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**RAHNER'S 'ANTHROPOLOGICAL TURN'  
IN THEOLOGY AND DOCTRINE OF  
REVELATION**

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**Abstract**

The article attempts to revisit Rahner's understanding of divine revelation in the light of man's transcendental openness to the Absolute Mystery called God. Therefore, first, it briefly analyses the anthropological presuppositions of Rahner's theology centred on the concept of 'supernatural existential.' Thereafter, it attempts to see how the transcendental enquiry is indeed a 'theological' investigation and what are the philosophical-theological bases for his claim that man is fundamentally *capax infiniti* for God. It explores how the transcendental openness of man is linked to the Christian idea of revelation, both in grace and in history. Finally, it wants to see how Rahner understands the culmination of revelation in the Christ event is actualised in the Word of God and what are its implications for contemporary theology.

Rahner is one of those thinkers who is very much 'alive' among theologians even after his death. Even though thirty years have passed since his death (1984) he continues to remain a point of reference in theology, especially in Catholic theology. We may ask what is so particular about his theology. One of his contributions is that, in his theological enterprise, Rahner highlights the God-experience of every person. From that perspective, Rahner would even call an ordinary person a 'mystic.' Thus, one understands the significance of the often-quoted statement of Rahner: "The Christian

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of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all.”<sup>1</sup> Here, the term ‘mysticism’ does not mean any parapsychological phenomenon, but a genuine experience of God emerging from the depths of existence. Such an insight is particularly significant for today’s Christianity that has to grapple with the challenges of a secularized, post-Christian environment.

For Rahner, the experience of God is not reserved to some religious elite or a select few. Every person, without excluding anyone, is entitled to have this experience because all human beings are desired, willed and fashioned by the same God. In other words, every person is a creation of God, and God knows how to relate with them in ways known to him alone. Taking his cue from the teachings of the Church,<sup>2</sup> in his reflection Rahner holds that those who accept themselves fully and follow the dictates of their conscience indirectly accept Christ as the absolute fulfilment and guarantor of their anonymous movement towards God in grace.<sup>3</sup> He is ready to qualify them (anonymous) Christians, even though they may not explicitly profess the Christian faith.

In this article we would like to revisit Rahner’s understanding of God’s self-disclosure, traditionally known as divine revelation. In order to situate ourselves in the context of Rahnerian reflection, first we shall briefly analyse the presuppositions of Rahner’s theology in general and then try to inquire why he insists that anthropology should be the starting point of any serious theological reflection. Thereafter, we shall discuss his understanding of revelation, both transcendental and categorial, in relation to the Word of God. Finally, we would like to draw the reader’s attention to the implications of Rahner’s idea of revelation to contemporary theology. It goes without saying that, for reasons of space, many of these themes can be indicated only briefly, although they deserve a more extensive treatment than what is presented here.

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<sup>1</sup>K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971-1992, 149. This series hereafter will be abbreviated as *TI*. See also *TI*, vol. 19, 99.

<sup>2</sup>“Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.” Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

<sup>3</sup>K. Rahner, “Mission: Salvation of the Non-Evangelized,” in K. Rahner—J. Alfaro, ed., *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopaedia of Theology*, vol. 4, London: Burns & Oates, 1968-1970, 80. Hereafter it will be abbreviated as *SM*.

## Anthropological Starting Point

At the very beginning of his book, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner asks an interesting question: "What is a Christian and why can one live this Christian existence with intellectual honesty?"<sup>4</sup> It is, as Rahner puts it, a question that comes from the fact of Christian existence. It is a question in harmony with the basic mandate of fundamental theology: give an account of one's faith (I Pt 3:15). How are we going to give an account of our faith in a post-modern, post-Christian world? In other words, Rahner wants to situate Christianity within the intellectual horizon of today's world, not that of some distant past.<sup>5</sup> Rahner reminds us that the urgent task of theology is to provide credible answers to the questions which people are asking in our days. Theology needs to explain in what way Christ is the answer to the human question.

For Rahner, theology becomes a relevant subject to the contemporary world only if it is taken together with the question of man. The question of the human person and his/her destiny are fundamental to any theological enquiry. Hence Rahner's transcendental enquiry approaches the question of man theologically. Theology after all is a combination of both *theos* and *logos*, human discourse on God and his relation to the world. Therefore, Rahner starts his theological enquiry with a reflection on man's openness to God, irrespective of his or her belief. For Rahner, revelation and human nature are intimately connected. Above all, for him, man is the universal question.<sup>6</sup> This question must be regarded as the 'condition' which makes the 'hearing' of the answer possible: "The question creates the condition for really hearing, and only the answer brings the question to its reflexive self-presence."<sup>7</sup> Further, he is of the opinion that theology must see the fundamental assertion of Christianity as the answer to the question which man *is* and other questions man *has*.<sup>8</sup> In other words, theology does not start from some abstract concepts of a distant God, but from the concrete human

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<sup>4</sup>K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1978, 2.

<sup>5</sup>Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, xi.

<sup>6</sup>*TI*, vol. 17, 53-70.

<sup>7</sup>Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 11.

