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Between Heaven and History: Rahner on Hope

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INTRODUCTION

I Peter 3:5 offers a poignant articulation of the theological endeavor: "Always be prepared to give an account of the hope that is in you." Why does this admonition point specifically to hope, as opposed to faith or love? In what does the preparation here noted consist? Ultimately Christian hope is the hope of salvation, and since God possesses a universal salvific will (I Tim 2:4), this includes salvation not merely for oneself, but for the whole world. Furthermore, this hope is truth, and any truth according to its own dynamism must necessarily be communicated (Rom 10:14–17). Thus, Paul writes: "Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (Rom 10:17)."

Hope bears more than an intellectual exigency; hope requires a change of life. In his encyclical Spe Salvi, Pope Benedict remarks: "The one who hopes lives differently; the one who hopes has been given a new life."[1] There is a relationship between hope and historical existence. How does Christian life challenge us to live differently in the 21st century? Can Christian hope reasonably respond to our present-day context? Does Christian hope bear historical significance?

In this paper, I will argue for a particular understanding of Christian hope as enshrined in the thought of Karl Rahner. Specifically, I will argue that Rahner's characteristic Ignatian worldview and his conception of the unity of nature and grace provide the basis for a conception of hope that overcomes the usual dichotomy between a flight from the world on one hand and immanentism on the other. For Rahner, there is no competition between eschatological and historical hope, precisely because they are unified in the Triune God who grounds them both. Christian hope dwells between heaven and history.

[1] *Spe Salvi* no.2

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RAHNER'S IGNATIAN WORLDVIEW

Rahner's conception of hope lies between an otherworldly fuga mundi approach and an activism restricted to the world of political matters. In order to appreciate the thoroughly immanent and yet abidingly transcendent character of Rahner's theology, it is necessary to consider two fundamental pillars of Rahner's thought: his Ignatian worldview and his concomitant Ignatian-Thomistic conception of nature and grace. Much has been written about Rahner's sacramental worldview, from both its Ignatian and its Thomistic origins.[2] Many have underscored the essentially positive orientation of Rahner towards the world as opposed to the allegedly stifling fuga mundi approach of both classical and Tridentine thought. And yet interestingly, Rahner actually grounds joy in the world in the fuga saeculi and not apart from it. In a particularly elucidating article on Ignatian mysticism Rahner inquires: "What have God and the world to do with each other? What have mysticism and the world to do with each other? Christian mysticism, and in fact the the whole of the Christian life, ultimately concerns 'the life of God beyond the world' [emphasis added]."[3] Still, Rahner also argues that Ignatian mysticism grounds "joy in the world."[4] How is this possible? Rahner identifies two elements of Ignatian piety: the centrality of the Cross and an orientation towards the the extramundane God. Both the cross and the "otherworldliness" of Ignatian piety form the foundation for a characteristic Ignatian immanence.

As a piety of the Cross, Ignatian piety is ultimately about conformity to the Crucified One. Classically, this conformity was undertaken through the monastic pursuit, whether in terms of a flight into the desert, or into the monastery. But Rahner sees the monk as ultimately the one who makes an existential flight into the desert "in order to seek God far from the world."[5] The monk is the one who essentially radicalizes his baptismal promises, who prays: "may grace come and may this world pass away."[6] Ignatius is one who simply extends this monastic ideal into an apostolic life. He writes: "how much does all growth in the spiritual life depend upon our rejecting utterly and not merely half-heartedly all that is an object of the world's love and longing . . . ?."[7] Clearly, Rahner underscores

[2] For a particularly perspicacious treatment of this theme see Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[3] Karl Rahner, "The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World," vol. 3, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Karl-H and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967) 277.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid. 281.

[6] Ibid. 282, quoting *DIdache* 10.

[7] Ibid. 282, quoting the General Examen in the Jesuit Constitutions.

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that in whatever Ignatian joy in the world consists it is not found in the reduction of transcendence to immanence, of eternity to time, of God to the world:

> In the case of Ignatius, then, there can be no question of an acceptance of the world by which man is in the first place and as a matter of course in the world, that is by which he takes his first stand in the world, in its goodness and its tasks, strives for the fulfillment of humanity within this world and then finally – and as late as possible after this – also awaits happiness with God, to guarantee which, over and above his obvious task in the world and a moral life, he has to fulfil (sic) a few other conditions of a rather juridical and ceremonial kind.[8]

This is chiefly because Ignatian piety is always oriented towards the God who transcends the world, in short, to the Christian God. Some knowledge of God can be derived from the elements of the world itself, from what the tradition terms the vestigia Dei. But natural theology alone cannot bring us to know the free, personal Christian God of revelation. And in this lies the human person's greatest temptation: to reduce God to the world. Rahner asks:

> "Was there ever a philosophy in all history outside of Christianity which did not yield to that temptation, beginning with the Greeks right up to Hegel? . . . And is not this original sin in the history of philosophy in the field of knowledge only an expression of that which happens constantly over and over again existentially in the life of man unredeemed: to allow God to be only what the world is, to make God in the image of man, to conceive piety as consideration for the world?"[9]

The human person, Rahner notes, tends towards just this sort of idolatry. And yet, the definitive revelation of God in the incarnation of Christ disrupts this tendency, replacing it with a "call" that draws the human person out of her world and into the divine life lying beyond the world. Knowledge of the free personal God bestowed on the human person in revelation at the same time reveals the human person as a transcendent being. The call of God deconstructs the human person's affinity for pure immanence, such that "the world – even the good world, the world insofar as it is the will and law of God – is condemned to a provisional status . . . ."[10]

Taken at face value this Ignatian spiritual narrative hardly sounds like grounds for engagement in, much less joy in, the world. And yet, paradoxically, because the transcendent God both grounds this world and chooses to reveal Himself through it, the Christian can indeed find joy there. As Rahner writes: ". . . every act which is

[8] Ibid. 283.
[9] Ibid. 285.
[10] Ibid. 286.

