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Summary Article: **Rahner, Karl (1904-1984)**

From *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*

Karl Rahner has been aptly called the 20th century's "Church Father" and "quiet mover of the Roman Catholic Church." Born in Freiburg (Breisgau), Germany, Rahner entered the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1922 and was ordained priest in 1934. After advanced studies in Freiburg (where he attended seminars taught by Martin Heidegger) and Innsbruck, he taught theology at Innsbruck (1949-1964). During this period, he was appointed one of the official theological experts (*periti*) of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) — a council whose theological outlook he profoundly influenced. He then became successor to Romano Guardini (d. 1968) in the Chair of Christianity and the Philosophy of Religion at the University of Munich (1964-1967) and was later appointed professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Münster (1967-1971). After retiring from university work, he lived at the Jesuit writers' house in Munich (1971-1981) and afterwards in Innsbruck, and continued his unrelenting worldwide lecturing, writing, and pastoral activity until his death a few weeks after his 80th birthday.

His dissertation — a creative interpretation of Aquinas' epistemology influenced by the transcendental Thomism of Joseph Maréchal (d. 1944) — was rejected by his mentor, Martin Honecker, but later became the now famous *Spirit in the World* (1939) (translated into several languages). *Hearer of the Word* (1941) (his second foundational work), *Encounters with Silence* (1938) (a book of stirring prayers), *Dictionary of Theology* (1961), *Foundations of Christian Faith* (1976) (an architectonic summary of his theology), and the monumental 23 volume (16 German volumes) *Theological Investigations* (1967-1983) are widely acclaimed. Rahner also edited or coedited the 13 volume *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (1957-1968), the multivolume *Quaestiones Disputatae* (1958-1984), the 6 volume *Sacramentum Mundi* (1967-1969), the 5 volume *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* (1964-1969), and the 5 volume compendium of dogmatic theology, *Mysterium Salutis* (1965-1976). His nearly 4,000 written works on every significant theological topic evince that he is *the* theological titan of the 20th century, whose stamp on the theological world remains to this day.

The "supernatural existential" (engrafted into every person even prior to justification by grace received sacramentally or extra-sacramentally is Grace as God's Self-offer, which "elevates," objectively redeems, and destines every human being to a supernatural goal) and its correlative, the "obediential potency" (the human person's natural ability to receive God's self-communication), stand at the center of Rahner's theology. This means that every person's deepest experience — albeit often implicit, denied, or repressed — is of God whose mystery, light, and love have embraced the total person. Thus, "the immanent Trinity which is the economic Trinity" works in every person's life as the Mystery to whom he or she must freely respond with an inmost, full yes or no. Salvation depends upon this response.

Rahner also maintains that in view of God's self-communication, every person's consciousness is graced with and illuminated by what he calls "transcendental revelation." Because the human person is "spirit-in-world," an individual-social-bodily-transcendental person who makes history, world religions are the social-historical incarnations — with greater or lesser degrees of success — of this revelation. Maintaining that Christ is the "absolute savior," that all grace is grace of Jesus Christ, and that Christianity is the "absolute religion" to which all are called, Rahner nevertheless holds that grace and

revelation can also be found in adherents to non-Christian religions and in agnostic and atheistic people. All who are faithful to the truth and goodness in their religions and who truly accept life's deepest mystery are, in Rahner's view, "anonymous Christians" in the sense that they are living in Christ's grace without knowing him.

In the tradition of the Greek Fathers and the Franciscan Duns Scotus (d. 1308), Rahner defends the thesis that even if sin had not occurred, the Word would have still become incarnate. To his way of thinking, therefore, salvation means that we are not only freed from sin but also divinized, that is, share in God's very own life (2 Pet. 1:4).

Rahner understands Jesus Christ as the high point of God's historical self-communication and its acceptance by man, that is, the God-Man. Combining a Christology "from below" (Jesus the man) with a Christology "from above" (the Word made flesh), Rahner views Christ as the unsurpassable, irrevocable, victorious presence of God's grace. The crucified and risen Christ also grounds this theologian's Christian pessimism and optimism: we must all die, but sin and death have been overcome by God's forgiving, healing, and transforming love. Rahner also holds the theological view that we can hope that everyone will be saved.

The church, in Rahner's view, is the social-historical visibility of the Christ-event, the community of those gathered together by the "absolute savior" in faith, hope, and love. It is the sacrament of God's victorious self-communication to the world. The Second Vatican Council transformed this formerly Eurocentric church into a genuine "World Church." Rahner also maintains that this indefectible, holy church can also be sinful — even at its highest level.

Perhaps the secret of Rahner's appeal is his synthesis of two elements: critical reverence for the Christian tradition and unusual sensitivity to the questions and problems of contemporary life. Here is a theologian who did not shy away from controversial issues: the ordination of women, dissent in the church, the election of bishops, ecumenical issues, and so on.

Rahner's theology also moves in two directions. He compresses all Christianity into three mysteries — Trinity, incarnation, and grace — and expands them into every dimension of human life through what he calls a "theology of everyday things" and a "mysticism of everyday life." Rahner not only explains critically and precisely what the Christian faith is, not only gives reasons to believe it, but he also seeks to unite people with it. Thus, his theology is more than faith seeking understanding; it is as well a mystagogy that gives the people of God experiential union with the faith by leading them into their own deepest mystery. Rahner was definitely more a pastoral and "sapiential" theologian than he was an academic one.

SEE ALSO: Grace; Mystical Tradition; Sin

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Egan, Harvey D., and Harvey D. Egan S.J. "Rahner, Karl (1904-1984)." *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, George Thomas Kurian, Wiley, 1st edition, 2012. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/rahner_karl_1904_1984. Accessed 19 Oct. 2019.