<sup>8</sup>Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 11. "What is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What purpose have these victories purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life?" Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 10. Cf. J. Xavier, "Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes* and Fundamental Theology," *Gregorianum*, 91, 1(2010) 124-136.

person and his experience of God in everyday life. What man knows about himself 'naturally' helps him to deepen his understanding of God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, for Rahner, transcendental revelation in grace and categorial revelation in Christ are not two asymptotic realities, but one and the same act of God's self-communication. In his opinion, this must be the starting-point for any mature theological reflection if theology wants to have a better understanding of the Incarnation. The Word of God that the believer hears as *a posteriori* can be understood fully only if he/she is 'capable' of hearing it, i.e. his/her nature is constituted in such a way that he/she is always *capax infiniti* (at least as *potentia oboedientialis*).<sup>10</sup> In spite of being fallible and sinful, by the very fact of being a creature willed by God, the Christian knows that he/she is a person spoken to by God, both in grace and in history. For Rahner, this self-understanding of the human person is the basis of all theological anthropology.<sup>11</sup> If that is the case, the Word of God addressed to man in Jesus Christ would not appear to him as an alien message. "Man, therefore, does not approach the *a posteriori* revealed doctrine of man with an *a priori* norm alien to theology."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Rahner reminds us that, by nature, man is necessarily oriented towards what is historically *a posteriori* (i.e. revelation in Christ) and he cannot simply reject this in a rationalistic way as nonessential. How does he come to know that his nature is constituted in this way? Rahner holds that by analysing human acts, like freedom and knowledge, man (who is a being primordially in possession of himself, and thus a personal subject) is in a position to discover his supernatural vocation and his orientation towards the absolute mystery of God. In short, for Rahner, the human person is "supernatural existential."

### Supernatural Existential

As already mentioned, the starting point of Rahner's theological reflection is the human person. It is because, for Rahner, in order to understand the full meaning of theology, especially Christology, the investigating subject should know first of all who he/she is. Existentially, man is a unique creature. In his transcendental analysis,

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<sup>9</sup>That is why Rahner encourages Christians to treat Christology as "self-transcending anthropology, and anthropology as deficient Christology." *TI*, vol. 1, 164.

<sup>10</sup>*TI*, vol. 4, 327; *TI*, vol. 16, 231; *TI*, vol. 18, 279; *TI*, vol. 21, 190-191. K. Rahner, "Christianity," *SM*, vol. 1, 306. The Church affirms the same in its teaching: *Homo est Capax Dei*. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 27-30.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. *TI*, vol. 9, 28-45.

<sup>12</sup>K. Rahner, "Man," *SM*, vol. 3, 368.

following Heidegger<sup>13</sup> and Maréchal,<sup>14</sup> Rahner holds that human existence is different from the existence of any other finite being or thing. In Heideggerian terms, man (*Dasein*), as opposed to the things of nature, is the being for whom existence is a question. "*Dasein* always understands itself in terms of its existence — in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself."<sup>15</sup> No other finite being occupies itself so intensely as the man in the searching for meaning of his or her existence. "*Dasein* is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather, it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it."<sup>16</sup> In this process, according to Heidegger, the human person transcends the 'ontic' existence which he/she shares with every other finite being. As far as the idea of existence is concerned, it is a privileged one, i.e. his/her ontological status as a being that is concerned of his/her existence. Thus the human person takes priority over all other entities.<sup>17</sup> Assimilating this Heideggerian insight into his theological reflection, Rahner comes to the conclusion that the human person is the being who is without parallel in this world. In comparison with the human person everything else is only 'environment.' In his theological reflection Rahner goes beyond the position of Heidegger. While discussing the question of man's pre-apprehension (*Vorgriff*) Rahner writes:

There are in the history of Western philosophy three typical directions in which an answer to this question has been attempted: the direction of the perennial philosophy which, in this case, goes from Plato to Hegel, the direction of Kant, and that of Heidegger. The first one answers: the range of the *Vorgriff* extends toward being as such, with no inner limit in itself, and therefore includes also the absolute being of God. Kant answers: the horizon, within which our objects are conceptually given to us, is the horizon of sense intuition, which does not reach beyond space and time. Heidegger says: the transcendence which serves as the basis for man's existence goes toward nothingness.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Though Rahner seems to downplay Heidegger's role in his theology, there is no doubt that Heidegger had a great influence on Rahner regarding latter's philosophical interpretation of man. Cf. P. Imhof—H. Biallowons, ed., *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews 1965-1982*, New York: Crossroad, 1986, 190-191.

<sup>14</sup>J. Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique: leçons sur le développement historique et théorique du problème de la connaissance*, 5 vols., Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1947.

<sup>15</sup>M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 33.

<sup>16</sup>Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32. Thus, for Heidegger, while *ontics* deals with 'entities,' *ontology* occupies itself with the question of 'Being.'

<sup>17</sup>Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 28-35.

<sup>18</sup>K. Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, New York: Continuum, 1994, 49.

For Rahner, the privileged ontological existence of the human person is not an inconsequential, passive ontic existence. Nor is it destined to nothingness. He takes this human existence to a higher level. Rahner in his philosophico-theological analysis of human nature argues that the human person, though lives in the world, is of a higher order of reality — i.e. supernatural existential. It is because the human person carries within him/her the potency for self-transcendence towards the ultimate mystery of life — God. Rahner therefore maintains that the human person is concretely and actively oriented towards the realization of such a self-transcendence. This “transcendental experience” of God is inherent in every activity of the human person. “The experience which we are appealing to here is not primarily and ultimately the experience which a person has when he decides explicitly and in a deliberate and responsible way upon some religious activity, for example, prayer, a cultic act, or a reflexive and theoretical occupation with religious themes. It is rather the experience which is given to every person prior to such reflexive religious activity and decisions, and indeed perhaps in a form and in a conceptuality which seemingly are not religious at all.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, for Rahner, the human being is indeed a supernatural existential. According to him, it is the fundamental structure of the human person.

