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KARL RAHNER: ON GRACE AND SALVATION

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,  
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School of Theology  
Saint John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

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This Paper was written under the direction of

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Miguel H. Díaz, Ph. D.

## KARL RAHNER: ON GRACE AND SALVATION

### Description of the Paper:

This paper comes as a response to the ecumenical spirit and culture of a world primarily informed by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. This paper will briefly introduce the theology of Karl Rahner, specifically his theologies of grace and salvation. What is so striking to this author about Rahner's views is that he saw a way to stay faithful to the Catholic Tradition which he loved while at the same time broadening the borders of the church and hence extending the community of the saved. In that light, this paper is inspired by a strong belief in the goodness of *all* humanity and the saving will of God towards *all* humanity.

*This paper may be duplicated.*

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Signature of Student Writer

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Date

## INTRODUCTION

A theologian once marked “optimism concerning salvation” as “one of the most noteworthy results of the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>1</sup> This theologian was perhaps the most prominent and influential Catholic theologian of the twentieth century and his name was Karl Rahner. In reality, Rahner’s own thoughts about salvation were uncharacteristically optimistic in contrast to Church tradition, a Tradition which declared for most of its history that minus a few rare exceptions, salvation outside of the church was impossible. To be sure, the Latin phrase “Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus,” translated, “No salvation outside the Church,” has been an underpinning of Catholic dogma for centuries.<sup>2</sup>

To evidence this, one only has to take a look at a series of proclamations and professions made by the faithful throughout the Tradition. In the earliest centuries of the Church, one can find Fathers such as St. Ignatius and Origen warning schismatics, heretics and others of the like, that outside Christian doctrine there is no salvation and

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner as quoted in Francis A. Sullivan’s *Salvation Outside the Church: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>2</sup> This author does recognize that since the beginning of the Church attempts have been made by Christian theologians to look at grace and salvation in a more positive way. For example, the writer and apologist Justin Martyr, using the term *logos spermatikos*, found truth amidst the teachings of both philosophers and pagans.

outside the Church there is only death.<sup>3</sup> In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII supports this conviction when he declares in his bull *Unam Sanctam*:

We are obliged by our faith to believe and to hold that there is one holy catholic and apostolic church; indeed, we firmly believe and sincerely confess this, and that *outside of this church there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins* (emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, as recently as the mid-twentieth century Catholics can be found denouncing other Catholics as heretical for declaring the possibility that non-Catholics can be saved.<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of the above discussed Tradition, one might ask where Rahner's positive attitude towards salvation came from. Perhaps in a world which was/is becoming increasingly more diverse, and as such demanding more and more that differences be respected and valued, a new spirit of openness and acceptance was inevitable. Perhaps Rahner merely saw something in the Gospel and in the world that others have neglected or been blind to. Either way, it is certain that Rahner's positive theology about salvation outside of the visible church, through his notion of the anonymous Christian, is a byproduct of his positive theology of grace, and that both theologies were and remain highly influential and significant.

### **RAHNER'S THEOLOGY OF GRACE**

Rahner's theology of grace is built on the foundational belief that grace is God's self-communication present in the world. Rahner believes, "that in Jesus Christ God has

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Quote cited in Sullivan, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 1.

communicated himself to us in an absolute and irreversible way.”<sup>6</sup> The Incarnation is in fact God’s self-emptying. Through God emptying himself in the Logos, humanity is offered participation in the life of God in a new and irreversible way. The humanity of the Logos, and hence the humanity of all, is a self-expression of God just as the divinity of the Logos is. In other words, in order for the Word made Flesh to be truly and fully God, than the humanity of the Logos in itself must be a true expression of God. If this were not so, then the Logos would only be a sign which does not disclose God’s true essence.<sup>7</sup> If we really believe in the Incarnation then we must understand that Jesus *in his being* is a revelation of God. Thus, Rahner writes, “Man is accordingly in the most basic definition that which God becomes if he sets out to show himself in the region of the extra-divine.”<sup>8</sup>

Rahner believes that the self-expression of God in Jesus Christ is the ultimate cause and end of humanity. Rahner agrees with Augustine’s notion that God “assumes by creating” and “creates by assuming” and adds that, “He [God] creates the human reality *by the very fact that he assumes it as his own.*”<sup>9</sup> Through God expressing himself in Christ, he was able to constitute his own history in the other, namely in the human reality. In other words, the humanity of Christ is the Logos in space and time (i.e. in

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 161, quoted in Harvey D. Egan, S.J., *The Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co, 1998), 33.

