there is a dimension of his thought which remains important and which in fact undercuts typical divisions between liberals and their opponents.

Keywords

Rahner, Ecclesiology, Church, World, Liberalism

The Church, Richard Lennan tells us, is the theme of over half of Karl Rahner's writings.[1] One might quibble over the counting – what proportion exactly we settle on depends on how broadly we conceive of ecclesiology – but in any case it seems clear that unless I set out to speak very superficially for the next forty minutes and very fast, it will not be possible to deal with Rahner's ecclesiology comprehensively. Nevertheless, because the sheer range and variety of Rahner's theology is one of its striking features, and one often lost sight of, I will begin with just a little bit of the fast and superficial – a brief and incomplete survey of the range of Rahner's ecclesiology.

Rahner wrote, famously and repeatedly, of the Church as the sacrament of salvation. He also wrote about the seven sacraments in relation to the Church, and in particular detail on the history of the sacrament of penance on the one hand and about the possibility of concelebration of the eucharist on the other. He wrote on the relationship of the institutional to the charismatic dimension of the Church, on the nature of infallibility in the Church, on the relationship of the episcopate to the papacy, on the nature of pastoral synods, on the nature of priesthood, and on the nature of parish priesthood in

[1] Richard Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 10.

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particular, on the spirituality of the priesthood, on women and the priesthood, on the restoration of the diaconate, on the apostolate of the laity, on the nature of secular institutes. He wrote about Latin as a Church language. He wrote about pluralism in the Church, about the changing nature of heresy in the Church, about the need for criticism in the Church. He wrote about structural change in the Church, about the development of dogma, about the question of televising the mass. He also wrote about the situation of the Church as "diaspora", a community no longer either in the majority or supported by a common culture; about the development of a "world-church", about which I will say more in a moment; and a good deal about the requirements of ecumenism.

Rahner also, of course, wrote about the theological and ecclesiological significance of the Second Vatican Council, about which, given the theme of our conference, I will say a little more. He was not uncritical of the Second Vatican Council: one can find reference in his essays to the Council's failures to acknowledge the sinfulness of the Church[2], to some Council documents appearing rather cliché-ridden[3], to them very soon coming to seem rather dated.[4] He thought it would be a mistake to look to the Council for concrete blueprints for the churches, or to suppose that the theological task could now content itself with commentary on conciliar documents. His writings do not, then, ooze with piety towards the Council, nor did he set himself up as a cheerleader for it. But he was nevertheless at some pains to stress on several occasions what he took to be the significance of the Second Vatican Council. On four fronts, at least, he thought something genuinely important had happened.[5] First, and most heavily stressed in his analysis, is the proposal that in the Council for the first time the Church began to know itself as that thing which I have already mentioned, a "world church", rather than as a fundamentally European phenomenon exported, along with other aspects of European culture, to the rest of the world.[6] He thought that the existence of the Church as "world church" was in evidence at the Council "only in a very rudimentary way and hesitatingly" (principally, it seems, through the presence of bishops from Africa, Asia,

[2] In 'The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II', Rahner writes "It might even be said that the parenetic impulse of the texts . . . is in *almost* every case movement from what is good to what is better in virtue, not from sin and its recognition to an ever renewed reaching out towards pardoning grace . . ." (*Theological Investigations* 6, p. 280).

[3] In 'Christian living formerly and today' Rahner writes that the Council's pronouncements on "modes of Christian living appropriate to the layman, the priest, the religious" are significant even though they "may strike one as somewhat traditional and *cliché*-ridden" (TI 7, p. 6).

[4] Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: SPCK, 1974), p. 13.

[5] This four-fold classification is mine rather than Rahner's.

[6] 'Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council', in TI 20, p. 78.

