

Speaking in New Tongues: Karl Rahner's Writings from the Grave

John Honner

Abstract: Karl Rahner's last four years were no less productive than the preceding four decades. After his death in 1984 several collections of his works appeared in English. They show a heartfelt concern for the unfinished work of Vatican II, especially for the reform of the teaching office of the Church, for the future of Catholicism in a world Church, and for the future of Christianity among world religions and new humanisms. This article explores these critical issues in Rahner's final writings and argues that, while the theology is not new, the conclusions are more pressing than before.

IN 1980, IN THE PREFACE TO THE FOURTEENTH VOLUME of his *Schriften zur Theologie*, "Concern for the Church", Karl Rahner stated that this would be the final volume in the series: 7,500 pages, he declared, seemed enough for him – if not for the reader.¹ This was quite different from the Rahner who had said on his 75th birthday, in the preceding year, that "One should never stop thinking too early". The last essay in this supposedly last volume was poignantly entitled "Why does God allow us to suffer?" The grand old man had had enough. As he often said in his later years, he was simply "waiting to die".² He was, perhaps, at long last heeding his mother's good-natured admonition and giving the younger theologians a go. Frau Rahner, however, lived a

1. Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie XIV* (Zürich: Benziger, 1980) 7. See Karl Rahner, *Theological investigations 20* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986). See *Theological investigations 1-19* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961-1983).

2. I heard Rahner say "I'm just an old man waiting to die" in Munich in 1980. Rahner declares the same thing in an interview with Hans Schöpfer in January 1981: see Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (eds.), *Karl Rahner in dialogue: conversations and interviews 1965-1982* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 276. He repeats this in another important source on Rahner's last years, *I remember: an autobiographical interview with Meinhold Kreuss* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 12. The story of Rahner's death is told in Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (eds.), *Karl Rahner: Bilder eines Lebens* (Zürich/Freiburg: Benziger/Herder, 1985) 162-5.

very long life. We should not have expected her son to be any different. Would this really be the end?

Behold, in 1983 and 1984 volumes fifteen and sixteen of Rahner's *Schriften* appeared.³ In the preface to volume fifteen Rahner acknowledged, with some embarrassment, that the announcement of his retirement had been premature: "When we unexpectedly discover in our old age that we are still capable of working and so feel obliged to continue," he wrote, "we may still publish the results of our work, which we ourselves look upon as a gift."⁴

Rahner died in March 1984. Long after his death, however, volumes 15 and 16 of the *Schriften* eventually appeared in translation as volumes 21-23 of *Theological investigations*. Five other important Rahnerian works were also published posthumously in English: the three books of interviews called *I remember*; *Karl Rahner in dialogue* and *Faith in a wintry season*; the fiery work written in collaboration with Heinrich Fries, called *Unity of the churches: an actual possibility*; and fittingly last of all, a prayer book called *Prayers for a lifetime*.⁵ For the English reader, therefore, it was as though Rahner were writing from the grave. It was wonderful to see these writings appearing even a decade after Rahner's death. It was as though he had been buried with his typewriter and the dead Rahner's relentless hand was producing yet more grist for the theological mill.

Despite the wonder of it, these various publications have attracted little critical attention.⁶ Yves Tourenne has recently published his thesis on the theology of the later Rahner, from 1970-84, suggesting there is a radicalisation of Rahner's theology, but without special attention to the very last years.⁷ Geoffrey Kelly has a couple of excellent pages on Rahner's retirement years, noting the greater emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit, the stress on an ascending Christology, and a "continuing focus on freedom".⁸ Richard Lennan, in his outstanding work on Rahner's ecclesiology, notes the increasing urgency in Rahner's writings

3. Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie XV, XVI* (Zürich: Benziger, 1983, 1984). See the translations: Karl Rahner, *Theological investigations 21, 22, 23* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1988, 1991, 1992).

4. Rahner, *Theological investigations 21*, p. vii.

5. Karl Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season: conversations and interviews with Karl Rahner in the last years of his life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); Karl Rahner and Heinrich Fries, *Unity of the churches: an actual possibility* (New York: Paulist, 1985); Karl Rahner, *Prayers for a lifetime* (New York: Crossroad, 1984). Also remarkable is the 22 years of correspondence between Rahner and Luise Rinser, one half of which is published in Rinser's *Gratwanderung: Briefe der Freundschaft an Karl Rahner 1962-1984* (Munich: Kösel, 1994): see Roland Hill's review in *The Tablet* (9 September 1995) 1136-7.