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good in itself, therefore also one which is already meaningful within the world, can be supernaturally elevated by grace in such a way that its aim and its meaning extend beyond the significance it has in the world, beyond the ordo legis naturae and into the life of God itself."[11] And here we find the sacramental logic that pervades Rahner's thought: the Christian, who is called to flee the world for the transcendent God, must accept that he may be called to find this transcendent One precisely in and through the world itself. Rahner conceives of this under the aegis of the Ignatian virtue of indiferencia: the willingness to respond to the call of God in whatever way it comes, or "perpetual readiness."[12] In other words, Rahner reminds us that to seek the very God who has revealed Godself in history is to seek this One in all things. But, Rahner cautions us that "Ignatius approaches the world from God" and not God from the world.[13]

RAHNER ON NATURE AND GRACE

Rahner's Ignatian worldview provides the foundation for his seminal reinterpretation of the relationship between nature and grace, a reinterpretation that arguably grounds all of his theological thinking. It is after all Rahner's conception of nature and grace that explicates his insistence on the unity between spirit and matter and underscores the underlying vision of sacramentality that grounds his theology.

Notably, Rahner defines grace primarily as God's self-communication to human beings in history (in the person of Jesus Christ) and in human transcendentality (as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit). This redefining of grace marks a turn from the regnant neo-Scholastic theology of nature and grace that resulted in extrinsicism and led to what Rahner believes to be certain soteriological defects.[14] Rahner

[11] Ibid. 289.

[12] Ibid. 291.

[13] Ibid. 290.

[14] The neo-Scholastics defined grace primarily as the supernatural gift of God to reasoning beings, for the purposes of salvation. There are, therefore, two kinds of grace: actual grace and sanctifying grace. Actual grace as a *gratia illuminationis* or *gratia inspirationis* in terms of the mind and will, or as a *gratia praeveniens* and *gratia cooperans* in terms of will alone, is the grace of salutary acts. Actual grace is ascribed to right action. Cf. Karl Rahner, "Nature and Grace," vol. 4, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 180. The underlying anthropological point for the development of this concept was that "pure nature" cannot reliably act morally, unassisted by grace, because it is incapacitated by concupiscence, which makes free will deficient. Actual grace, therefore, heals the deficient free will and permits the person to act rightly. It is necessary for right action (against the Pelagians), gratuitous (against the Molinists) and universal (against the Jansenists).

Sanctifying grace was attributed to justification. Thus it describes the habitual state of holiness. Cf. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, Ill.: Tan, 1974),

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saw specific problems with the neo-Scholastic construal of grace.[15] First, with the exception of knowledge from propositional doctrine, grace is inaccessible by human consciousness. Grace gives no sign of its presence in the conscious, personal life of human beings. That is, grace is an object of faith that lies absolutely beyond human consciousness. But this raises an epistemological problem: if grace lies wholly in a realm unattainable by human cognition, how can one know it at all?[16] Second, the neo-Scholastic conception of grace leads to extrinsicism, whereby grace acts as a "superstructure" added on to human nature.[17] Grace, therefore, is never permitted to permeate the life of the individual fully. Grace and nature are two wholly separate entities: Hence, an abyss lies between grace and the human person's natural constitution. This extrinsicism represents a move away from authentic Thomistic thought, which emphasizes the essential affinity of nature for grace. It results in a view of the human person as essentially ungraced nature. This is problematic, because either grace is so remote that it does not matter for actual human lives, or grace is simply a projection of the natural into a supernatural realm (the latter being the response of Feuerbach). Hence, extrinsicism does not speak appropriately to human action towards and cooperation with God; human beings are in this model too passive. One never chooses to respond to God, one simply permits the movement of grace. Lastly, the neo-Scholastic conception of grace presents a soteriological problem. Essentially, sanctifying grace as created grace is insufficient for salvation. For after all, how can one reach an uncreated end, if the grace given is created – if only the "gift" and not the "giver" is given?[18]

Grace is, for Rahner, above all else God's gift of Godself; it is God's self-communicative love. This self-communicative God of Christian faith Rahner calls "Holy Mystery." Holy Mystery is

230–232, 255. The neo-Scholastics (particularly Cajetan, Savonarola, Sylvester of Ferrara, Cano, Suarez and Gardeil) conceived of sanctifying grave as created grace (i.e. abiding virtue) as opposed to uncreated grace (i.e. the Holy Spirit). It is, therefore, the *gift* of the divine indwelling that makes the soul holy via efficient causality and not the divine indwelling itself. Cf. Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," vol.1, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 298–99.

[15] Karl Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," vol. 1, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 298–99.

[16] Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 166. See also Rahner, "Concerning Nature and Grace," 298f.

[17] Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 168.

[18] Ibid., 177. In this Rahner follows Peter Lombard (Sent. I d. 17) who also equated sanctifying grace with *gratia increata*. This interpretation is contrary to Thomas, who in ST II-II, q. 23, a. 2 rejects this reading, though he still posits *gratia habitualis* as a participation in the divine life.

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ultimately God's presence as loving freedom. "Grace" ultimately describes this transcendental experience of the self-communicative love of Holy Mystery.[19] This grace is given both to human history and to human transcendentality. In human history, grace is bestowed in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate historical act of acceptance of the free offer of Godself. The incarnation holds a threefold significance for Rahner's development of a theology of grace: the incarnation is the principle, the event and the model of grace.[20] The incarnation is the principle of grace because the Logos is the source and mediator of the grace of God. Hence, grace is essentially Christological in character. As Rahner notes: "Jesus Christ is the person, who by his free incarnation, creates the order of grace and nature, as his own presupposition (nature) and his milieu (the grace of other spiritual creatures)."[21] The incarnation is also the event of God's self-diffusive love poured out into the world. This is precisely what incarnation means – the irruption into history of the love of God.[22] Lastly, the incarnation is the model of grace, because in Jesus Christ resides the fullest affirmative response to God's self-offer. His acceptance of God's grace serves as a model for human acceptance.