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Latin America and so on, and in particular bishops who *were* in fact African, Asian, Latin American rather than European missionaries) but that this rudimentary and hesitating thing nevertheless marked a hugely important shift. The shift from a Church exported from Europe to a world-church was a "caesura", he proposed, as profound as the transition brought about by Paul from the earliest Jewish Christianity to a Christianity which included the Gentiles, and with ramifications that might be as far-reaching and hard to predict.[7] So, first of all, the Council was the first official act of the Church as a world-church. Secondly, there was at the Council a renouncing of the use of external power in matters of religion. Thirdly, there was a profound shift in the Church's attitude towards other Christian churches and communities, towards non-Christian religions, and more generally a shift from a fundamental pessimism to a fundamental optimism about salvation. And finally, there was a general theological shift away from the language and patterns of neo-scholasticism: limbo was quietly dropped, what Rahner calls the "theological exuberance" of Mariology checked, a theology of the episcopacy began to be developed, changes in the view of Scripture introduced. Neo-scholasticism did not simply disappear, but its period of theological hegemony was over.

The language in which Rahner assesses the Second Vatican Council is interesting. At nearly every stage he speaks of the *irreversibility* of what has happened, of changes that cannot be undone, of frontiers being crossed that one cannot go back behind. If the changes are so dramatic and so irreversible, one might think, why need one even bother to write articles on them? When I first came across these pieces as a student, indeed, I found them boring, and could not understand why Rahner, normally so intelligent and interesting, had troubled himself to produce these bland and obvious essays. Now it no longer seems such a puzzle to me. There is, I think one has to say, clearly something of the performative in Rahner's assessments of Vatican II;[8] these developments he thinks *should* be irreversible, and he is hoping that by describing them in this way he will help bring it about that they *are* in fact irreversible. This is a dimension that I missed as a student because I was not much aware of the forces in the Church pulling in a very different direction.[9]

[7] This notion that the Council represents a fundamental caesura is explored in 'Basic Theological Interpretation', particularly on pp. 82–87.

[8] Rahner himself distinguishes in the opening passage of the essay 'The abiding significance of the Second Vatican Council' (TI 20) between the indicative and the imperative, suggesting that the Council is not just something to be described but that it sets a task for the Church.

[9] See 'The Struggle for the Council', a collection of essays which compose the final part of Nicholas Lash's *Theology for Pilgrims* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), for a portrait of these forces.

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I have lingered a little over Rahner's assessment of Vatican II because of its relevance to our conference, but the task I was given was a bit broader: what I want to focus on primarily is not so much Rahner's assessment of Vatican II, as our own assessment of Rahner. While Rahner asked and attempted to answer the question, "Does the Second Vatican Council have an abiding significance?", my own question will be: "Is there an abiding significance to what Rahner has to say about the Church, and more particularly about the Church in relation to the world?" Is what he wrote, in other words, still helpful? Does it have anything to teach us?

In quite a number of quarters, I think, the instinctive answer would be "No, of course not." I met a doctoral student not too long ago from Duke University who told me that when she introduced Rahner into a conversation with fellow students, she was laughed at. The reaction may not always be this stark, but I think it would be fair to say that in many parts of the Catholic theological world and also the Protestant, Rahner is not especially in vogue. He is thought of, if he is thought of at all, as too much aligned with the 60s and 70s, and as proposing a theology that is so taken with being open to and in touch with the modern world, or so in the grip of modern philosophy, that it cannot help but sacrifice and distort the content of the faith.

I think there are a variety of reasons for Rahner's falling out of favour which have little to do with the actual substance of his writings. There is first of all a certain inevitable cycling of fashion in theology at a *research* level, and if one is at the top of the heap in terms of perceived theological significance at a particular point, one is unlikely to stay there for very long. The need for doctoral students to be doing something different from their predecessors is usually too strong. Secondly, from what I understand, Rahner was for a time so much in vogue that in Catholic institutions in a number of countries he was more or less at the core of the *teaching* curriculum, forced down students' throats at every turn in a way bound to put a whole cohort off very thoroughly. Then, of course, there is the question of church politics: Rahner tends (with only partial justification) to be identified with a certain style of post-Vatican II Catholicism and, if one sees the development of this kind of Catholicism as a fundamentally unfortunate thing, then one may have an interest in finding reasons to be dismissive of him.