Moreover, Rahner holds that man from the depth of his being is a limitless question regarding God. This transcendence is the fundamental act which in fact constitutes his essence. He experiences this transcendental orientation in a variety of human acts like the experience of knowledge, freedom and will. If we analyse these human acts, we realize that transcendence is the fundamental act which has at the same time its origin in God and it is a movement towards God. In fact, this transcendence is nothing but the human openness to God perpetually initiated by God in the act of creation. At the same time, this openness remains a question addressed to the freedom of man who is free to accept or refuse his/her transcendence. This human response could take the form of an act of faith.<sup>20</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, Rahner argues that the same openness, whose origin is none other than God himself, is also the *potentia oboedientialis* for God’s self-communication as the possible but free and radically highest answer

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<sup>19</sup>Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 132.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. J. Xavier, “Faith in Contemporary Theologies,” *Vidyajyoti*, 77 (2013) 363-66.

of God to the question which man himself is.<sup>21</sup> Here Rahner goes beyond the traditional understanding of the *potentia oboedientialis* as the absence of contradiction in the relationship of nature and grace.<sup>22</sup> For Rahner, the *potentia oboedientialis* means a "positive" orientation in the human person for God's self-giving in revelation.<sup>23</sup>

For Rahner, supernatural existential is not something that man invents for himself to have a better ranking among creatures, a sort of status booster. On the contrary, in the 'first level of reflection' man discovers that he has a supernatural vocation and he is under an absolute obligation to attain his supernatural goal. This condition is all inclusive and inescapably prior to man's free action. The universal salvific will of God is not an "afterthought" of God, but is an existential determination of man willed by God in the act of creation. Rahner concludes that as a consequence of God's universal salvific will man's essence by nature is supernatural existence. The human person never lacks this supernatural vocation. It is given to him along with his nature. Since man's whole nature is permeated by the supernatural existential, the person who rejects his supernatural vocation stands with his own being in the shadow of doom. Again, it explains, for Rahner, why man can never be ontologically and personally indifferent to his supernatural destiny or vocation.

Now, in Rahner's view, the supernatural elevation of man, which is presupposed by natural creation, is also the condition of the possibility of God's revelation. So this creation, man, appears in fact as the place where God communicates himself in Christ. "In that sense everyone, really and radically every person must be understood as the event of a supernatural self-communication of God, although not in the sense that every person necessarily accepts in freedom God's self-communication to man."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, man is fundamentally structured to hear the Word. This is the fundamental state of grace. This presupposes that every person is potentially a hearer of the Word of God. As taught by the Church, if God's

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<sup>21</sup>K. Rahner, "Potentia Oboedientialis," *SM*, vol. 5, 66; *TI*, vol. 5, 181; Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 54.

<sup>22</sup>If we consider the *potentia oboedientialis* as an absence of contradiction between grace and nature, according to Rahner, it would mean that grace is something that is added to human nature in a subsequent moment.

<sup>23</sup>K. Riesenhuber, "Afterword: The Anonymous Christian According to Karl Rahner," in A. Röper, *The Anonymous Christian*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966, 157.

<sup>24</sup>Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 127-28.

definitive self-revelation is expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, one has to accept the fact that grace is the unmerited gift to all men by God and every human being is somehow directed to Christ.<sup>25</sup>

### **“Graced” Existence of the Human Person**

Again, for Rahner, the concept of grace becomes a helpful tool in elucidating the understanding of the human person as the one who is destined to transcendence. He reminds us that it is God’s gratuitous grace that elevated man to a higher level of existence, not anything else. Theologically speaking, for Rahner, it is grace that makes a man so special in this world. It is grace that spurs our intentional activity towards God.<sup>26</sup> For Rahner, grace is the determining factor of the transcendence of man, i.e. his orientation towards God. He holds that grace does not exist in opposition to ‘pure nature.’ In fact, he defines nature as the constitution of man which is presupposed by, and persists in, the capacity to hear the Word of God or revelation.<sup>27</sup>

In Rahner’s understanding, grace is not something that is superadded to the structure of the human person in a subsequent moment of his or her existence. His argument is that, if supernatural grace is the self-communication of God to man, it cannot be an element in any particular category of things which is added to the nature of man. And it is only in the light of this truth that the nature of grace as salvation is definitely disclosed.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Rahner raises the traditional discourse on grace to a higher level whereby his transcendental theology considers man as a reality willed and blessed by God’s grace. From that perspective, human ‘nature’ (as the condition of the possibility of grace) is the starting point of theology.

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<sup>25</sup>Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 126. In this self-communication God reveals himself not by a kind of efficient causality but as the cognitive determinant of the finite creature by a “quasi-formal causality.” In the ultimate analysis, no one can take the place of God. Cf. K. Rahner, “Revelation: God’s Self-Communication,” *SM*, vol. 5, 354; Rahner, “Christianity,” *SM*, vol. 1, 307.

<sup>26</sup>Though in Rahner there is an intimate relationship between the Absolute Savior and man’s transcendental orientation towards God, in no way we can say that this Absolute Savior is a transcendental deduction. In fact, Rahner insists that man in his transcendental experience does not discover ‘a certain God.’ On the contrary, God’s self-gift in Jesus Christ is the source of our search for a better and informed knowledge of God. Cf. *TI*, vol. 9, 29-30; *TI*, vol. 11, 227.

<sup>27</sup>Rahner, “Man,” *SM*, vol. 3, 369.

<sup>28</sup>Rahner, “Transcendental Theology,” *SM*, vol. 6, 288.



Thus, as already mentioned, any serious discourse on the human person's relationship with God needs to examine the anthropological aspect of theology.