Contrast Rahner's incarnation narrative with the recent discussion raised by Charles Taylor about the "excarnation(al)" character of our current age.[23] Here we see precisely why Rahner insists on a Christological basis for hope. Taylor uses the term "excarnation" to point to the modernist attempt to reject bodily limitation by fleeing to pure rationality. This abstraction from the body has had far-reaching implications for our current age, including the post-modern preoccupation with rational skepticism on the one hand, and a reactionary embrace of sensualism on the other. The subtext of this "excarnation" narrative in both its modern and post-modern form is the flight from death.

The tension raised in our "secular age" between the incarnation narrative of Christianity and the "excarnation" narrative of secularism is not irresolvable. This is because God draws near to human beings in grace not just in human history, but also in human transcendentality. At the core of the human person lies God's grace. In order to develop this point, Rahner constructs a subtle theological

[19] Rahner, "Human Question of Meaning," 101.

[20] Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 176.

[21] Ibid., 173.

[22] Rahner articulates this in terms of the Scotistic option, the unconditional predestination of the incarnation. Since for Scotus, the primary reason for the incarnation is not redemption, in terms of freedom from sin, but salvation, in terms of the completion of the cosmic order, Christ would have been incarnate whether or not there was a Fall. Of course, this position was not held only by Scotus. Dominant proponents of this position include Athanasius, Rupert of Dentz and Albert the Great. See Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 176.

[23] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 613–615, 741, 746, 751–753, 766, 771.

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anthropology based on the human person as a "hearer of the word." Rahner asserts that from Christological revelation one knows that God reveals Godself . But the question remains about the possibility of hearing this revelation. In other words, is God's revelation a self-interpreting self-communication, or are human beings structured in such a way as to receive God's revelation? Rahner responds that human beings, as subjects and persons, are ontologically structured in such a way that they bear a fundamental openness to God and an intrinsic orientation towards grace.

The purpose of God's grace given in human history and human transcendentality is salvation, as union with God. Here, Rahner follows an Ireneaen strand of soteriology that views salvation as a "recapitulation" of creation, rather than merely as redemption from sin. In this tradition, salvation is conceived of primarily as theosis – divinization.[24] To grasp this divinization, it is necessary to return to a point touched upon above. Uncreated grace given in the mode of offer – the supernatural existential – is the gift of Godself, the Holy Spirit. This means that there is something of the divine in each person, a consideration that Rahner discusses under his idiosyncratic term "quasi-formal causality."[25] The qualifier "quasi" denotes the "meta-categorial character of God's abidingly transcendent formal causality."[26] This means that when the human person embraces her true nature, that is her true subjectivity as a person made in the image of God, and when she accepts God's grace through freedom, she grasps her full humanity. Human beings are fully humanized only in response to grace. And this is precisely what it means to be divinized.

I would suggest that there are two anthropological aspects of Rahner's thought that are dependent upon his conception of nature and grace: the unity of spirit and matter and the unity of the experience of God and the experience of the self. With respect to the

[24] Karl Rahner, "Theology of Worship," vol.19, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 143.

[25] Recall that the tradition holds that human beings were created via efficient causality, in which what is produced is different from and lesser than the producer (the formal cause) [Cf. Karl Rahner, "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," vol,1, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 143]. But if what is produced is the producer, then the mechanism must be one of formal causality [Cf. Ibid., 329]. That is, if God creates the human person and (in a separate but coextensive act) graces her with an indwelling of the Holy Spirit (as connatural, but not natural, to human being), then human beings must be created by something akin to formal causality [Cf. Ibid., 325]. And yet, human beings are not God. By virtue of grace human beings are transcendent, but a finite transcendence, while God is absolute transcendence. To preserve God's ultimate transcendence and to underscore the analogous nature of causal language used to describe God and God's actions, Rahner introduces his category of quasi-formal causality [Cf. Ibid. 330].

[26] Ibid.

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former, Christian faith asserts that matter and spirit are ultimately unified in their origin, history and goal.[27] Both matter and spirit spring from the same primordial source: God as universal ground. And yet, this is known only a posteriori. Rightfully speaking, God is not simply the ground of unity, but pure, absolute unity itself. God as pure, transcendent unity, therefore, "exists before the duality of subjectivity and objectivity which we call spirit and matter,"[28] grounds this duality, and shows the division to be somewhat arbitrary, for both spirit and matter bear an equally immediate reference to God. Because there is no human spirituality without materiality as its condition of possibility, spirit and matter are unified in history. Their unity is itself intrinsically historical, because it evolves and reaches its apex in human freedom and culminates in the historical acceptance of grace, enacted by Christ and ratified by human beings. Therefore, matter and spirit are united in their goal.

Rahner's conception of nature and grace also impacts his understanding of the relationship between the individual self and God. Human beings are the nexus of nature and grace: this intrinsic constitution grounds the possibility of experience of God. As the finite subject that bears a transcendence towards the Ultimate, the human person remains in an inextricable relationship with God, such that knowledge of the self is in some way knowledge of the whole of reality, and knowledge of God is in some way knowledge of the self.[29] Precisely because the historical instantiation of human being (as opposed to "pure" human nature) is wed to the Holy Spirit in grace, Rahner can posit an unthematic experience that precedes every act of human knowledge.[30] There is a "passive experience . . . as a

[27] Rahner, "The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith," 154. This conception is found throughout the tradition, most notably in a resistance to gnostic dualism and to Platonic interpretations that too easily reduce the Incarnation and Resurrection to purely spiritual realities. This has been asserted in patristic theology most notably by Irenaeus in the Adversus Haereses, by Justin Martyr in *On the Ressurection*, by Tertullian in *Adversus Marcionem* and *Adversus Valentinianos*, and by Gregory of Nyssa in the *De Vita Mosis*. In medieval theology, the unity of the body and the soul is affirmed quite fruitfully by Augistine Book XIX of the *Civitatis Dei*, by Thomas in ST I-I, q.76, by Bonaventure in the *Itinerarium*, and by Scotus in Book I of the *Ordinatio*. Anthropological unity was reaffirmed by the Thomists in the Tridentine period, and by the neothomists and transcendental Thomists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including in the thought of Rousselot, Marechal, Mariatian and Gilson (*L'Intellectualisme de Saint Thomas; Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, Cahiers V; *Integral Humanism*; and The Unity of Philosophical experience, respectively). Anthropological unity has also been affirmed more recently as the basis of female dignity and full flourishing in the thought of Elizabeth A. Johnson, as the basis of political liberation in Metz and Guttierez, and as the basis of the dignity of human sexuality in the theology of the late Pope John Paul II.