So there are reasons for Rahner's being out of favour in some circles which have very little to do with the quality or interest of his theology in general, or what he has to say about Church and world in particular. But this is not the whole story. I must admit that to my own question 'Is there an abiding significance to Rahner's thought on the Church and the world?' my own answer will in part be 'No'. Not to every aspect of it. Some of it, I think, does not date especially well. But what the forces I have been discussing, the

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forces of Church politics and academic fashion, have encouraged us to do *too much*, it seems to me, is to bundle together what are really rather different aspects of Rahner's thought, and to see the whole through the lens of that which can seem most passé. We must, then, engage in some unbundling. In particular I want to distinguish three strands in what we can find in Rahner on the question of the church and the world. There is a first strand that has become mainstream, and for that very reason has lost much of its interest; a second strand I think simply has not dated very well; and a third strand which I think should retain considerable interest for us.

First of all, then, there is the strand in Rahner's thought that is no longer very exciting because it has been absorbed; success has robbed it, not I suppose of its significance, but at least of most of its interest. I was once rather sharply alerted to this phenomenon when giving a talk to a group of cloistered Carmelites. Having been asked to speak about Rahner, I thought I had better say something about what he tends to be most known for, the theory of the anonymous Christian. So towards the end of my talk I began to set up the problem: Rahner was trying to reconcile God's universal saving will on the one hand with the belief that there is no salvation outside the Church on the other. I had trouble getting to the description of his solution, however, because at this point a number of the nuns began to get rather angry with me, or with Rahner, or perhaps with both. How could he possibly say there was no salvation outside the Church? What sort of thing was this to say? The Church was, after all, the *sacrament* of salvation, they said, the making visible to the world of what God's grace was in fact enacting. I was a bit thrown off my stride by this. The vision of the Church that Rahner (among others) had promoted had proved so successful that it made Rahner's own arguments redundant, and in this case even offensive, it seemed.

Now I do not mean to suggest that Rahner's argument for anonymous Christianity has been successful in the sense that it has met with general approval. In fact it may well be the most frequently criticised snippet of his thought, if only because it is the most widely distributed. But on a more general level, the shift away from the bleak and pessimistic view of the world outside the Church and its prospects for salvation for which Rahner (among others) campaigned, seems to have taken place. That we can imagine God's grace, the grace of Christ, as operative outside the (visible) Church, that we can trust and hope in God's love and goodness for the salvation of all when thinking about non-Christians, seem to be things which are, not perhaps universally but at least pretty widely, presumed within Catholic theology. For various reasons people do not always like Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians but, like the nuns, they have no need of it because they are already essentially starting from the conclusion Rahner wanted to support – starting from the conclusion,

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that is, that one can be a serious and faithful Christian without being deeply worried about the prospects for non-Christians, that one can hope that the grace of Christ is working outside the boundaries of the visible Church.

There is, then, one strand in Rahner's thought on church and world which has become rather uninteresting by virtue of its own success. A second strand, as I've already suggested, simply has not aged particularly well. Not too surprisingly, this has to do mostly with Rahner's diagnosis of the time he was living through and his predictions for the future. He frequently wrote of the Church being in a period of transition, of the confusion and uncertainty which accompany such a transition, and of the need for patience to endure it. Quite frequently he wrote of the unknowability of the future, whether the future of the world or of the Church. All this seems very plausible. Yet at the same time Rahner also put forward concrete descriptions of what was happening in this transition and concrete proposals for what (beyond patience) was needed in such a time, as well as concrete predictions for what the Church would have to become in the future. Not all these ring true in our ears any more.