In his opinion, grace is nothing but the experience of the absolute closeness of God in his radical self-communication, which of course reaches its culmination in the categorial revelation of the Christ-event. In other words, for Rahner, grace is the condition of the possibility of the capacity to receive the self-manifestation of God in revelation. In fact, man by nature is constituted by grace. Rahner even describes the man as "the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God."<sup>29</sup> This self-communication means that God in his own most proper reality makes himself the inner most constitutive element of the human person. Rahner calls it grace. In effect, it defines who man is. It means that the supernatural existence of the human person is not just a theoretical proposition. It has practical consequences as well. The idea of supernatural existence maintains that, even prior to justification by sanctifying grace, the human person already stands under the universal salvific will of God. Consequently, the human person is permanently the object of God's saving care and offer of grace. In fact, the absolute infinite being, God, is the condition of the possibility of transcendental openness of the human person. And through this openness of his pre-reflexive awareness of God, man is capable of hearing the Word of God as and when God articulates it. Thus, as already mentioned, man by nature is essentially open to revelation (i.e. nature as *potentia oboedientialis* for supernatural grace). This human person as a creature is bestowed with the gift of limitless receptivity to God. Rahner even calls man "the potential brother of Christ." It is because the ultimate definition of man, according to Rahner, is that he is the possible mode of existence of God if God exteriorizes himself to what is other than himself.<sup>30</sup>

Again, it is important to note that, for Rahner, grace cannot be a "limited gift" given only to a select few. On the contrary, it is an "unmerited gift" offered to all human beings without exception.

If we give anthropology this radical form, man is to be understood as the being who — at least in the form of the offer made to his freedom — is always and everywhere inescapably endowed with God's self-

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<sup>29</sup>Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116.

<sup>30</sup>Rahner, "Man," *SM*, vol. 3, 368. As noted, it is in reference to Christ, the *ideal* man.

communication — the Holy Spirit of grace. It is in this that he already experiences the fundamental event of what we call Christian revelation.<sup>31</sup>

It invites us to briefly see how Rahner understands/interprets the idea of Christian revelation.

### **Revelation and Truths**

Rahner has serious reservations about the attempt to see revelation as a collection of divine 'truths.' For him, if revelation is understood only as the communication of truths, what happens is that these truths are measured not by the *intellectus* which forms a primordial unity with the will, but by the *ratio*. It needs to be remembered that reason by nature has the tendency to 'see,' 'comprehend' and 'demonstrate.' The general understanding is that, since the divinely revealed truths belong to a different category, they are not accessible to reason. In other words, they surpass the created intellect and they remain obscure to mortal human reason. Therefore Rahner expresses his uneasiness with the idea of revelation as a deposit of truths: "The silent presupposition throughout is that we are dealing with truths which should strictly speaking have come within the scope of reason with its power to see and *comprehend*, but in this case do not meet its demands."<sup>32</sup> For Rahner, modern man may find it extremely difficult to understand or accept the above reasoning. Fundamental theology needs to find ways and means to present revelation as *self-communication* of God that has reached its culmination in Jesus Christ as taught by the Church.<sup>33</sup>

According to Rahner, from the history of revelation and biblical theology one understands that "it is by his action upon us that God imparts truths to us. "Going along with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, Rahner holds that revelation is more than the communication of truths. It is the definitive self-giving of God. And this self-communication of God, latent in grace, becomes explicitly known in the historical event of Christ. "Revelation is essentially a

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<sup>31</sup>Rahner continues: "To see revelation in this way as fundamentally taking place in God's self-communication does not contradict the traditional concept of revelation. For it is a matter of course that this grace which communicates God and so reveals him, which always comes into being in man's transcendental dependency on God (which it elevates) can — and indeed must — for man become a self-given fact which he reflects upon only in the context of mankind's history. It is in history, wherever this reflection authentically takes place, arriving at its zenith in Christ that we can talk about Christian revelation in the traditional sense of the word." *TI*, vol. 17, 65-66.

<sup>32</sup>*TI*, vol. 4, 39.

<sup>33</sup>Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 4.

revelation-event, a deed of God, because it does not consist merely in human discourse but conveys the very reality of what is revealed."<sup>34</sup> Further, Rahner maintains that there is a strict identity between the actual historical form of revelation in Christ and the revelation in grace as the supernatural condition of its possibility. In other words, for Rahner, the self-communication of God in grace, also known as transcendental revelation, cannot be detached from the categorial revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Here we may tend to ask: Is there any relationship between God's self-communication and the content of faith communicated as truths? The answer is yes. For Rahner, the revelation of mysteries in the form of truths is necessary if man is called ontologically to a supernatural end. That is to say, grace demands the communication of divine truths as mysteries. But Rahner would insist that, while dealing with these truths, theology should not disregard the addressee of divine revelation, i.e. the human person. After all, revelation is not a collection of some 'abstract' truths. For theology, truths do not exist for themselves. They exist for man and his salvation: "The communication of mystery can only take place in grace; mystery demands, as the condition of possibility of its being heard, a hearer divinized by grace."<sup>35</sup> In the ultimate analysis, for Rahner, God himself is revelation in grace, i.e. man's salvation.<sup>36</sup> And God himself makes this relationship possible.

For, without destroying the fact that grace is God himself in self-communication, grace is not a 'thing' but — as communicated grace — a conditioning of the spiritual and intellectual subject as such to a direct relationship with God. The most objective reality of salvation is at the same time necessarily the most subjective: the direct relationship of the subject with God through God himself.<sup>37</sup>

It can only be understood if one takes God as the absolute realisation of man's transcendental orientation. Thus God himself becomes the

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<sup>34</sup>K. Rahner, *Theology of Pastoral Action*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1968, 28.

<sup>35</sup>*TI*, vol. 4, 46.