<sup>7</sup> See Karl Rahner’s distinction between sign and symbol in “The Theology of Symbol” in *Theological Investigations. Vol. IV*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 221-252.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Vol. VI Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press Inc, 1969), 393.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundation of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), 222.

history), and humans are a result of that expression of God in history. This is why Rahner explains that, “In their innermost essential ground creatures must be understood as the possibility of being able to be assumed, of being the material for a possible history of God.”<sup>10</sup> Out of this theology, Rahner derives the conviction that human nature is an inner moment of grace or an unfolding of the divine.

In light of such beliefs, Rahner concludes that to be human is to be graced; to be a recipient of God’s offer of self. Not only are humans the recipient of God’s offer of self, but humans are also by nature orientated to God.<sup>11</sup> Rahner states, “That man is insofar as he abandons himself to the absolute mystery whom we call God.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, humans by definition are tied to the very life of God. To describe this orientation Rahner uses the precise language of an, “obediential potency for the hypostatic union.”<sup>13</sup> This means that humans in their essence are drawn towards union with God and thus, that the nature of humanity is to be self-transcendent. Giving into this orientation for Rahner is seen as becoming truly human; it is seen as an expression of human self-realization. Given this understanding, Rahner argues that a free person is not necessarily one who has a multitude of choices but rather is a person who surrenders him/herself to the mystery of God. Precisely because our fulfillment is found ultimately in God, Rahner sees humanity to be an infinite question whose final answer is God. Jesus Christ then, is the union of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 222-223.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Vol. XVI Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, trans. David Morland O.S.B. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), 40.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



the question which man is and the answer which God is. Jesus Christ is both the source and the culmination of all human longings.

Since Jesus Christ is the source of *all* human reachings, God's gift of self is present always and everywhere as an offer to *all* humans. This must be the case if we believe that God's salvific will embraces every human without exception; if we believe that God desires all to be saved and makes it possible for all to be saved. This principle, upheld by Karl Rahner, is known as the universal salvific will of God.<sup>14</sup> It is also a notion found in Scripture, "This is good and pleasing to God our savior, *who wills everyone to be saved* and to come to knowledge of the truth (emphasis mine)."<sup>15</sup>

Tied to this notion that grace is always and everywhere present is the idea that humans already and always exist in an elevated offer of grace. This conviction follows from his agreement with the traditional Thomistic line of thought that grace presupposes nature; it presupposes the creation of humanity. This means that creation and salvation are to be understood as interrelated moments of the life of grace. It means that salvation through Jesus Christ is not merely an afterthought of God but rather an ontological human reality since the beginning of time.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Rahner holds that while humans already and always exist in an elevated offer of grace, graced humanity can choose whether to accept or reject that offer. It is because of this choice that while salvation and grace are offered to all, they may not be granted to all.

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<sup>14</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 147.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Tim 2:3 NAB

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Sheehan, "The Body of Blessing" in *Rahner Beyond Rahner: A Great Theologian Encounters the Pacific Rim*, ed. Paul G. Crowley, S.J. (Lanham, MD; Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 29.

## SALVATION IN LIGHT OF RAHNER'S THEOLOGY OF GRACE

In Rahner's theology, salvation requires a response to divine revelation with supernatural faith. The capacity for such a response is provided by grace transforming the recipient's consciousness. According to Rahner, a positive response to the divine self-communication occurs when one, "freely accepts his [her] own unlimited transcendence."<sup>17</sup> In other words, a human accepts God when he/she accepts him/herself as a being directed ultimately to God through knowledge, freedom, and goodness. One does this when one freely and genuinely follows one's conscience.<sup>18</sup> At this point one may ask what it looks like to freely follow one's conscience; what action does this requirement entail? Rahner argues that the demand of conscience necessitates humans to transcend selfishness through acts of faith, charity and hope, and ultimately through acts of love. Rahner would also argue that in this one act of love the other aforementioned virtues are implied. Hence, for Rahner, "The basic act in which man morally transcends himself is this love of the *thou* of the neighbor."<sup>19</sup>

As formerly noted, in Rahner's theology humans are fully realized insofar as they surrender themselves to God. Rahner also saw this surrendering to God to be equivalent to giving ourselves to the other. Thus, love is the final fulfillment of the person who comes to realize him/herself in the love of neighbor. This unity between the love of God

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<sup>17</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Vol. XVI*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> This summarization of Rahner's thoughts is taken from George Vass S.J. in "The Faith Needed for Salvation," *The Month*, April 1970, 207.

and the love of neighbor can be tied back to Rahner's belief that all of humanity expresses God in a very real and intimate way. If humanity is itself an expression of the transcendent, i.e. the divine, then in loving humanity, we love God. It follows, therefore, that if we fail to love humanity then we also fail to love God. Accordingly Rahner writes, "Whoever does not love the brother whom he 'sees', also cannot love God whom he does not see, and that one can love God whom one does not see only *by* loving one's visible brother lovingly."<sup>20</sup>