[28] Ibid., 156.

[29] This connection grounds the structure of Pope John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*.

[30] Though Rahner posits this unthematic experience on epistemological grounds, his theological anthropology further necessitates the concept.

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matter of transcendental necessity, an experience so inescapable that it cannot be denied."[31] There is a secret life, as it were, of human beings, always lived on the existential level and never fully grasped in human reflections. This unthematic and a priori experience of God and the self forms a unity grounding all other experiences. This unity is nothing other than the experience of God as the condition of possibility of human beings' experiential and cognitional existence.That is, God is the condition of possibility of human being and knowing and not the Kantian categories.

Rahner's theology of nature and grace demonstrates a robust Catholic sacramental worldview. Contrast this view with that of both liberal and neo-classical Protestantism, which feature a vacillation between the two seemingly opposed poles of God and human being. In both the subjectivism of Schleiermacher and Ritschl and the objectivism of Barth and Brunner (wherein God stands against in judgement over all that is strictly human),[32] there is a fundamental opposition between God and the world. This Rahner seeks to reconcile.[33] Despite the apparent opposition between the concept of God as "ground of the world," as favored by the subjectivists, and that of God as "wholly other and opposed to the world," as favored by the dialecticians, Rahner insists that both trajectories are consistent, for they both make God dialectically necessary: The first, positively for human subjectivity, and the second, negatively for human finitude. This opposition is resolved in Rahner's thought. Grounded in Ignatian mysticism and convicted of the non-reducible unity of nature and grace, Rahner discloses the non-competitive relationship between God and the human person, which simultaneously preserves God's absolute transcendence and the human person's finite transcendence.

HOPE IN CLASSICAL THOMISM

Rahner's Ignatian-Thomistic worldview provides the theological framework for understanding his reflections on Christian hope. Of course, Rahner's thought was not formulated in a vacuum: it is heir to the theology of his predecessors, particularly, Thomas Aquinas. Let

[31] Karl Rahner, "Experience of Self and Experience of God," vol. 13, *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Bourke (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975) 123. Here I would note that for Rahner this unthematic experience is, therefore, a "transcendental necessity" in both the philosophical and theological sense. He posits the necessity of unthematic experience as an epistemological postulate that results from his conception of knowledge. But he also asserts its necessity as an anthropological postulate that results from his conception of grace.

[32] Ibid. 19.

[33] HW 18–19.

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us, therefore, turn to a brief treatment of hope in classical Thomism before returning to Rahner's contributions.

Thomas, following Aristotle, classifies the virtues in general as "good habits."[34] The specifically theological virtues, of which hope is secondary, are those virtues that direct us toward God and are therefore the foundation of the participation in the divine life for each person.[35] In other words, the entire purpose for the theological virtues, which are the result of grace, is to direct the human person towards supernatural happiness. They are properly speaking "theological" virtues because their object is God, they are given by God, and they are known only through revelation.[36]

Thomas's discussion of the theological virtues occurs against the backdrop of an argument concerning the relationship between the natural virtues and the possibility of supernatural virtue. Thomas argues that "the theological virtues direct man to supernatural happiness in the same way as by the natural inclination man is directed to his connatural end."[37] This "natural inclination" corresponds to the intellect insofar as it is able to attain the first principles of rational knowledge and to the will insofar as it naturally tends toward the good. The theological virtues are still necessary, however, so that the intellect might attain to "certain supernatural principles which are held by means of a Divine light," namely, the articles of faith. In addition, the theological virtues direct the will towards its supernatural end "as something attainable," which is hope, and towards "a certain spiritual union," which pertains to love. According to Thomas only love is a perfect theological virtue. Faith and hope remain imperfect, because faith cannot "see" its object and hope fails to possess it. Thus, hope for Thomas is the desire for that which love possesses. Hope inchoately possesses its divine object, though it does not possess it in fact: "The act of hope consists in looking to God for future bliss."[38] And yet, when that future bliss of spiritual union is consummated in love, hope is no longer necessary.[39] Thus, hope is in some sense the paradigmatic virtue of earthly life.

The classical Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper centers his reflections on just this conception of hope as the most earthly virtue. He focuses his reflection on the understanding of the Christian life as status viatoris, and the human person as homo viator. Pieper maintains that this conception is foundational to Christian life and

[34] ST 1–2, q. 95, a. 1.
[35] ST 1–2, q. 62, a. 1.
[36] Ibid.
[37] ST 1–2, q. 62, a. 3.
[38] ST 1–2, q. 65, a. 4.
[39] Or, as Thomas puts it an imperfection and its corresponding perfection cannot coexist. Cf. ST 1–2, q. 67, a. 4.

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self-understanding. To be a viator is "to be the 'one on the way'."[40] The status viatoris is opposed to the status comprehensoris, or the Beatific Vision, in which one has already "comprehended, encompassed, [and] arrived."[41] Thus, the object of the Christian journey is supernatural happiness, which Pieper, following Thomas, defines as "primarily the fulfillment objectively appropriate to our nature and only secondarily as the subjective response to this fulfillment."[42]

For Pieper, the status viatoris refers primarily to creaturehood as such, rather than to a location. "It is the inherent 'not yet' of finite being."[43] This bears both a negative and a positive meaning: it denotes both "the absence of fulfillment and the orientation towards fulfillment."[44] The human person's "proximity to nothingness," which results from the fact that she is created ex nihilo, often realizes itself in sin and this results in the loss of the very thing longed for – beatitude. And yet, the human person retains a natural orientation towards fulfillment, a fulfillment that can be reached only (in part) by her "own effort."[45] As Thomas before him, Pieper maintains that the status viatoris is abolished in the Beatific Vision, wherein the creature can no longer move towards nothingness and her natural orientation in hope is actually fulfilled in fact through love.