<sup>36</sup>For Rahner, theology makes sense only if it is a discipline that deals with the relationship between God and man. Therefore, he would even equate revelation with salvation and he has no hesitation in saying that "revelation is revelation of salvation and therefore theology is essentially salvation theology." *TI*, vol. 9, 35. It goes along with the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council: "Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men" (*Dei Verbum*, 6).

<sup>37</sup>*TI*, vol. 9, 36.

ultimate future of man. It is nothing but God's self-communication in revelation.

### **Revelation as God's Self-communication in Grace and History**

For Rahner, revelation means that God has given himself to man in absolute nearness.<sup>38</sup> Here, as mentioned earlier, revelation does not mean the communication of something distinct from God, which would not be God himself. If that is the case, revelation would mean something *about* God. For Rahner, on the contrary, revelation in the strict sense means God's giving himself to man as he is. It is nothing but the historical self-unfolding of the transcendental relation between God and man which is constituted and effected by God's self-communication. This self-communication takes place in two modes: in grace and in history (i.e. the incarnation of the Logos/Word).<sup>39</sup> Rahner is of the opinion that in theology the *a priori* character of the subject (i.e. transcendental orientation) and the *a posteriori* quality of the historical object (i.e. categorial revelation in Christ) enjoy an exclusive and unique relationship.<sup>40</sup> Rahner summarizes this relationship thus:

To ask what revelation is, is thus equivalent to asking what is the highest and most radical case of that general relationship in which the actual coming to be of the higher from the self-transcending lower, is only one aspect of the one wonder of becoming and history, the other being its perpetual creation from above. Both aspects are equally true and real.<sup>41</sup>

According to him, this understanding of revelation can avoid both the immanentism of Modernism and a merely extrinsic concept of revelation that smacks of mythology.<sup>42</sup> Here, revelation is not understood as a stage in the development of man's religious consciousness and needs. Nor is it a purely extrinsic divine intervention coming purely from the outside, speaking to men and conveying to them through prophets truths in the form of propositions which would otherwise be inaccessible to them, and giving moral and other commands which men have to obey.

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<sup>38</sup>Röper, *The Anonymous Christian*, 116.

<sup>39</sup>K.Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation," *SM*, vol. 5, 349; K. Rahner, "Annotazioni sul concetto di rivelazione," in K. Rahner-J. Ratzinger, ed., *Rivelazione e Tradizione*. Brescia: Morcelliana, 1970, 15.

<sup>40</sup>*TI*, vol. 9, 30.

<sup>41</sup>Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation," *SM*, vol. 5, 348.

<sup>42</sup>Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation," *SM*, vol. 5, 349; *TI*, vol. 9, 28-29.

Revelation as grace-given communication is made to every human being without exception. In other words, it is in his supernaturally elevated transcendence that man experiences the absolute closeness of God. It is not a mere "religious feeling" of human beings.<sup>43</sup> It is indeed God's self-communication in divinizing grace. And therefore, for Rahner, it has every right to be called revelation. However, the discussion on revelation does not end here. "This history of God's self-communication and of the creature's self-transcendence, which is the history of the increasing divinization of the world, does not take place only in the depths of the free conscience, but because of man's unity in plurality and the dynamic tendency of grace towards the transfiguration of all creation, has an actually concrete historical dimension."<sup>44</sup>

Revelation in grace cannot be seen as an invention of human mind. It is a pure gift of God. Even as the communication of truths, divine revelation only comes to us as the salvific action of God's grace. In grace God first bestows on us the capacity of hearing his word of revelation. In other words, in grace God first imparts on us the reality of which the word of revelation speaks:

The reality is spoken of only in the grace by which the reality itself is communicated, and revelation only expounds it and makes it the object of consciousness. Revelation is not a preliminary substitute for the thing, as if for the moment we had only a message 'about' the thing and not the thing itself.<sup>45</sup>

Again, Rahner reminds us that the human person experiences his/her transcendence in history here and now (not in some imaginary world!). It is not a non-historical, isolated, search of some mystical experience in an individualistic fashion outside history. It is necessarily accomplished in the history of the action and thought of mankind. "Consequently this *absolute* transcendence directed towards the absolute presence of the ineffable mystery giving himself to men, has a history, and this is what we call the history of revelation."<sup>46</sup> It is the Christ-event. For Rahner, this historical revelation is the result of God's transcendental self-communication in grace in accordance with his supernatural saving

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<sup>43</sup> Here Rahner seems to have gone beyond Daniélou's understanding of religions. Cfr. J. Daniélou, "Christianity and non-Christian Religions," in T.P. Burke, ed., *The Word in History*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966, 86-101.

<sup>44</sup>K. Rahner, "Incarnation," *SM*, vol. 3, 117

<sup>45</sup>*TI*, vol. 4, 39.

<sup>46</sup>Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation," *SM*, vol. 5, 349.

providence. Thus, in Rahner's thinking, we see a unity between transcendental revelation in grace and historical revelation in the Christ-event. He summarizes the Christological concentration of revelation thus:

God is revealed as communicating himself in absolute and merciful presence as God, that is, as the absolute mystery. The historical mediation of this transcendental experience is also revealed as valid, as bringing about and authenticating the absolute experience of God. The unique and final culmination of this history of revelation has already occurred and has revealed the absolute and irrevocable unity of God's transcendental self-communication to mankind and of its historical mediation in the one God-man Jesus Christ, who is at once God himself as communicated, the human acceptance of this communication and the final historical manifestation of this offer and acceptance.<sup>47</sup>

What is the implication of this understanding of revelation for the human being? Here, for Rahner, God is not presented as an extrinsic reality intruding into the world of human beings. God in Christ is the fulfilment of the fundamental nature and expectation of every person. According to Rahner, the very fact that the human being is the supernatural existential, he/she is open to God's self-communication both in grace and history. In other words, the grace-given fundamental subjective disposition of man is directed towards the God of triune life. Rahner further argues that this transcendental revelation "can quite definitely be regarded as a word of revelation, provided that the notion of 'word' is not reduced to that of a phonetic utterance."<sup>48</sup> It is because transcendental revelation is always historically mediated, and that man's historical reality can never be without language. And the language God uses to communicate with human beings is the language of the Word.