Thus, if the self-transcendent nature of humanity includes being fundamentally orientated towards what is unconditionally right and good and hence to love, then without loving one's neighbor the human fails to accept his/her own self-transcendence and finally lacks the supernatural faith required for salvation. On the other hand, when one does fully accept one's own self-transcendence, that potential for transcendence is raised up by grace to its final goal: i.e. the presence of God.<sup>21</sup> In Rahner's theology, this grace which leads to human fulfillment, or salvation, must be the grace of Christ. Since Christ is the source of the grace received by all, salvation as a response to that grace must inevitably come through Him. This point is made clear in the subsequent verse of Timothy, "For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as ransom for all."<sup>22</sup> In this light, Rahner sees the church as the tangible, historical presence of this grace in the world and hence Christianity as the absolute religion for all.

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<sup>20</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Vol VI*, 247.

<sup>21</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Vol. XVI*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Tim. 2:5-6. NAB

Nonetheless, as previously mentioned Rahner holds a positive view of salvation and believes that salvation outside of the church is possible. Precisely because God desires all humans to be saved, Rahner finds it unreasonable to think that God would consign all non-Christians to hell. Thus Rahner holds the simultaneous belief that non-Christians can be saved and that such salvation always comes through Jesus Christ. As previously noted, however, salvation of the Christian and non-Christian alike requires a response of faith.

For Rahner, a person who lives a life of supernatural faith is one who follows his/her conscience to the love of neighbor, whether or not he/she calls it faith. Since this is foundationally a faith orientated towards Christ, Rahner labeled any non-Christian who so surrendered him/herself to his/her innermost being an “anonymous Christian.” In his own words, Rahner describes an “anonymous Christian” as:

The pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Christ.<sup>23</sup>

It is the implicit nature of these acts of faith, hope, and love, which distinguish “anonymous Christians” as well as visible Christians from those who lie outside of salvation. In as much as acts of charity are directed towards others, their love and faith is considered directed toward God since Christ is the source of the grace which they have received. Since “anonymous Christians” lack explicit Christian faith and baptism, they

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Vol. XIV Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, The Church in the World*, trans. David Bourke (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 283.

are not members of the visible church. Even so, since they do share in Christ's grace of which the church is the sacramental sign, they are in spiritual communion with the church.

If Rahner holds a positive belief about the salvation of non-Christians, his convictions about the salvific role of non-Christian religions are just as positive. Indeed, it is precisely because of his belief that non-Christians can attain salvation through faith, hope, and love, that it seems necessary to him that non-Christian religions must play a role in salvation. Rahner understands that humans are social beings and thus need to communally express their response to God. This is why he is convinced that when Christianity is not a feasible option, it must be part of God's design that people express their devotion to God in the religion which is available to them.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that these religions only remain legitimate while people are inculpably ignorant of any duty to leave the religion they are accustomed to and embrace Christianity. In his book *Salvation Outside the Church?*, Frances A Sullivan, S.J. states that Rahner insists:

That until non-Christians become so convinced of their obligation to accept Christianity that it would be a mortal sin for them not to do so, their own religion continues to be the way in which God must intend that they express their relationship with him and arrive at their salvation.<sup>25</sup>

It follows then that even people who have heard the Christian message but have not yet embraced Christianity, are justified in remaining in the religion of their culture.

Because of this belief that non-Christians are warranted in remaining in the religion of their culture, Rahner supposes that non-Christian religions maintain a salvific

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<sup>24</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 314-316.

<sup>25</sup> Sullivan, 172.

role in history. Since these non-Christian religions are valid ways to salvation for the majority of the world's population, Rahner finds it possible to be able to locate supernatural elements in them, elements which mediate divine grace. The possibility of such elements does not negate for Rahner the very real possibility that a non-Christian religion may have negative effects on salvation in the life of a particular non-Christian, just as Christianity has had and may continue to have negative effects on salvation in the lives of particular Christians. Even so, as theologian Harvey Egan states, "Rahner would have unhesitatingly maintained that the 'seeds of the Word' can be found in these religions and that they, too, in some sense, are a 'preparation for the Gospel'." <sup>26</sup>

These "seeds" can be found for Rahner in the rights and rituals of non-Christian religions. Rahner considers these rights and rituals to be sacraments in an analogous way, while still emphatically upholding the Christian sacraments as normative. In the same way, Rahner considers that the holy scriptures of other religions may be inspired to a certain degree and hence should be read and interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ. He believes that Christ is present in non-Christians, non-Christian religions, and non-Christian scriptures and rituals, in and through Christ's Spirit.