Rahner seemed to think he knew quite clearly, for instance, what the transition he was living through was *from* and what it was a transition *to*; what was the old and what was the new. It seemed clear to him which groups in the Church were dated, essentially of the past, and which were those who really reflected the present and future; who were the "men of yesterday" and who the "men of tomorrow", to use a phrase from his *Shape of the Church to Come*, written in 1972.[10] One gets a sense at points like this that Rahner, for all his talk of the uncertainty and the darkness and the unknowability of the future, was, for a period at least, pretty confident that whatever minor setbacks and resistance there might be, things were and inescapably had to be moving in a particular direction. This is a confidence which now, in a Church where the younger clergy are less inclined to question authority and more concerned to preserve the traditional than the older, seems to date Rahner.

And then there is his frequently recurring theme of, to put it in its shortest formulation, the Christian of the future as a mystic. Rahner often pointed to the changed situation of the modern believer, for whom various kinds of external support for Christian belief were no longer in place. The Christian of the future would no longer belong to a homogeneously Christian society, would no longer be surrounded

[10] See for instance p. 50. See also his discussion of the 'Church of non-simultaneity' (pp. 35–37) exploring the notion that the German society and therefore Church contains groups which exist at the same time and yet in socially and culturally different epochs. In this chapter at least pluralism in Church and society is construed in terms of before and after, earlier and later.

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by others who give at least lip service to what the Christian believes, would in this sense no longer have his or her faith supported from without by society as a whole. What follows from this, he concluded, is that faith will become more solitary, more inward, more based on the individual's own direct experience of God. "The spirituality of the future", he wrote, "will have to live much more clearly than hitherto out of a solitary, immediate experience of God and his Spirit in the individual"[11]. "The lonely responsibility of the individual in his decision of faith is", he wrote, "required in a way much more radical than it was in former times"[12]. Rahner was careful, of course, always to insist that Christian faith must have a communal dimension, that it cannot be *just* a matter between the individual and God, and that it will have to be articulated and expressed outwardly. But the credibility of what is believed, and the vitality of the belief, will rest very much on private, individual experience.

Rahner's theology of an everyday mysticism[13] is one of the most fascinating and significant aspects of his thought, but what may date him here is his insistence that *because* of the Church's changing relationship to the world, *because* of the new situation we are in where the broader culture and society do not make any kind of Christianity the default option, *therefore* there will be, and there needs to be, a shift away from the external, communal dimension of Christianity (something he at times seems to suggest will need to be quite significantly stripped back and pared down) towards the lonely mystical experience of the individual. But in fact it is possible to draw exactly the opposite conclusion from the same observation: because there is no longer a general socializing into Christianity going on through the broader culture, it becomes *all the more* important that this socialization goes on within the Church through the telling of narrative and the use of ritual, through scripture and liturgy, through the maintenance of clear boundaries and definite teachings, and so on.

This second possibility, that the changed situation of the church in the world points to a greater need for emphasis on what one might call the externals of faith, is in fact quite close to the line taken by a good deal of the most influential of recent theology. Now it may not be necessary to take sides on this issue – perhaps the Church in its current situation needs to be strong in both dimensions, perhaps one must not be played off against the other. But it can at least be granted that what seemed the obvious to Rahner does not any longer seem quite so obvious to us, and indeed that in Rahner's descriptions

[11] TI 20 p. 148.

[12] *Ibid*, 149.

[13] I am here paraphrasing from Harvey Egan's title, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998).

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of the way forward we may sometimes now hear traces of a rather out of fashion existentialism.

Finally, it is sometimes possible to detect in Rahner's essays hints of what now seems to us the excessive optimism of the 1960s, an optimism in particular about the nature of the contemporary 'world' in which the Church finds itself. Rahner was very clear in principle that the Church at times needs to criticise society, and he was himself at some points concretely critical of it. But at times one can get the impression that these critical elements were not at the forefront of his thought; that the 'the world' as Rahner describes it is really a rather positive one; that his is a fundamentally cheerful, sanguine outlook on increasing secularisation, on technological developments, on human domination and manipulation of nature, on the coming of globalisation (though he does not use that term).