For this reason, Pieper notes that "the way of man leads to death as its end but not as its meaning."[46] The human person is poised between being and nothingness. Yet one need not turn to an Heideggerian-existentialist point of view, in which the human person is "imprisoned in nothingness." While the human person's proximity to nothingness is real, the same human person is grounded in absolute being. Thus, the problem with existentialism is its myopia, or perhaps, its reductionism. Homo viator is not suspended over the abyss of nothingness, as Heidegger claims, but moves "towards being and away from nothingness; it leads to realization and not annihilation."[47]

The status viator in Pieper's estimation is the very nature of the human person, which is governed by temporality. One need not respond to the "not yet" of creatureliness with Heideggerian despair, since the meaning of human being is ultimately fulfillment. Still, one cannot transform the not yet of temporal being into the "certainty of

[40] Josef Pieper, "On Hope," *Faith, Hope, Love*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 91.
[41] Ibid. 91.
[42] Ibid. 92.
[43] Ibid. 93.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid. 94.
[47] Ibid. 97.

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possession" (as recent evangelical forms of Protestantism would have us do). The only proper response to earthly existence is hope.

The theological virtue of hope is a "steadfast turning toward the true fulfillment of man's nature,"[48] which is God. Hope is marked by patience and by confidence, but never by certainty. Hope is, Pieper tells us, ordered to two companion virtues: magnanimity and humility. Magnanimity is the seat of courage and confidence in the highest possibilities of human nature. Humility corresponds to the right view of oneself before God, and as such it is not opposed to magnanimity. There is no conflict between one's smallness before God and the highest possibilities for human nature. Humility offers a limit to hope, while magnanimity is its extension.

While both Thomas and Pieper offer an interesting analysis of hope against the backdrop of a discussion of virtue, the Thomist and classical Thomistic perspective leaves open the question of the relationship between hope and human suffering or other concerns of the historico-political sphere. Pieper does hint at a possible direction, when he writes,

> Job's words ["although he should kill me, I will trust him"] cut the foundation, moreover, from under a misapprehension that can, in fact, be critical in a catastrophic age, namely, the mistaken assumption that the substance of natural hope can be encompassed by supernatural hope even from below (instead of from above); in other words, that the fulfillment of supernatural hope must occur through the fulfillment of natural hope.[49]

He offers no further commentary beyond this. Rahner's contribution to a theology of hope lies precisely in a deeper understanding of the relationship between supernatural hope and history. Let us now turn to the conception of hope in Rahner's thought.

RAHNER ON HOPE

First and foremost, Rahner is a good Thomist. Hence, he, like Pieper, begins with a recognition of the human person's final end in God: "We cannot get rid of our metaphysical need, our groping awareness of God. Yet, we feel inclined to resist God, preferring to stay on earth, the earth we investigate and use with our own power, to our own profit."[50] Here, Rahner emphasizes the "basic dualism" of

[48] Ibid. 100.

[49] Ibid. 112.

[50] Karl Rahner, "Utopia and Reality: The Shape of Christian Existence Caught Between the Ideal and the Real," vol. 22, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 27.

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human existence: the juxtaposition of the present and the future, the so-called real and the ideal. The future, or "utopia" as Rahner conceives of it, marks the telos of human striving. And yet, this striving underscores the tension between our human preoccupation with present realities and our future happiness in God. Utopia, the future, our telos – destabilizes present existence by showing us that our perceived reality is actually provisional. Human existence is unstable and insecure.[51] We are not able to accept comfortably that "we do not originate from ourselves,"[52] that we are dependent upon other realities that are not of our making, and that "we are proceeding toward an end that we ourselves cannot determine (not even by suicide)."[53] We desire to be free agents, and yet we are not self-evident. Thus, Rahner reminds us, with Thomas, that true reality is God Himself, "an infinite, absolute, eternal God who is distinct from the world and for whom we are intended; the history of our freedom terminates inexorably in the very immediacy of God, whom we hope to meet as our redeeming, forgiving, liberating judgement (emphasis added)."[54] Hence, that which is most self-evident, most real, is most obscure: our origin and end, God. In this view the theological virtue of hope is nothing but "a final comprehensive trust in this existence [in anxiety] which is given anterior to freedom . . . a free acquiescence in existence in its totality and oneness in which the subject as such assumes the risk of self-abandonment."[55] Hope is a comportment of trust even in contingency.[56]

Rahner's conception of the relationship between present reality and utopia corresponds to Pieper's discussion of the status viatoris and the status comprehensoris with this exception: Rahner focuses more closely on the historical significance of the status comprehensoris. For Rahner, the telos of the human person, who is "distinct from the world," is the very same One who grounds human freedom in history. God is the end of history, yes, but an end to the very historical process

[51] Karl Rahner, "Anxiety and Christian Trust in Theological Perspective," vol, 23, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Hugh M. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 7.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Rahner, "Utopia and Reality," 30.

[55] Rahner, "Anxiety and Christian Trust," 9.

[56] It is precisely this notion of trust vis a vis contingency that is so troublesome to our postmodern times. Gianni Vattimo has highlighted just this discomfiture with contingency as the central problem of secularism. Vattimo notes that "the utopian idea has always shared with metaphysics an unchallenged preference for the idea of oneness" and for this reason he finds all utopian projects suspect. And yet he holds out hope for a critical retrieval of a concept of utopia precisely because "the world itself . . . is given to us only to the extent that we are *geworfene Entwürfe*, projects brought into being despite ourselves." And so Vattimo conceives of hope purely in a secularist sense of retrieving cultural survival narratives to combat the inescapable contingency of human existence. Cf. Gianni Vattimo, "Utopia Dispersed," *Diogenes* 53 (Summer 2006), 20.

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that God grounds, redeems, forgives, and therefore, liberates. Thus, for supernatural hope grounds human history and historical hope.