6. Harvey Egan has a fine but brief review of *Schriften XV* in *Theological studies* 46 (1985) 553-5. It is not insignificant that *Theological studies*, unless I am mistaken, only deigned to review one of the English volumes, and then in the shorter notices.

7. Yves Tourenne, *La théologie du dernier Rahner* (Paris: Cerf, 1995).

8. Geoffrey B. Kelly (ed.), introduction to *Karl Rahner: theologian of the graced search for meaning* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 27-9.

about the future from the 1980s on.⁹ Leo O'Donovan, in his otherwise excellent essay, "A journey into time: the legacy of Karl Rahner's last years", pays very little attention to the final volume of Rahner's *Schriften*.¹⁰ This final volume contains, admittedly, a strange collection of smaller devotional essays and occasional papers, a general mix of Rahner's intense piety and restless grumpy charm. But there is, perhaps, more than a hint of innovation and radical vision in Rahner's last writings.

Perhaps Rahner had become tired of his own voice by the end of 1979, and perhaps that was why he had announced his retirement in 1980. Perhaps, like the Thomas Aquinas of legend, Rahner had found the summa of his theology to be nothing but straw. Certainly, he was unhappy with the state of Roman Catholic theology. But something must have changed in him. How else can we explain the fact that, after announcing his retirement, Rahner published hundreds of thousands of words in his last four years, an astonishing output for any person at any stage of life? Surely some force must have given him new energy. Had he found something new to say? Or do we have here only the death-rattle of a compulsive writer?

If Rahner had found that he had something new to say, how is it that nobody has noticed? Have we all become immune to Teutonic metaphysics? Have we, like Metz, found Rahner too private and no longer relevant to the concerns of political theology, still wrestling with neo-scholastic enemies long since crushed to death in the powerful grip of his transcendental theology?¹¹ Or, like Novak and Weigel and others, do we see Rahner as the man most responsible for the reprehensible excesses of Vatican II and, if you can believe it, the progenitor of Leonardo Boff and Mary Daly?¹² Or, like Ratzinger, have we concluded that in the end Rahner's work was a piece of theological acrobatics that had little to do with reality?¹³

Or do we no longer want to know? What if Rahner was, with hitherto unexpressed fire, not only resurrecting the dangerous memory of Vatican II but also, in his own mind, writing schema for Vatican III? He had, after all, shaped a good deal of Vatican II,¹⁴ where, to his

9. See Richard Lennan, *The ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 246.

10. Leo O'Donovan, "A journey into time: the legacy of Karl Rahner's last years", *Theological studies* 46 (1985) 621-46.

11. See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in history and society* (London: Burns and Oates, 1980) 13, n. 15.

12. See David S. Toolan's report, "The 'Catholic Moment' under siege", *America* (1 March 1997) 3.

13. See Rahner's preface to *Schriften XVI*, and Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 256, n. 185. See also Ratzinger's criticisms of Rahner, along with those of Beer and von Stockhausen, in *30 Days* (October 1992 and April 1993).

14. See Ralph M. Wiltgen, *The Rhine flows into the Tiber* (Devon: Augustine, 1978) 80, 91-2, 96, 103, 131, 176, 245.

amusement, some of the cardinals called him "The Holy Ghost writer".¹⁵ What if his "Concern for the Church" demanded more of him than was expressed in *Schriften XIV*? Certainly, he was ready to ghost-write a letter from a Pope Paul VII of the twenty first century.¹⁶

Rahner's final writings and conversations are preoccupied, in my view, with three topics in particular, and all have to do with the fundamentals of the future of the Christian community: first, the reform of the teaching office of the Church; secondly, the future of Catholicism in a world-Church; and, finally, the future of Christianity among world religions and new humanisms.¹⁷ In this article I want to review his remarks about each of these three topics, in the hope that Rahner may, after all, still have something to say – just when we thought he was dead.