Perhaps this is not quite fair to Rahner. He does not seem personally to have been of a particularly optimistic disposition, and he was as capable as the next theologian of noticing the terrible things that have gone on in the twentieth-century.[14] It may well be that the proper context for understanding the balance of his rhetoric on secularisation, technological developments and so on, is not in fact any general cultural optimism of the 1960s but rather the quite particular need he felt to combat a fortress mentality that had been dominant in the Roman Catholic Church, the need he felt, that is to say, to ease the Church away from an excessively anxious and defensive way of approaching that which lay beyond its boundaries, away from a mentality which saw the world principally in terms of threat.

To focus too much on just how optimistic Rahner was or wasn't, however, is in the end to miss a much more fundamental issue in the way Rahner sees the Church/world relationship, which brings me to the third strand I want to discuss. Something that again and again comes through in Rahner's writings on Church and world is not so much that the world is such a wonderful place that the Church ought to embrace it, as that the Church in fact, whatever it might suppose to the contrary, has no option about engagement with the world. It does not stand apart, over-against the world, in some kind of separate existence. It does not engage with the world in a second step, after taking a deliberate decision that it might perhaps be a good idea to do so for pastoral reasons, because of the need to communicate

[14] That Rahner's deepest optimism, his optimism about the hope for universal salvation, is not something shallow and easy, becomes clear if one takes seriously passages like the following: "It [the hope that all may be saved] is an attitude which may seem obvious to the liberalistic, bourgeois philistine . . . . But if someone has even a remote idea of who God is, is really aware of the terrible darkness of the history of humanity, he will find the optimism of universal salvation which the Church has struggled to acquire an almost frightening message to which he has to respond with the ultimate resources of his faith" (TI 20, pp. 101–2).

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with the world or out of a benign condescension. The Church is always already there, always already worldly, always in the midst of things, and only deceives itself if it thinks otherwise. The choice, then, is not over whether or not to engage with the world, but over whether to take cognizance and some measure of responsibility for the engagement, indeed the embeddedness, that is inevitably already a reality. So, for instance, in *The Shape of the Church to Come*, Rahner makes the point repeatedly that the official Church may be tempted to react to unsettling changes in society by pulling up the drawbridge and tending to its aging and ever-diminishing 'little flock' in just the way it always has; but this would not mean that it remains apart from the world, that it avoids being influenced by and enmeshed in society. What it would rather mean is that it is engaged with a very particular (and dwindling) sociological grouping, that it is still being 'worldly', but according to a particular way that just happens to be passing away.

A very similar pattern emerges on the plane of philosophy and engagement with contemporary intellectual movements of thought. Rahner is often accused of being too much enthralled by modern thought, too captured by Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. I don't want here to go into a full discussion of the justice or otherwise of these worries, which I have tried to deal with elsewhere,[15] but I think it is worth noticing that when Rahner appeals, whether rightly or wrongly, to some aspect of modern philosophy or the modern mentality in general – the turn to the subject, for instance, or the evolutionary worldview – he *never* makes the claim that Catholic theology ought to take these things on board simply because they are *true*. He never even says they must be taken on board because they are better than that which came before. His rationale is always rather different: that these are things which are ultimately unavoidable for people of a modern mindset; we just cannot help it, these patterns of thought inevitably shape us, and so if we do not want to be intellectually schizophrenic, we need in some way to integrate them with our faith, to take them into account, at least, in the way we articulate it. There is a givenness to our situation which cannot be avoided. We do not decide whether or not we ought to participate in our historical period, in our society, in the mentality of our time – we always find ourselves already there.

All this does not, of course, mean we cannot criticise or resist or reject some aspects of our world, our society, the prevailing philosophy or outlook or practices of our time. But it is *our* world, our own world, the mindset of *our* period, that we will be criticising, not something that we look out upon from another place altogether. Or

[15] C.f. especially *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004).