### **Revelation as the Word of God and Sacrament**

Our discussion has come to an important topic in Rahner's theology, i.e. the relationship between God's revelation and the Word of God. In an interesting article published in 1958 Rahner explains the theological significance of the Word of God as revelation.<sup>49</sup> It is revelation because it is spoken by God in the infinite *katabasis* of his

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<sup>47</sup>Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation," *SM*, vol. 5, 349.

<sup>48</sup>Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation," *SM*, vol. 5, 350.

<sup>49</sup>Foreword to *La hora sin tiempo*, a collection of poems on the priesthood by Jorge Blajot. Cf. *TI*, vol. 3, 294.

self-communication, i.e. God's descending self-disclosure. In that sense, the Word of God brings the inner and most intimate light of God into the darkness of man.<sup>50</sup> However, it should not be seen as the product of man's subjective creativity. It is not a human word "about" God. At the same time, Rahner holds that, in order to hear the Word when God utters it in his freedom, man needs subjectivity which is constituted by God. God is the "inner precondition constituting the possibility of hearing what is said."<sup>51</sup> This *a priori* subjectivity acquires its specifically *theological* quality when "it is spoken and heard in the Holy Spirit."<sup>52</sup> In other words, it is the Spirit that helps man to 'hear' in faith the Word of God *as such*, without being altered. What happens here is that when one hears the Word, it is not simply (in content and conceptuality) a word *about* God, but it points to beyond itself, i.e. to the mystery called God. The Word becomes a promise of God himself. And this promise is present in our own reality as the Word of God. Finally, in the Incarnation, the Word (Logos) of God, in order to communicate the *ad intra* of God's infinite love to humanity becomes the *ad extra*. That is to say, the Word of God has become man, Jesus Christ.<sup>53</sup> Theologically speaking, it is the highest form of self-communication of God. Rahner summarises this train of thought thus:

The word of God is the eternal Logos of God who was made flesh, and therefore could also and in fact did become the word of man. All the words of God previously spoken are only the advance echoes of this word of God in the world. So much therefore is the word possessed of divine nobility, that we can call the Son, the eternal self-comprehension of the Father, nothing else but the Word.<sup>54</sup>

For Rahner, if God wants to make himself known to the world *in that which he is in his most proper*, he can do this in only two ways: either he seizes us and the world immediately into the dazzling brilliance of his divine light, i.e. the direct vision of God, or he comes in Word. Being God, he cannot come to us in any way other than in the word, without already taking us away from the world to himself. If he wants to give himself to us precisely *as he is* (Mystery), the only

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<sup>50</sup>TI, vol. 3, 303.

<sup>51</sup>K. Rahner, "Word of God and Theology," in K. Rahner, ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology*, London: Burns & Oates, 1975, 1827.

<sup>52</sup>Rahner, "Word of God and Theology," 1828.

<sup>53</sup>Rahner, "Incarnation," SM, vol. 3, 111.

<sup>54</sup> For this reason, according to Rahner, it was precisely this person, the Word, not another person of the most holy Trinity, who became in the flesh the word of God directed to us. TI, vol. 3, 303.

possibility that we can think of is that thing which belongs to God's own reality: the Word.<sup>55</sup> Again, according to Rahner, the word is that reality which enables man to go beyond the muteness of the whole created order. Thus, we realise that it is the word alone that is capable of making God present as the God of mysteries to the man who does not yet see him. It is capable of making God consciously present in the world. Therefore, Rahner calls the word "the primordial sacrament of transcendence."<sup>56</sup>

As seen above, for Rahner, divine revelation takes place in two modes: in grace and in the event, i.e. transcendental and categorial revelation. The Incarnate Word is the categorial mode of God's self-communication. However, we need to remember that grace and word are not two mutually exclusive and independent realities. In fact, as mentioned above, they are one and the same reality happening in two modes of God's self-giving.<sup>57</sup> They complement each other and complete the act of revelation. Therefore, Rahner would say that "without grace, without the communication of God himself to the creature, the word would be empty: without the word, grace would not be present to us as spiritual and free persons in a conscious way. The word is the bodiliness of his grace."<sup>58</sup> This word is one of the constitutive elements of the presence of God in the world. It dwells among us in faith and not in vision. And faith comes from hearing the word of God (*fides ex auditu*).<sup>59</sup> This word is necessary, if God is to mean more to us than the ultimate ground of extra-divine reality, if God is to be for us the God of grace who communicates to man his own intra-divine glory.

The Word, which is spoken, is a free and gratuitous act of God. It is not that the human person who discovers this word through his intellectual expertise or skills. Again, it cannot be discovered at all times and in all places in the world. It is a unique event: the Christ event. This word has been spoken by God. God speaks this word through Christ and his messengers. However, the messengers are only heralds of this Word because they cannot take the place of the Word, which is God's presence-to-us uniquely revealed in Christ. The messengers are at the service of the Word. Their role arises only because Christ sends them to the world as his messengers. They

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<sup>55</sup>Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 129-136; *TI*, vol. 3, 302-303.

<sup>56</sup>*TI*, vol. 3, 304.

<sup>57</sup>See note 39 above.

<sup>58</sup>*TI*, vol. 3, 303.