As a preliminary note, let us recall Rahner's pessimism about the state of contemporary Catholic theology in his last few years. In 1979, while conceding that some competent theology was being done, he asked rhetorically:

But does this contradict the view that theology in the Church today is less vibrant and active than it was in the first phase of the new theology? Does not the validity of this viewpoint manifest itself in a certain stagnation of ecumenical theology, and in a dearth of high-level theology which would bring Christianity to the unbelievers of our time while speaking in new tongues, confidently and obviously out of the mentality of our time? All things taken into consideration I really do feel that Catholic theology today by and large does not rate a higher mark than Grade C.¹⁸

This is a bitter judgement on any account. Rahner is accusing Catholic theologians of having no courage and of being unable to tackle the difficult questions.

It is worth remembering that Rahner himself, upon tackling the difficult questions in his earlier years, had come under such a strict censorship in the late 1950s that he had decided to write no more.¹⁹ Fortunately, Vatican II rescued him from such an unlikely resolve. In his last years, however, Rahner perceived the Church to be entering a winter season, with the promise of Vatican II yet to be fulfilled.²⁰ To this

15. See Rahner, *I remember*, 82.

16. See Rahner's "Letter to Peppino" in "The perennial actuality of the papacy", *Theological investigations* 22, 191-207.

17. O'Donovan suggests that Rahner's last writings are located under three headings: the doctrine of God, questions about the Church, and issues concerned with history and society: see O'Donovan, "A journey into time", 624.

18. Rahner, *Theological investigations*, 21, 75.

19. See Rahner, *I remember*, 63-4.

20. Karl Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 176, 189. Rahner saw Ratzinger's rejection of Metz's appointment as a theology professor in Munich as a symptom of a backward movement in the Catholic Church. See Rahner, *In dialogue*, 234.

task, then, he addressed himself once more, writing much less cautiously than he had in the past, boldly challenging conservative tendencies in the Church. In this sense, he himself was “speaking in new tongues”.

Let us now examine more closely the three outstanding concerns of Rahner’s final writings. Following this examination, we may be in a better position to diagnose the “theo-pathology” of the supposedly retired Karl Rahner.

1. THE REFORM OF THE TEACHING OFFICE OF THE CHURCH

In the final three volumes of *Theological investigations* there are at least ten articles on the role of the papacy and/or the magisterium in the Church. Rahner had always been, and always remained, a strong defender of the need for a teaching office in the Church: the very existence of a teaching office was, for him, the guarantee of the work of Christ and of the possibility of the development of doctrine.²¹ Only where there were absolute, ahistorical, and unchanging truths would a teaching office be unnecessary. Thus support for a teaching office was both support for change and recognition of the possibility of change. Rahner never resiled from this conviction, but this did not mean that he always defended what the teaching office taught. On the other hand, it is important to note that Rahner saw himself always as a theologian of the Church and in the Church, and all his arguments were from the position of one thinking within the Church.²²

Rahner became especially critical, nonetheless, of the way the magisterium operated in the last years of his life. There is a cluster of articles in Rahner’s final volumes under the heading of “Doctrine and magisterium”.²³ As ever, Rahner’s notorious even-handedness nearly gets the better of his own convictions. He defends the perennial role of the papacy and the magisterium on the one hand, but warns on the other that the papacy is not essential to God’s dealings with the world. In the same essay, he is critical of the papacy’s contemporary isolation from the situation of ordinary Christians and peoples of other or of no faith; he is equally critical of the silencing of theologians and suggests that Protestant orders could be recognised.

In a long essay simply entitled “Authority”, originally published in 1982, Rahner discusses the role of authority in any human society, the difference between authority and coercive power, and thus the foundations for the following conclusions concerning the teaching authority in the Church:

21. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978) 381.

22. See Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 28-36, 189-210.

23. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 22, 165-224.

it is the task of the teaching authority in the Church to see to it that in the Church the truth of revelation is given proper witness and proclamation. Only to this degree and extent does this teaching authority extend as well to the correct belief of the individual who, so to speak, has to take it upon him or herself to see to it that his or her faith corresponds to the social presence of Christ's truth in the Church and through the Church in the world. The Church's teaching office can provide this pure presence of the truth of revelation in the Church, but it is not in a position to supervise the conformity of the individual's specific faith within the Church's doctrine.