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to be more precise, we *may* look at it from another place altogether but if we do so, this other place will not be the place of a pure Church, but of some other particular bit of the world: the world of a previous generation or an immigrant subpopulation perhaps. So we can criticise particular things in our world, but we cannot step outside our world so as to be able to criticise it all at once.

All this is in danger of sounding, perhaps, platitudinous. The Church is worldly. It is always part of a particular place and time. Of course it is. This is after all the kind of thing about which the historians never tire of reminding us. But I think that although nearly everybody knows this when they are thinking of the past, not quite so many find a way to bring it actively into their understanding of the present. Certainly it is not something I see much evidence of in official Vatican documents, or in, say, the writings of a thinker like von Balthasar. In Rahner one finds a constant effort to come to terms with our situatedness, with the contingencies of our location in the world and in time, without falling into relativism. And, to repeat the point, it is not just a matter of coming to terms with the fact that those to whom we preach, those to whom we want to reach out, have a particular context; it is at least as much a matter of coming to terms with the contingency of *our own* location. One finds Rahner, then, constantly, almost tiresomely, affirming that while we must believe that there are unchanging metaphysical truths and an unchanging faith, these things are always, at any time, including our own time, and including whatever 'good old days' we may hearken back to, perceived and known and articulated in historically particular ways.

Now one might say that this side of Rahner's thought too has already been absorbed, insofar as we have seen during and since his time a proliferation of contextual theologies: African, Asian, feminist, womanist, liberation, black, Latino, mujerista and so on. To some extent this is true, but the theme has a slightly different caste in Rahner's thought than it does in most contextual theology. I think this is partly because in Rahner it is worked out primarily in terms of time, of historical period, rather than in terms of geographic or group identity, and partly because in Rahner the accent falls more on the *inevitability*, rather than the *permissibility*, of being shaped by our locatedness. In any case, as various contextual theologians remind us (and, indeed, as the very usage of the *phrase* 'contextual theology' – to cover certain kinds of theology only – suggests) this is a theme that has *not* been taken up by what is called the mainstream.

There are parallels, I think, between what I am calling Rahner's insistence on the worldliness of the Church and his work on the *sinfulness* of the Church.[16] So I would like to digress for a moment

[16] This is addressed particularly in two essays in the sixth volume of the *Theological Investigations*.

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on to sinfulness. The Church has, and has had since Augustine, no difficulty in granting that its *members* are sinful, even that *all* its members are sinful, and yet there is, in the Catholicism of the last few centuries at least, a reluctance to describe the *Church* as sinful. Rahner was convinced that this was untenable. His argument, or one strand of it, goes something like this: if no one can deny that clergy, bishops and popes are sinners, and we have no reason to assume, no dogma to assure us, that this sinfulness *only* effects them in their private capacity, then we have to conclude that acts of the Church are themselves marked by sin, which means that the Church itself is sinful. To deny this would be to turn the Church into some sort of hypostasized ideal and to make of our relationship with it a belief in an idea rather than faith in a reality. It just cannot work to allow that Christians are sinners but construe the Church only in terms of holiness.

One might be tempted to say that Rahner's ecclesiology is marked by a concern for *honesty* and that this is what unites his treatment of the Church's sinfulness and its worldliness – you must describe things as they really are, and not through the fog of an abstract ideal. But I think this is not quite right; or if right, it does not go far enough. Rahner is not just suggesting that as a matter of fact and regrettably we must face up to the situation that the Church is worldly, shaped by temporality, subject to change and sin, and that it departs from the ideal we might have for it. It is not just, to put it crudely, that he describes things as they are. It is that he does so precisely as a *theologian* and in genuinely theological terms. He insists that it is a matter of *faith*, and not just experience, that the church is sinful. The sinfulness of the Church is something we would be obliged to affirm even if we had not happened to notice it. In the same way, it is a matter of faith that the Church really is always embedded in a particular time, always shaped by the world it is in. Even if we can't immediately see how we are ourselves shaped by our time, we are obliged to suppose that we are. What one finds in Rahner, then, is not so much the honesty to acknowledge a gap between theory and reality, theology and experience, but rather an effort to think in such a way that we do not create for ourselves this gap in the first place. We have to think in such a way that we do not keep that which we believe on a separate plane from that which we in fact see around us. What I think is crucial, then, is not so much that Rahner himself is honest, as that he develops an ecclesiology that makes honesty easier, a theology that allows us, while remaining really theological, to really look at and think about what we find in the Church, a theology that reduces the ever-present temptation to double-think.