It is precisely this destabilizing relationship between utopia and present reality that offers a necessary critique to false idealism and to a false realism. In the former case, the so-called idealist seeks to flee the world and public life by retreating into "a quiet realm of private happiness, leisure, of mere estheticism, of pure ideas."[57] For false idealists, reality is shown to be "hopelessly and pitifully wanting." Their ideals "are not contained in reality even in germ, but merely hover above so-called reality as its condemnation." Thus, we see that flight from the world is actually a flight into hopelessness. And yet, an inordinate preoccupation with the world is the other side of the same coin of hopelessness. The false realists, the cynics, stoics, and revolutionaries, rather than fleeing the world take complete refuge in it and thus flee eternity. In other words, whereas the false idealist flees the world for the purity of the private sphere, the false realist remains myopically entrenched in politics.

But what, then, is the proper Christian response? Quite simply: supernatural hope. Hope in the God who grounds history forces the Christian to be in the world and to take responsibility for the world, without, however, confusing human agency with divine freedom.[58] Thus, even though God alone is true reality, which both relativizes present reality and at the same time grounds that reality,

> it remains true that the God for whom we are headed, for whom we exist, to whom we will render an account, is totally other, totally different from the "real" realities with which our experience is concerned. And this God may not be reduced to being the mere splendor with which we exalt our own reality.[59]

Here we see that Rahner (contrary to the criticisms of Von Balthasar and others) never retreats to a hyper-subjectivism that reduces the divine to the human. Certainly for Rahner, our goal of heaven is grounded in earthly life, and eternal life ratifies historical life. And yet, eternal life, as union with God, is something given by God alone and not ultimately grasped through human striving. For this reason we hold our telos in hope, and not in possession – in spe not in re).

For Rahner, as for Thomas and Pieper before him, we are always "in via, always pilgrims."[60] We are suspended, as it were, between heaven and earth "and we cannot give up either one." We always run the risk of the flight of fancy of the false idealist or of the flight

[57] Rahner, "Utopia and Reality," 28.
[58] Ibid., 30.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 32.

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into purely earthly hope of the false realist. The acceptance of this tension is precisely what it means to hope. For hope is sustained by grace, and only in grace can we creatures, who do not determine our own telos, reach the God who is our final end.

Lest the above considerations seem too radically optimistic, Rahner does take up the inconsistencies of human life, under what he terms "perplexity." Departing from St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:8.[61] Rahner ponders despair and its possibility as an unavoidable undercurrent of human life. While human life is joyfully marked by its telos of fulfillment in God, it is also marked by the attributes of creaturehood: finitude, sin and most importantly death. Rahner writes: "We can never fully understand the meaning of suffering and death . . . within history, it is never possible to wholly and to definitively overcome the riddles of human existence and history."[62] Even the hope of the resurrection (i.e. eschatological hope), Rahner reminds us, fails to abrogate the radical perplexity of human existence, since "we arrive at God's definitive realm only by passing through death, which itself is the ultimate and all-embracing enigma of human existence."[63] But if even hope in the resurrection does not wipe away the "perplexity" of death (and ultimately all suffering) what is the substance of Christian hope? Rahner replies: it must preach pessimism: it must preach ultimately about man's sinfulness, because "to admit sin is the same as to admit suffering."[64] This recognition surprisingly leads Rahner to criticize the seemingly too optimistic approach of Gaudium et Spes which fails, he claims, to realize the negative aspects of the human condition.[65]

Yet, despite the anxiety wrought by human finitude and sin, Rahner encourages us to "fight for this very history of ours joyfully,"[66] because ultimately Christian hope results in joy and confidence of the Spirit. There is ultimately only one way to navigate the seeming hopelessness of life without either false optimism or cynicism: human beings must "experience their radical fall into the abyss of the divinity as their deepest perplexity.[67] Thus, the beatific vision itself is an experience of the darkness of God, God's supreme otherness that

[61] Cf. Rahner, "Christian Pessimism." Rahner actually seems to be laboring under a misunderstanding of the pericope, though this does not invalidate his insights in this article. Paul says in 2 Cor 1:8 that he despairs of his life because people wish to kill him, and in 2 Cor 4:8 he resists despairing of God. Rahner conflates the two passages and then mistakenly maintains that Paul is perplexed by both life and God.

[62] Karl Rahner, "Christian Pessimism," vol. 22, *Theological Investigations*, 157.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid. 158.

[66] Ibid. 160

[67] Ibid. 161.

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dissolves the darkness of death into an even more radical experience of otherness/darkness.

Recently, John Thiel has argued that much theology has abdicated discussion of the content of Christian hope in favor of a sort of Kantian prohibition of eschatological speech. He notes:

> Abiding by Kant's own critical strictures, theologians who write today on eschatology often explore the existential dimensions of Christian hoping, and are decidedly reluctant to speculate on the objects of hope professed in faith. Eschatology then becomes a kind of "immanentology" in which talk about the life to come is really taken to be talk about life in the present.[68] Although directed to eschatology specifically, Thiel's criticism, in which he explicitly includes Rahner's thought, raises an important question germane to the topic of hope: Does Rahner's conception of hope consider human existentiality more than the content of hope itself? I do not think that he does. Rahner does not seem to avoid the content of the eschata precisely because his reflections of hope focus almost exclusively on God as the telos of the human person, a telos given in grace, a God who reaches out towards us rather than vice versa. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the dominant apophatic strain in Rahner's theology. Rahner will not name this telos beyond Holy Mystery, or the Incomprehensible, or similar titles. But this is not because he defers to Kant's reticence to employ metaphysical language, but because Rahner possesses a deep conviction that apohaticism is at its depths the very nature of God. The One hoped for, who destabilizes our experience of reality and reorients it towards Godself, is this selfsame One who is unfathomable, who cannot be drawn in, who, with respect to human knowing, is darkness. This darkness, of course, does not denote an absence or a permanent withdrawal of the Godhead. We have every reason to believe that Rahner, along with the Christian mystical tradition from Pseudo-Dionysius to John of the Cross, sees this darkness as nothing other than a superabundance of light perceived by the finite mind as darkness. But, and here is the rub, the human person is never released from finitude even in the status comprehensoris. So what becomes of the dark vision of God in our beatitude? Rahner has insisted that God remains unfathomable Holy Mystery even in the beatific vision. Does this in the end destroy Christian hope of fulfillment in God? Not necessarily. Only if human fulfillment lies in "seeing" God as God sees Godself will human hope be frustrated. But if our creaturehood is maintained even in death (and this is a necessary corollary of the Christian doctrine that we will maintain our own personalities in death) should not the refulgence of the Godhead exceed our vision? Ought not there be some excess of light, some perplexity?