In respect to the individual's faith...the teaching office can only ascertain that this particular expression of faith does not contradict the universal faith of the Church. The teaching office cannot go beyond this negative form of certification...²⁴

In other words, the days of coercive power are over! The freedom of religion, enshrined at Vatican II, insists that faith is a free personal act and "attempts to exercise such coercive power...should be assessed as attempts to claim for the Church a power which it does not possess either on the basis of its own nature or its present day situation in a pluralist society".²⁵

In an another essay from the same year, entitled "The mature Christian", Rahner further moderates the authority of the magisterium: "it is entirely possible for the Church's magisterium to issue teachings, albeit not in the form of ultimately binding definitions in the strict sense, which...are simply erroneous".²⁶ Once again, he appeals to Vatican II to justify the need for maturity in the freedom of the faith. He more than hints at the magisterium's neglect of the predicament of those in second marriages, and similar situations, and he concludes this essay with a remarkable exhortation to mature Christians "to make their decisions by themselves... to have the courage to make use of this mature responsibility of their own and they must not whine that the world and the Church have left them alone".²⁷ Elsewhere, even more strongly, he writes: "The contemporary Christian is no longer someone who simply waits for decisions from above. He or she must act according to Christian principles without waiting for the authority of the Church."²⁸ In *The unity of the churches* Rahner also discusses at length the reform of the Petrine office.²⁹ His writings and interviews are laced with similar remarks, indeed constant choruses, which clearly

24. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 23, 85.

25. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 23, 83.

26. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 21, 123.

27. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 21, 127-8.

28. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 156.

29. See Rahner, *The unity of the churches*, 59, 83; and *Faith in a wintry season*, 170, 171.

and without apology would overturn the present structures and practices of the magisterium.

Harvey Egan irenically observes that, in these essays, Rahner “urges both scholarly theology and the magisterium to pay more attention to the actual, lived faith of the people because their faith instinct lives from a universal revelation that is in some way deeper than that explicated by official revelation”.³⁰ Revelation, it seems, and the future of revelation, is in the hands of the world as much as it is in the hands of the Church. And this, of course, has been a theme of Rahner’s work from its very outset. But just how far does Rahner take this theology? An evaluation must come later. In his final reflections on the future of Catholicism and Christianity, Rahner spells out some ways in which the Church, freed from the restraining hand of fearful authority, might move.

3. THE FUTURE OF CATHOLICISM IN A WORLD-CHURCH

In the twenty second volume of *Theological investigations* there are seven essays gathered together under the heading “The future of the Church”. At the outset, Rahner addresses the “forgotten dogmatic initiatives of the Second Vatican Council”, referring to suggestions made at Vatican II which impinge on doctrine and which “have generally not yet received sufficient attention and elaboration in Catholic theology”.³¹

One of these “forgotten initiatives” has to do with the way the European church must change if it is to become a world-church. The key word is plurality. A world-wide unity of faith can never entail a uniformity of faith. Indeed “a sufficient unity of faith may be reached among those who, confessing the triune God and Jesus as Lord and Savior, believe the essential foundations of Christianity and have been baptized.”³² Or, as he puts it elsewhere,

I am convinced that the unity of Christian confessions and churches could be brought about more rapidly and more easily than ordinary people think.... if Rome were to be as tolerant in regard to the non-Catholic churches of the West as it is in regard to the oriental churches, a catholic unity would indeed be possible.³³

Rahner suggests ways of moving towards such a world-church in a later essay, subtitled “a pastoral strategy for the world-church”.³⁴ Elsewhere, just before he died, Rahner stressed his belief that “it must be clearly stated that the traditional Western or Roman strategy is not

30. H. Egan, Review of *Schriften XV*, 555.

31. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 22, 97. See *Gaudium et Spes*, § 21.

32. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 22, 77.

33. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 79-80.

34. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 22, 106-119.

everywhere applicable. Regional differences must be seen as obvious."³⁵ Again, for example, "there is no reason why a pluriform inculturation of the gospel would undermine the unity of Christian faith and of the Church."³⁶ In *Faith in a wintry season* Rahner imagines smaller dioceses, the creation of non-local parishes, the writing of a non-European code of canon law,³⁷ the possibility of a non-celibate clergy,³⁸ the ordination of women,³⁹ intercommunion, local appointment of bishops, decentralisation of the Church, even polygamy,⁴⁰ and so on. Indeed, Rahner seems to support almost everything that the present restorationist powers oppose. He even has a word for Australia:

Let the new churches in Africa, Asia, Australia, and South America recognise their historical roots in the Mediterranean and North Atlantic churches, let them also keep various European features in their further history, even if they are not "of divine right", but – let them also reject or modify such features, without Rome issuing prohibitions.⁴¹