<sup>59</sup>*TI*, vol. 4, 269.



cannot take hold of this Word by their own power or alter it. No human interpretation can change the basic character of the Word, which belongs to God alone. Therefore, Rahner would argue that,

what the messenger and the herald<sup>60</sup> of the word of God proclaims is the kerygma, not primarily nor ultimately a doctrine. He is handing on a message. His word, in so far as it is his word, is a signpost pointing to the word spoken by another, Christ. He must be submerged and unseen behind the message he delivers.<sup>61</sup>

The Word that is proclaimed is an efficacious word. It is efficacious because it is not merely a discourse *about* something.<sup>62</sup> Rahner explains the efficaciousness of the Word as the salvation of man. Salvation is not something that is imposed on man, but an invitation. The salvation that comes from God as love achieves its own fulfilment only if it is accepted and answered in freedom. And freedom exists only where there is consciousness of spirit and wakefulness of heart. Here we see the dynamics between grace and the Word. For Rahner, God's grace only reaches its own fulfilment when it is spoken. So grace is in the expectation of the Word to be spoken. It is present in virtue of being proclaimed. The Word primarily spoken as the love of God, to which man can respond. The Word is consequently the efficacy of love. Thus, it is an efficacious word: Word as Sacrament.<sup>63</sup>

For Rahner, there are many efficacious words spoken at the command of Christ. These words are of varying efficacy in themselves and in the men who hear them. But Rahner asks: "When is the most concentrated, the most effective word spoken? When is everything said at once, so that nothing more has to be said, because with this word everything is really there?" It is in the word of Consecration. 'This is my Body... this is the chalice of my Blood...'

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<sup>60</sup> Rahner calls this messenger or herald "priest." For him, priest is not primarily a theologian, but a preacher. Here Rahner makes a very significant observation: "And because there is preaching for that reason there is theology: not vice versa. For the same reason it is the preaching Church with her demand for faith which is the norm of theology: it is not the 'science' of theology which is the norm of an haute vulgarisation which could be called preaching." *TI*, vol. 3, 304.

<sup>61</sup> *TI*, vol. 3, 304.

<sup>62</sup> Like, for example, the weather that would remain equally real and effective if it were not talked about. Here the case is quite different.

<sup>63</sup> *TI*, vol. 3, 305. For Rahner, the efficacy of the word of God can have very different grades and degrees. This depends on what kind of word of God is in question, how and by whom it is spoken. But wherever it is really a case of the word of God itself as a delivered message, there we are in the presence of the efficacious word. It is different from theology which can be merely human reflection about the word of God.

Theologically speaking, here only the pronounced word becomes fully efficacious. It speaks in such a way that what was spoken of is now present. Everything is then present: heaven and earth, past and eternal future; everything is gathered together into this word. Here, these words are not spoken *about* some higher realities like the eternal mystery of the Trinity. On the contrary, in these words, God gives himself completely to us. He becomes all in all.<sup>64</sup>

### **Implications of Rahner's Doctrine of Revelation**

Though Rahner's understanding of revelation can be the starting point for different themes in theology, especially in dogmatic discipline (like Christology, Trinity, ecclesiology, etc.), we limit ourselves to look at it from the point of view of fundamental theology. Even here, we would like to highlight only one aspect — the question of revelation and universal salvation in today's world.

We need to acknowledge that Rahner's understanding of revelation, especially transcendental revelation, is a big step towards entering into dialogue with the modern world and the people of different faiths. It does not consider those who do not profess explicitly the Christian faith as *massa damnata* (condemned mass). In Rahner's view, every person, no matter what ethnic group or faith he/she belongs to, is supernatural existential, i.e. a being "willed" by God who continues to exist in his presence. Moreover, God's offer of salvation is open to all (1 Tim 2:4). At the same time, the Church teaches us that faith is necessary for salvation. If we take both these truths together, i.e. the necessity of Christian faith and God's universal will of salvation, theology needs to show how those who do not profess explicitly the Christian faith are not excluded from the offer of salvation wrought by Christ. As seen above, here, Rahner's idea concurs with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>65</sup> From that perspective Rahner argues that the history of revelation is co-extensive with the spiritual history of mankind. That makes us

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<sup>64</sup>*TI*, vol. 3, 306. Some Protestants may find it difficult to accept this Catholic position espoused by Rahner. For example, Elsie Gibson writes: "In the Eucharist Christ's words must be spoken and the bread and wine consecrated by a priest ordained by a bishop in the apostolic succession. A lesser sacrament — holy orders — is thus determinative of a greater. Our Lord's words and the consecration are with power when spoken by one man, without power when spoken by another. Where, then, is the power — in the words or in the man uttering them?" E. Gibson, "The Word as Sacrament," *Christian Century* 83/ 39 S 28 (1966) 1174.

<sup>65</sup>See note 2 above.

realize that the topic cannot be treated purely from an ecclesiological point of view because the inner structure of this 'people of God' in the sense of objectively redeemed mankind is not immediately given to us.<sup>66</sup> However, still holding on to the principle that salvation is impossible without faith and faith is impossible without revelation, Rahner argues that every human being on the face of the earth is an addressee and a beneficiary of God's revelation by grace in a non-explicit manner. Rahner calls it "transcendental divinization of man's fundamental subjective disposition."<sup>67</sup> Consequently, for every human being this supernatural existential itself constitutes a "revelation" of God through his self-communication in grace. Rahner holds that the grace-given fundamental subjective disposition is indeed a divine revelation for those who have no opportunity to know Christ.<sup>68</sup> Thus Rahner is able to speak of non-official and implicit Christianity. In his opinion, it "can and should be called Christianity in a valid sense, even though it cannot call itself such or refuses to do so."<sup>69</sup> Speaking in a prophetic vein Rahner affirms that "the Church will go out to meet the non-Christian of tomorrow with the attitude expressed by St Paul when he said: 'What therefore you do not know and yet worship that I proclaim to you (Acts 17:23).'"<sup>70</sup>