What of Pieper's claim that "the way of homo viator . . . is not a directionless back-and-forth between being and nothingness; it leads

[68] John Thiel, "For What May We Hope?Thoughts on the Eschatological Imagination," *Theological Studies* 67 (Summer 2006) 519.

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toward being and away from nothingness; it leads to realization and not annihilation?"[69] It seems that the relationship between being and nothingness is far more tensive in Rahner's thought. It is not that Rahner thinks that the goal of human life is anything other than fulfillment, but Rahner's reflections on death in particular lead one to conclude that he conceives of annihilation as a necessary pathway to this fulfillment. Though death is not the final annihilation of hell, it does seem to be a true experience of discontinuity. Nevertheless, Rahner, like Pieper, does not impute to nothingness the same weight as being in the existential equation. Rahner makes clear that being certainly exerts more of a gravitational pull on human life, but the drama of human living, and the certainty of annihilation in death, cannot be avoided.[70]

JOHANN BAPTIST METZ'S CRITIQUE OF RAHNER

Rahner's theology of hope has not gone unchallenged. The most sustained critique of Rahner's theology on this point has been offered by his student Johann Baptist Metz. It is worth revisiting this critique, since Metz's appraisal of Rahner's theology of hope is still read as standard by many theologians today.

The primary theological objective of Metz is to articulate a practical fundamental theology that takes history and the world seriously. He claims that his so-called "political theology" is post-metaphysical and post-transcendental, rejecting Kantian idealism and the abstraction of the human person from history. Repudiating any theological articulation that divorces praxis from subjectivity, Metz chooses to reject transcendental-existential and personalist theology.[71] Metz adopts as his theological starting point the historical situation, that is, the world as it is experienced by the subject and mediated by society.

Metz believes that 20th century Christianity experienced a crisis concerning its identity precipitated by the then current context of secularization. Essentially, he maintains that the traditional metaphysical basis of Christianity no longer makes sense in light of the "rejection of the holy" that characterizes modern society.[72] He proposes that the missing element in contemporary theology is an authentic understanding of the world. In his view traditional Catholic theology has preserved a cosmocentric, rather than an anthropocentric, worldview,

[69] Pieper, "On Hope," 97.

[70] Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 102.

[71] Johannes Baptist Metz. *Faith in History and Society*, trans. D. Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980) 60.

[72] Johannes Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans. W. Glen Doepel (New York:Seabury, 1973) 17.

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focused on abstract "nature" instead of concrete history.[73] Whereas in a cosmocentric worldview the world exists in the mind of God and bears the imprint of God throughout creation, the post-enlightenment worldview presents a world based on science, technology and human action. "This is a world where man discovers not vestigia Dei in nature and history, but the marks of his own activity."[74]

Given this secularized world, Metz believes that any Christian theology that seeks to be adequate must place a primacy on the historical future.[75] The world is primarily understood in terms of the "new" and the "never-having-been" of the future. This futuricity of the human person bespeaks an active rather than passive posture towards the world. The future, therefore, does not impose upon the human person, but as history, it is created by the human person.[76] Thus, for Metz "appeal to the doctrines of creation-incarnation recedes and intrinsically disappears, and eschatology, which grounds the world as history and the primacy of the future leading to a political theology emerges to the fore."[77]

Metz's primary critique of Rahner's theology takes both a moderate and an extreme form.[78] The moderate form criticizes Rahner's generalization of human experience, which "does not confront history on its own terms."[79] Rahner's metaphysical anthropology fails to take the human history of suffering seriously because it claims that the human person is always already given fulfillment. Employing the fable of the hedgehog and the hare, Metz claims that the fact that the end of the race (i.e., salvation) is always already given to human transcendentality and to history undercuts the real unfolding of history. It relegates human decision and action to a sphere of unnecessary exertions trapped within an inescapable transcendent horizon.

Essentially, Metz asserts that history and the human subject are overly-spiritualized in Rahner's theology, and this disallows either God or the human being to be truly worldly.[80] His critique also extends to Rahner's Christology. Rahner's notion of salvation remains

[73] Joseph Columbo, *An Essay on Theology and History: Studies in Pannenburg, Metz and the Frankfurt School* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 61.

[74] Metz, *Theology of the World*, 146–147. Cite also Guardini's End of the Modern World.

[75] Columbo, *An Essay*, 158.

[76] Ibid., 84.

[77] Ibid., 163.

[78] This reflects Mary Maher's delineation of Metz's thought. See Maher, "Rahner on the Human Experience of God: Idealist Tautology or Christian Theology?" *Philosophy and Theology* 7 (1992), 142.

[79] Ibid., 137.

[80] Roger Dick Johns, *Man in the World: The Theology of Johannes Batist Metz* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1976) 44.

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unclear, because Rahner fails to recognize the character of otherness between God and creation. In order to engage seriously the context of secularization and pluralism, one must accept the essential "difference" between God and the world. Faith must be open to the "non-absolute, non-divine reality of the world as such."[81] In Metz's view, Rahner's so-called transcendental theology has atrophied Christianity by its insistence on privatization and personalism. Once one considers the world on its own terms, then one must concede the intrinsically intersubjective nature of the human person. This, in turn, betokens the necessity of a political theology, arising from narrative, which is the only adequate form of theological articulation. Furthermore, Metz sees no real place for authentic Christology in Rahner's system, because Rahner insists on freedom merely as an affirmation or negation of an already given presence of God. This, Metz believes, leaves no room for "practical arcane knowledge of the imitation of Christ."[82]

In its more extreme version, Metz's critique accuses Rahner of presenting an idealistic tautology. Again referring to the fable, the cheating hare simultaneously engages in the race and in its end, so that "the beginning is like the end."[83] Truly, Metz claims, history and its contradictions disappear in transcendental theology. Furthermore, in the framework of transcendental theology God must necessarily communicate, destroying the gratuitousness of the divine self-gift. History "becomes merely the categorical pre-condition of understanding human being as absolute transcendence."[84] Here, Metz disparages Rahner's seeming suspension of the human person between the realms of spirit and matter, between the corporeal and the incorporeal.