Apart from the task of showing people that God is in the end more important than their stomachs, Rahner regards the most pressing contemporary theological concerns to include issues related to ecumenism.⁴² "The one Church of the future will not be the Roman Catholic Church in the form that it exists today. It will be marked by legitimate pluralism" and "the existing pluralism among Christian denominations is not so far from the one Church of the future as one might think."⁴³ More demanding, nonetheless, is Rahner's frequent insistence "that the Christian of the future has to be a mystic or he or she won't be at all". This was a favourite saying. It implies that authority is to come from within, not extrinsically,⁴⁴ and indeed a mystical awareness of the complex layers of meaning and of unity-in-difference probably constitutes the only way an intelligent believer could hold together the rigid structures of the Church on the one hand and the promise of the Church on the other. The real challenge to

35. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 192.

36. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 79; See also *In dialogue*, 234-7.

37. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 183, 187, 195. See also 75, 169, 183; *In dialogue*, 111, 171, 199, 235, 276-9, 286-8. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 22, 19.

38. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 196.

39. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 22, 131. *Faith in a wintry season*, 101, 163. It is well known that Rahner wrote a letter protesting against the Congregation for the Faith's declaration on the non-ordination of women. See, for example, *In dialogue*, 272, 296.

40. See Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 162.

41. Rahner, *In dialogue*, 271. See *Faith in a wintry season*, 165.

42. See Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 161.

43. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 161.

44. *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 328, from an interview in 1982. Quote is from Rahner, *Theological investigations* 7, 15. See *Faith in a wintry season*, 115. See also H. Egan, "Rahner's mystical theology" in W. J. Kelly (ed.), *Theology and discovery: essays in honor of Karl Rahner* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980) 139-58.

intellectuals is to realise that “the mystery consists in being able to grasp rationally that the incomprehensible really exists”.⁴⁵

For Rahner, the mystery of God is the highest light, the supreme court, the last touchstone of reality.... Pick any metaphor you want, the ineffable God stands behind them all and within them all. And, further, this ineffable God is triune, transcendent and immanent, relational and constant. The Church – in government, sacrament and community – must be true to, rather than obscuring of, this mystery. We run the risk, otherwise, of having only religion and no real God. It is an awareness of the mystery of God, in Rahner’s view, that will empower newness in the Church and sustain the unity of faith. Perhaps he is too optimistic, and sets the bar too high for the ordinary tribal Roman Catholic. Or perhaps he is right: the unwillingness of the tribal Catholic to engage transcendence is sustaining an authority and culture which gives a false witness of security to the world and thus ignores the central mission of Christ to be *for* the salvation of the world. Once more, however, let us put the critique of Rahner’s views on hold until we consider what he has to say about his third major interest, the future of Christianity among non-Christian cultures.

4. THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG WORLD RELIGIONS AND NEW HUMANISMS

In an interview on his 75th birthday Rahner was asked if there were any further themes he wished to work out in his theology. He replied that he had hoped to write something on *apocatastasis* (the Orthodox doctrine that all free beings will eventually share in the grace of salvation), hoping that “God has in fact created a world in which all questions indeed find a positive solution”.⁴⁶

The later Rahner accepts the fact that religion is practised in real life and that the world is a web of varying cultures.⁴⁷ Hence,

Dialogue with the present-day or still surviving world-religions ought to be a major area of modern theology.... Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam cannot be considered simply as human interventions that have gone bad or as a deterioration of human religiosity that has to be judged merely negatively.”⁴⁸

Elsewhere he argues,

beyond ecumenism there are burning questions; they exist because in the world today we have not only Christians but also Moslems, and the entire secularized, positivist, relativist, skeptical, atheistic

45. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 160.

46. Rahner, *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 194.

47. Rahner, *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 324, from an interview in 1982.

48. Rahner, *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 325, from an interview in 1982.

world in which the message of Christianity must be preached in a new way."⁴⁹

And the European Church "must grapple with the problems of Islam in a theological way and not just politically and polemically".⁵⁰

Dialogue with science also became very important for Rahner, though it was not new in his writing.⁵¹ Now, however, the dialogue was to be part of a broader scheme of engagements because, since Vatican II, the whole non-Christian world, whether religious, humanist or atheist, is no longer the *massa damnata* it was for so long thought to be.⁵² "Christianity is the acceptance in faith...of a unity of all reality that comes not from human beings but is grounded in God's self-communication."⁵³ The theology of this openness to other religions all rests on Rahner's great essay on the theology of the Trinity as the monotheism above all monotheisms.⁵⁴