I noted earlier that there is a tendency in many theological circles to dismiss Rahner, and I outlined various reasons for this. But there is another and probably simpler way of explaining the phenomenon.

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One could say that the one thing which unites many of the most influential recent theological groupings, from the Balthasarians to the Hauerwasians, from the postliberals and Barthians to the Radically Orthodox (groupings which are otherwise very different and at times mutually antagonistic) is an antipathy to theological liberalism: Rahner is dismissed because he is deemed a liberal. Another way to formulate what I have been arguing, then, is that, while it may be true that one can at times hear traces of theological liberalism in Rahner's voice, there is a strand in his thought which in fact undercuts the divide between liberals and their opponents.

A standard formulation of the confrontation between liberals and conservatives, or liberals and postliberals, might go something like this: what does the Church need to do, in face of the contemporary world? Does it need to shape itself to the language, the concepts, the standards of the world, so as to make its message heard and to demonstrate the credibility and relevance of its faith? Or does it need to have the courage and confidence to be itself, to be different, to confound the world, to be counter-cultural, to follow its own distinctive logic rather than buying into to the most recent standards of reasonableness, whatever these happen to be? Now lying behind both these options, I think, is the image of a Church which *first of all* stands on its own, separated, and looks at a world over there, and *then* has to decide whether to sidle up and adapt, or to stay resolutely where it is and maintain a proud independence. The presumption of a prior separateness, in other words, infects *both* liberalism *and* its opponents. And I think that what Rahner constantly reminds us of is that this is just not how it is. We cannot *decide* whether or not to be modern, to be part of our world, because we always already are; we cannot decide whether or not to live in our time, because we always already do. This does not mean, of course, that there are no choices to be made. We do have to decide some things; at particular points and in particular ways we need to be subversive, to be different, to resist, to live otherwise. Yet this will always be against a background of being inescapably worldly, and in many more and subtler ways than we can consciously grasp.[17]

This is perhaps all very well, it might be objected, but annoyingly *vague*. No concrete indication would seem to follow from what I have been describing of how *in particular* the Church needs to act in the world in which it finds itself. There are two things to say in my defence. The first is that it may well be that by and large what we should be learning from Rahner these days is not so much on the level of concrete and practical proposals, but rather something

[17] There is also a choice to be made at times whether to retain practices that originated in a different period and no longer mean what they once did. To keep these practices may be legitimate, but it is nevertheless a choice to be a particular way *in our own world*.

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to do with broad orientation, with tone, manner, with underlying presuppositions and approach. All these things, though elusive and hard to pin down, are enormously important for theology.[18] The second thing to say in defence against the charge of vagueness is that while what I have been putting forward may not lead to concrete proposals, neither does a general rhetoric of resistance to, difference from and contradiction of the world, no matter how assertive and confident that rhetoric might be. And if we are always faced with the problem of determining at which points and in which ways we need to resist the world, the world which we are in and which is in us, then an acknowledgement of the complexity of our situation may well make a better starting point for discussion and discernment than a rhetoric of otherness.

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[18] The case with Hans Urs von Balthasar, I think, is exactly the reverse: there is much rich material to mine, much that can be borrowed and put to use in various ways, but he ought definitely *not* be a guide when it comes to questions of tone, manner, method, questions of overall orientation and underlying presupposition. I try to make the case for this in the forthcoming Eerdmans volume *Balthasar: a very critical introduction*.

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