Rahner looks at revelation from a new perspective which goes beyond the debate on religious pluralism. Unlike Daniélou and von Balthasar, who see religions as expressions of ascending religious act in mankind,<sup>71</sup> Rahner's theology is not an attempt to redeem religions and their relevance. It is not a question of opting for an inclusive or exclusive Christology either.<sup>72</sup> Though Rahner seems to be close to the inclusive view point, in his doctrine of revelation, what Rahner tries to offer us is a new understanding of God and man. In his

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<sup>66</sup>Riesenhuber, "Afterword: The Anonymous Christian According to Karl Rahner," 147.

<sup>67</sup>Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation," *SM*, vol. 5, 350.

<sup>68</sup>Rahner, "Revelation: Theological Interpretation," *SM*, vol. 5, 350.

<sup>69</sup>Rahner, "Mission: Salvation of the Non-Evangelized," *SM*, vol. 4, 80.

<sup>70</sup>*TI*, vol. 5, 134. It is significant to note that Rahner made these observations in 1961, long before the Second Vatican Council promulgated those important documents on non-Christian religions (GS 22; LG 16; AG 7).

<sup>71</sup>Cf. Daniélou, "Christianity and non-Christian Religions," 89; *The Salvation of the Nations*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962; *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament*. Baltimore: Helicon, 1957. H.U. von Balthasar, "Catholicism and the Religions," *Communio* 5 (1978) 6-14.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. P. Schineller, "Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views," *Theological Studies* 37/4 (1976) 545-566.

'anthropological turn,' Rahner makes theology a discipline highly relevant for the modern man without excluding anyone. From the Rahnerian point of view, primarily, God is not a biased, sectarian divinity. He is the Lord of all that exist. Consequently, every person on earth is precious in the eyes of God. No one can exist without God's care and providence. No one is outside the purview of God's care, not even an atheist! To borrow again a phrase from St Paul, all of us "live, move, and exist in God" (Acts 17:28). Seen from the Rahnerian perspective, thus, revelation is a new mode of human consciousness in which the human spirit perceives itself as finalized toward the divine in a new way, and perceives the divine as drawing the human spirit into closer union with itself. Thus, for Rahner, revelation is simultaneously anthropocentric and theocentric.<sup>73</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Christian faith rests on the conviction that God has indeed spoken to human beings. The Christian knows this revelation as the self-communication of God in grace and history is not reserved only for him but must reach to all men and women. He also knows that the culmination of this self-communication of God, as taught by the Church, is the Incarnation of Christ. In other words, the meaning and purpose of the Incarnation is the self-communication of God to the whole of humanity. How does theology communicate this basic understanding of the purpose of revelation to the world of today?

One of the important tasks of fundamental theology is the mediation of the faith. It is a challenging task because it demands creative fidelity. Today, theology, especially fundamental theology, needs to present the Christian faith in such a way that it is credible. Moreover, it needs to help the individual to understand that his daily experiences are part of his whole life, which of course includes his spiritual life. Only then the unity of the two commands — love of God and love of neighbour — makes sense and becomes a reality in his life.<sup>74</sup> In other words, what is affirmed is that the human experience cannot be ignored or bypassed while talking about God. Further, the Christian faith is not a "second-hand" experience of God transmitted by a select few, no matter how sublime it may appear to

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<sup>73</sup> A. Dulles, *Models of Revelations*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 1992, 100.

<sup>74</sup> "In the case of this unity the important thing is to understand rather that the one does not exist and cannot be understood or exercised without the other, and that two names have really to be given to the same reality if we are to summon up its one mystery, which cannot be abrogated." *TI*, vol. 6, 232.

be. The task of fundamental theology is to help people to recognize their often undetected experiences of God, including their encounter with the poor and the marginalised (Mt 25:31-45). Moreover, Christian faith demands that each person in his/her own particular situation becomes the "subject" of his/her faith. Only then faith becomes personal and responsible. And here the contribution of Karl Rahner is significant. For him, every human person is the addressee of God's initiative. All our experiences, both spiritual and worldly, affirm that deeply inscribed in our hearts is an orientation to God and to his word of revelation. At the same time, Rahner holds that, in Jesus Christ, God draws near to us in a personal way and calls all men and women to be in communion with him. In its culminating expression, revelation is the good news that God is with us (*Emmanuel*) to free us from the darkness of sin and to raise us up to life eternal.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, for Rahner, theology is based on the assumption that God has offered to his creatures abundant light, both natural and supernatural, to perceive his presence in the world and find meaning and fulfilment of their lives. In other words, the human person is made in such a way that he/she is able to listen to the Word of God when he speaks — *Homo est Dei capax* (CCC, 27). According to Rahner, the human person by nature is the hearer of the Word. Consequently, faith is the human response to God's Word. Faith as the correlative of revelation demands an attentive hearing on the part of the human person. Faith is that reality by which one accepts God's invitation to enter into a deeper fellowship with him. Therefore, faith is a personal act and attitude, deeply engaging our freedom. In fact, revelation and its correlative, faith, are at the heart of Rahner's theology. That is why Rahner defines theology as "the science of faith."<sup>76</sup> Thus, Rahner in his theology attempts to present the Christian faith in a credible way for people, taking into consideration their questions and concerns.

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<sup>75</sup>Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 4.

<sup>76</sup>K. Rahner, "Theology: Nature," in K. Rahner, ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, New York: Seabury, 1975, 1687.