Atheism is also included in this set of dialogues, a set established in the context of Rahner's radical theology of nature and grace. Thus, just before he died, Rahner spoke in Budapest at a conference on "The responsibility of human beings in the contemporary world" attended by communists and religious figures.⁵⁵ Rahner lectured on realistic humanism, believing that all shared human convictions and all serious humanisms were also of the outpouring and summoning of the divine. But if one does dare to suggest, as Vatican II hints, that there can be grace even among atheists, what does this imply for the Church's view of itself as essential to salvation? Harvey Egan notes that for Rahner "only God can rescue everything human from its inherent dynamism to a dead end" and that "atheism is a horrible deformation of human consciousness" and that "several essays debunk the notion that this world can save, even if it were totally Christian".⁵⁶ And yet, at the same time, in these very considerations, Rahner seems to be taking the heart of history most seriously, provided that the heart is open and alive. Egan's assessment of Rahner is true in as much as Rahner is never one for "cheap liberalism". And, further, Rahner recognises that the struggle against atheism "is always first and foremost a struggle against a view of God which is in danger of replacing the true, incomprehensible God by a human idol", a danger to which stupidity

49. Rahner, *Karl Rahner in dialogue*, 358.

50. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 21, 98.

51. Rahner pursued the topic as early as *Theological investigations* 3 ("science as a confession") and *Theological investigations* 13 ("Theology as engaged in an interdisciplinary dialogue with the sciences").

52. See Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 193.

53. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 199.

54. See Rahner, "Oneness and threefoldness of God in discussion with Islam", in *Theological investigations* 18, 105-121.

55. See Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 125-140 and *Foundations of Christian faith*, 8.

56. H. Egan, Review of *Schriften XV*, 554.

and malice, even in the Church, can contribute.⁵⁷ Inculpable atheists are thus included in the Church's saving outreach.⁵⁸

Over and over again Rahner insists that the pressing theological task, therefore, is not just an ecumenism with other Christian traditions, which in Rahner's view is all too easy a matter to settle, but an ecumenism with other world religions and with the professedly unreligious, even unbelievers. There is, Rahner's theological stance implies, a quality of grace and revelation in each present historical moment and in the striving to become human, and whatever this quality of grace may be, it is unavoidably staring us in the face today, for us to recognise and embrace. The most abiding element of Rahner's final thoughts is, as O'Donovan puts it, Rahner's "fundamental correlation...between God as the world's most inner entelechy and the whole history of humanity".⁵⁹ And O'Donovan emphasises, "Rahner's later thought sought an increasingly temporal and historical conception of God and the people of God".⁶⁰ Says Rahner, "The Church must speak with the men and women of today."⁶¹ Once again, then, Rahner challenges the conservative Barthians' belief that we must listen only to God and those whom, according to the Church, God has appointed. Without faith, grace, Church (take your own pick), they will say, there is no salvation. Rahner disagrees. But a Church without a pope as we know it, and without a European identity as we know it, and even without the monopoly on grace as we have known it... what good is a Church like that? Avery Dulles, for one, is not optimistic about the prospects of a democratic Church.⁶² Lennan, on the other hand, carefully considers Dulles' critique and offers a more optimistic analysis of Rahner's vision of an open Church and the future:

In proposing a model of the future Church, Rahner was interpreting Christian tradition for a new age. This being so, his proposals drew on an aspect of that tradition which is often neglected: its compatibility with development. What Rahner offered was a scheme for developing that tradition in the light of contemporary conditions.⁶³

Is Rahner's proposal to be rejected? Are the pre-occupations of his final years indicative of something new in his thinking? To an evaluation of the writings of the later Rahner let us now turn.

57. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 21, 148.

58. See Rahner, *Theological investigations* 21, 146-7.

59. O'Donovan, "Legacy", 624.

60. O'Donovan, "Legacy", 637.

61. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 186.

62. See A. Dulles, "Ecclesial futurology: moving towards the 1990s", *Proceedings of the canon law society of America* 47 (1986) 11.

63. Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 257.

5. CRITIQUE AND EVALUATION

There are two critiques that must be undertaken here. The first has to do with my suggestion that there is something special about these "writings from the grave". The second has to do with the observation that Rahner, as Ratzinger puts it, is performing theological acrobatics that are out of touch with reality.