It is important to note that Rahner does not desire the notion of "anonymous Christianity" to be a way for Christians to assert superiority over non-Christians by insinuating that they are in actuality Christians without knowing it. Instead, following his theology of grace, Rahner wishes that the presence of God's grace and Spirit be recognized within all persons. This is why Rahner still acknowledges the virtue of

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<sup>26</sup> Harvey D. Egan, S. J., "A Rahnerian Response" in *Sic et Non: Encountering Dominus Iesus*, ed. Stephen J. Pope and Charles Hefling (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 65.

missionary activity as a way of awakening non-Christians to the reality of their true being as those graced by God's self-expression in the Word made Flesh. Indeed, he feels that missionary activity is most successful in regards to those who without recognizing it are nonetheless already living in the grace of Christ. While Rahner maintains that salvation outside of the church is possible, he also argues that only within the church are people able to gain the fullness of life in Christ.

## CONCLUSION

Rahner's views about salvation may seem to some to be very innovative and optimistic. In Rahner's mind, however, his convictions are necessary conclusions derived from the Gospel; the Gospel which in his mind finds its' most authentic expression in the love of God and neighbor. This is why Rahner uses such strong language when he states:

Such a "presence" of Jesus Christ throughout the whole history of salvation and in relation to all people cannot be denied or overlooked by Christians if they believe in Jesus Christ as the salvation of *all* people, and do not think that the salvation of non-Christians is brought about by God and his mercy independently of Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly Rahner believes that Jesus Christ is the salvation for *all* people and hence that His presence can be found in all people and all religions.

Indeed, throughout the history of the Catholic Church the issue of salvation outside of the church has been addressed and readdressed a plentitude of times. As

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<sup>27</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 312.

always, the Church today is one living and working amidst a very real and present world, a world full of its own norms, convictions, enterprises and expectations. This world of today is evermore focused on inter-religious dialogue, freedom, mutual understanding and mutual acceptance. In such an atmosphere, the question of salvation outside of the church is as significant as ever. Perhaps, as noted in the introduction to this paper, this is why the Second Vatican Council was indeed so optimistic about salvation.

Despite the progress the Church has made, through the efforts of theologians such as Karl Rahner, towards greater inclusion and acceptance of different beliefs, customs and theologies, the journey is not yet over. Everyday people join and leave the Church. Everyday Christians of different denominations misunderstand and misrepresent each other. Everyday Christians and non-Christians alike judge and condemn each other. Because of these reasons and for many more, it is imperative that theologians, Church leaders, and the laity, continue to proclaim the Gospel and continue to open their eyes, ears and hearts to each other and to God.

For Karl Rahner, one's neighbor became, "the human word in which God's Word can be heard."<sup>28</sup> As the Christian community does continue its' attempts to recognize God's Word in all of humanity, they must not forget the importance of true devotion to their One God and One faith. The ideas of anonymous Christianity and salvation outside of the Church if not considered properly can be exploited into excusing a lack of authentic Christian devotion and faith as justifiable. The possibility of salvation for our countless non-Christian brothers and sisters around the world should give us hope, it

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<sup>28</sup> This specific paraphrase of Rahner can be found in Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 102.



should not, however, convince us that remaining active participants in the life of our Church is inconsequential. The task is to remain strong in one's own faith while recognizing the value which can be found in the faith of another. On the issue of salvation specifically, it is essential that as Christians continue to love and live in Christ's grace that they also continue to remember that ultimately salvation is determined and granted by God and not by humans.

In that light, I recall that throughout my childhood non-Catholic friends of mine would occasionally argue, "Catholics believe that everyone else is going to hell." I also remember being very afraid that they were right but fairly certain that they were not. Somehow the notion of an all-loving God damning a majority of the world's people to hell did not sit right with me. As I grew up and continued to learn more about the Church's past history in regards to the teaching about salvation outside of the church, I became increasingly more uncomfortable. To be certain, it is a common struggle of any faithful person to reconcile a firm belief in one God, one religion, and/or one church, and an inner sense that salvation must be granted in some way outside of belief in that one God, one religion and/or one church. This is why Rahner's theology is so refreshing to me. He asks the question I have long raised within my own heart:

Can the Christian believe even for a moment that the overwhelming mass of his brothers not only those before the appearance of Christ right back to the most distant past but also those of the present and of the future before us, are unquestionably and in principle excluded from the fulfillment of their lives and condemned to eternal meaninglessness?<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Vol. VI*, 391.

To this question, Rahner and I both must empathetically assert the answer is “no.” Our “no” arises with such conviction from our common belief that to be human, whether Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, atheist or what have you, that *to be human*, is to be graced by God.

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