Metz's critique is inadequate on several accounts. Metz seems to approach theology from an either/or mentality of dialectical opposition, while Rahner's method is much more synthetic. This difference grounds the tension between the two theological approaches.

Metz claims that Rahner's concept of history subsumes the "not yet" of the future in its "already," undercutting the here-and-now historical action and experience of the human subject. Metz asserts that the only way to honor present suffering is to draw upon the biblical notion of promise as enacted in narrative. It seems that Metz misinterprets both Rahner and scripture on this point. Rahner, for his part, speaks of the human person's anticipation, not possession, of its transcendental end. Recall that for Rahner, as for Thomas before

[81] Metz, *Theology of the World*, 64.
[82] Metz, *Faith in History*, 158.
[83] Ibid., 163.
[84] Maher, "Rahner on the Human Experience," 142.

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him, the human person possesses her final end in spe and not in re. Furthermore, the scriptural understanding of promise includes the concept of abiding covenantal relationship.[85] Rahner's development of the supernatural existential and the Vorgriff makes sense alongside this scriptural understanding of God's abiding love amidst suffering. God's grace, according to Rahner, is present with the human person amidst her real, worldly decisions. And in this, the beginning is not like the end, because the beginning is the offer of grace. The end is the response to and the consummation of that offer of grace; namely, the union of God and the human person, which has real implications for the world.

Metz's contention that Rahner fails to recognize the real difference between God and human beings, between transcendence and history, is not substantiated by Rahner's theology. Rahner does not collapse creation into God. Rahner's Ignatian mysticism specifically disassociates him from just this sort of Hegelianism. For Rahner, in creation God gives rise to the other, and in self-communication God draws near by truly constituting the other, and both of these movements are primordial. The subject always retains her alterity: she is historical spirit, a finite transcendence, while God is pure, limitless esse. According to Metz, because the human person is spiritualized, she no longer needs eschatological hope.[86] And yet, Rahner defines subjectivity precisely as the experience of contingency. Hence, Rahner's whole theology articulates what is possible.[87] One cannot know with absolute certitude, but one can hope.

What of Metz's claim that humanity runs the fabled race and cannot be defeated? To some extent, this is true. Rahner suggests that God is always affirmed, even in explicit acts of negation. Rahner also claims that history moves towards a transcendent goal, and that because good outweighs evil, this goal will be fulfilled. There is only one telos, and it is God. The question is: can Catholic theology claim the opposite of this assertion and still uphold the incommensurability of God? It does not seem so. If God is fundamentally incommensurable, then God can embrace all creation and its history, lest a limit be imposed upon God's limitlessness. God can embrace history, not by an extrinsic necessity imposed by creatures,

[85] John L. McKenzie, "Aspects of Old Testament Thought," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*,ed. Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990) 1300–1301.

[86] Metz, *Faith in History*, 162.

[87] Note, for example, the concept of obediential potency in Rahner's anthropology. There are always operative two types of possibility: God's and humanity's. One waits for a "possible" word, a "possible" gift of self-communicative love from the God who gives himself gratuitously. In turn, human beings, through freedom, may choose to accept God's grace. But this acceptance remains a "possibility" open to human beings, requiring the right exercise of freedom for its actualization. Cf. HW.

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but from God's own internal necessity. God encircles all of history and brings it to fulfillment. So, indeed, the transcendental horizon is inescapable, for if there were a place that exceeded or escaped this horizon, then God could not be God. And yet, Rahner points to death as a true interruption of the usual Thomistic teleological narrative. Thus, history will only reach its collective transcendental end through the individual-personal and discontinuous experience of death.

Metz's critique suffers from a second flaw. His insistence on human operation as formative of an absolutely open future, to the exclusion of contemplation, results in a crypto-Pelagianism. Salvation for Metz is not constituted once and for all by the historical offer and acceptance of grace already enacted in Jesus Christ. Rather, it is daily constituted by each person in imitation of Christ. Is salvation merely the imitation of Christ's historical example? Or, do the Incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus actually effect an ontological change, both in the world order and in human nature? Rahner opts for the latter. Thus, salvation for Rahner is an exercise of subjective freedom in history to complete what has been done irrevocably in Christ. Metz, at times, seems to relegate soteriology purely to the sphere of human merit.[88]

Overall, Metz fails to recognize the gravity of Rahner's conception of hope. Metz resists a definition of hope in freedom that consists of only an affirmation or negation of God. If Rahner defined hope merely as a verbal assent, then Metz's critique would be justified. However, for Rahner, hope allows the individual to confront all of human experience. Hope lets the human person face the whole saga of human history and to place herself behind each and every act.

CONCLUSION

Rahner's conception of hope unites eschatological hope and the earthly, immanent immersion in time and history, activity and labor. Christian hope stands between heaven and history. It would be one-sided, in Rahner's account, to restrict our hope to solely immanent or solely transcendent terms. God, as the Triune ground of both our eschatological hope and our historical experience, infuses our historical action with the blessed hope. Rahner contends: ". . . .once we have found the God of the life beyond, then such an attitude will

[88] Furthermore, it betrays a contradiction within his own theology. Metz emphasizes the biblical notion of promise, and yet proclaims a future that is absolutely new. There is, therefore, little continuity in Metz theology between promise and its eschatological fulfillment.

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break out of deep seclusion in God into the world, and work as long as day lasts, immerse itself in the work of time in the world and yet await with deep longing the Coming of the Lord."[89]

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[89] Rahner, "Ignatian Mysticism," 293.

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