On the first point, it is evident that in his later years Rahner made these radical remarks about the future of the Church over and over again. On the other hand, some do not find Rahner any more radical in his later years than he was in his prime, observing also that the later Rahner in fact speaks out equally strongly *against* the Church's critics. After all, Rahner was for the ordination of women ("relative ordination") long before 1976, and the book on ecumenism he co-authored with Fries contains ideas which go back to his work at Vatican II. There are no major changes to his theology of grace, creation, Christology, the Trinity, Church, pope-bishops issues, sacraments, and world religions. There is a "slight" shift to pneumatology as the starting point in his theology of the dialogue with world religions, but he continues to insist that this pneumatology not be separated from a high Christology. The many interviews one finds in *Faith in a wintry season* indicate no major break between early and late Rahner, and the final volume of the *Schriften* contains articles on very traditional topics, such as devotion to the Sacred Heart, Mariology, martyrdom, and the like.⁶⁴ Also, as Richard Lennan clearly demonstrates, Rahner's ecclesiology has always had a radical element.

It is probably true, then, that there is no major change in Rahner's theology. I think, nonetheless, that there is a greater intensity of *feeling* and of application in Rahner's final years. That is, if the theory does not change very much, Rahner talks less about theory and more dramatically about its application. He speaks as an involved human being. He also pushes the theory further than before: for example, ecumenism with other Christian traditions becomes ecumenism with world religions, and with humanisms, and with science, and with atheism; again, Rahner's fairly even-handed criticisms of the magisterium become much, much more direct. In his earlier works he debated points of theology, but in these last years he talks much more about points of discipline.

Tourenne agrees: "In his final period Rahner remained the same.... However, his final period is original in the radicalisation of his thought."⁶⁵ Tourenne seems to refer particularly to the deepening ways

64. I thank Harvey Egan for these corrective comments.

65. Tourenne, *La théologie du dernier Rahner*, 373, my translation.

in which Rahner talks about the mystery of God and about ordinary life being the sanctuary of the divine, and that these moves constitute the final radicalisation of Rahner's theology.⁶⁶ Kelly, also, notes Rahner's greater emphasis on freedom and deference to the Spirit, as well as remarking on the "spark of his [Rahner's] boldness in criticizing the Church for stifling the Spirit's creative movements".⁶⁷

The big change is not in Rahner's foundations, therefore, but in the priority that Rahner began to give to what he called "practical theology", theology done from the conviction that "pastoral issues be recognized as the primary responsibility of all systematic disciplines in theology".⁶⁸ But now we come to the theologically critical question: on what ground is such a practical theology established? The answer is, on Rahner's fundamental belief that the Holy Spirit is the animator of the Church.⁶⁹ The Spirit is both the guarantee of grace and, implicitly, the one who thrives on plurality. I think it could also be shown that, for the early Rahner, those in office in the Church were considered closer to the grace of Christ and that the investiture of authority was thought to come from above,⁷⁰ but for the later Rahner that the reverse was the case. Tourenne agrees.

Even if Rahner's later writings do not represent a considerable radicalisation of his thought, they do suggest a sharpening of the application of his ideas. He is saying the same thing, but he speaks in a new tongue.

Which brings us to the second critique. Can Rahner's later theology work, and what is the cost, and how do we get there? Some might be of the opinion that Rahner is turning the Roman Church into a conglomeration which will inevitably admit the worst features of Protestantism and the Orthodox: disunity, ethnic churches, liberalism, and so on and so on. But is it not possible that this opinion is merely a fear, and such an outcome need not be the consequence of Rahner's open Church? Rahner's insistence on the quality of mysticism required of the future Church offers protection from the worst religiosities of divided Christianity in the past, but is it practical? One may be pessimistic in this regard, but the Church has, at various times in its life, given the mystical a higher priority than it does today.

More seriously, what will be the cost to our usual understanding of the Christian faith: is Christology, and even theism as we know it, going to be changed beyond recognition? Is the consequence of proclaiming Christ equally meant to be a veiling of Christ? And is Christian life,

66. See Tourenne, *La théologie du dernier Rahner*, 388-94.

67. Kelly, *Karl Rahner: theologian of the graced search for meaning*, 28.

68. Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 227. See Rahner, "Practical theology", *Theological investigations* 10, 350.

69. See Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, chapter 3.

70. See Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 102-3.

being necessarily mystical, then going to become unchurched and individualistic? This outcome seems much more likely if we take Rahner's vision on board seriously, though he would always answer on the one hand and on the other, and forever defend the necessity of a Church with structure and doctrine. Perhaps what Rahner is most concerned about in his radical later writings is the provision of a corrective to balance the concentrated weight of the heavy authority administered in the Church today. Rahner is certainly no new-age moon-worshipper. But within Christian theology, I think, his position is, as his last writings make clear, a radical one.

6. ENVOI: HOLY MYSTERIES FOR THE SECULAR WORLD

One of the last and most interesting essays Rahner wrote is called "Against the witch hysteria".⁷¹ It is written partly as a testimony to Friedrich Spee, a Jesuit of the early seventeenth century who was prominent in the protest against the execution of women as witches during the fearsome Thirty Years War. Spee worked without the permission of his superiors and under censure from the then General of the Jesuits. Rahner's essay celebrates Spee's obedience to the Gospel and is thus also, surely, written against those who will pervert Christianity out of fear and, even today, who will not speak out, who will not see that their highest obedience is to Christ. Rahner's final writings certainly belong in this category, and hence their special significance today.

Rahner is deeply critical of the current manner of authority, and consequent uniformity, in the Church today. He is as equipoised as ever: on the one hand firmly endorsing the need for a magisterium and the right of the magisterium to determine what is and what is not Catholic. He is absolutely convinced of the uniqueness of Christ, but equally sure that Christianity is not uniquely European, and indeed that the very uniqueness of Christ demands a unity in all great world religions; he is as convinced as ever of the need for new intellectual approaches to theology, yet he insists that it must be mystical. In short, he is decrying the present prosaic profile of the Catholic Church. Any obedience here, he is saying, is not obedience to Christ, nor is it obedience to the Holy Spirit. Nor indeed, is it even obedience to Vatican II. And yet those who wish to reform the Church, he will insist, must stay in the Church.

Those who have always been critics of Rahner, like von Balthasar and his disciples, were probably right in realising that, when Rahner's project was finished, mystical humanism was to be given as much weight as divine intervention (not that the monophysitism which von

71. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 23, 169-177, first published in 1983.

Balthasar's theology might induce would offer complete redemption for humanity).⁷² But if we choose to follow Rahner's path, what do we do next? How does theology move into polity when the polity is so clearly over against the current culture of the magisterium? Are we just to wait for the end of the wintry season?

It is clear that Rahner does not know all the answers to the questions he raises. Nonetheless, he believes that these are the important questions. He waits for the next generation of theologians to set about answering them, to improve their grade, to offer the holy mysteries to a secular world. His final hope is that this wintry season in the Church, if we are truly Christian, might be the occasion of its springtime: "Each one of us should...see these times as a personal challenge to work so that the inner core of faith becomes alive. Then of course the Church itself will again shine radiantly..."⁷³

I began this study with a quotation from Rahner's essay on "The present situation of Catholic theology". Let me conclude with a charter for theology taken from the same essay:

Theology must serve as a science of proclamation of the gospel and must serve the people of our time. It must resolutely and open-mindedly face the mentality of modern men and women. It cannot consider only those who are believers, but it must also consider those who doubt and think that the message of Christianity is indeed a rather beautiful but ultimately old-fashioned myth, a myth that one can tolerate but no longer live by in honesty.... The proclamation of the Church, including high official statements from Rome, all too often has the tone of a decree from on high which scarcely conceals an inner insecurity... This proclamation takes place all too often in a language which...speaks only to the devout faithful...but does not dare to offer the holy mysteries of Christianity to this secular world.⁷⁴

In other words, where some may want to stay behind the bulwark of official teaching, building the walls higher and thicker each year, such a mighty fortress is not a blessed home for Rahner. The challenge, as he perceives it, is to venture beyond these walls and to reach towards the unknown transcendence of a God who is not only incarnate and the founder of the Church, but also "other" and "holy mystery".

72. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cordula in The moment of Christian witness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994) 133-141; *Theo-Drama IV* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994) 273-284; and R. Williams' essay on von Balthasar and Rahner in John Riches (ed.), *The analogy of beauty: the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1986) 11-34.

73. Rahner, *Faith in a wintry season*, 200.

74. Rahner, *Theological investigations* 21, 76-7.