

Topic 6: The Creature Who "Does Theology"

O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth!

You have set your majesty above the heavens! Out of the mouths of babes and infants - you have drawn a defense against your foes, to silence enemy and avenger. When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place - What are humans that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them little less than a god, crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them rule over the works of your hands, put all things at their feet: All sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field, The birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatever swims the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth! Ps 8

I. The Theological Anthropology of Karl Rahner: The aim of Rahner's fundamental theology is "to give people confidence from the very content of Christian dogma itself that they can believe with intellectual honesty." This will involve a correlation between the formal clarity of dogmatic statements and their fruitfulness for the life of faith. In other words, faith must speak to life at the level of both intellectual meaning and existential meaningfulness.

Rahner distinguishes a second level of reflection (where each theological discipline seeks verification by its own specific method) from the first level of reflection "where faith gives an account of itself," that is, where the human's own existential reality (as a hearer of the word) grounds one's reflective grasp of the truth of the Christian faith.

II. The Hearer of the Word: Rahner's Metaphor for the Human Person before God. To be a "hearer of the word" is to be, in our very being, a question and a mystery. The fact that "we are creatures whose questions are endless" can be verified in the personal experience of everyone. This gives Rahner a common starting point on which he begins to construct an intellectually honest account of Christian hope. The value of Rahner's starting point: the Christian can, in principle, speak about his/ her faith to anyone regardless of their cultural or religious background. This allows Rahner to propose that human experience itself is created by and for the Christian message.

III. The Human as Transcendent: What Rahner means by transcendence is available in every ordinary experience. Every experience raises questions which in turn give rise to new horizons. The more questions and answers we have, the more the horizon recedes. This is Rahner's basic evidence for claiming that the human person is "spirit" or "transcendent being."

Every experience has a transcendent ground and horizon, but the "awareness of transcendence" is not a particular experience which we have alongside other experiences. It is the ground of all experiencing. More importantly, this aspect of experience is not a concept. Rather, it grounds and gives rise to concepts. Human transcendence is founded in the "pre-apprehension" of infinite reality, a knowledge and consciousness that is pre-reflective, pre-conceptual, pre-thematic. Theology makes explicit (thematic) this implicit (pre-thematic) grasp of the infinite. Note: theology does not ground pre-apprehension; pre-apprehension grounds theology.

IV. Rahner's Account of Human Freedom and Responsibility: The human is not only a hearer of the word but a doer of the word, not only capable of knowing, but of acting responsibly in freedom. As with the transcendental character of knowing, freedom is not one experience among others or a particular piece of experience.

Freedom is not "something one has" but "who one is and is becoming." Real freedom is present in our experience of ourselves as persons "given over to ourselves" and thus responsible for ourselves. It is present when we are responsible for ourselves.

The transcendental character of freedom appears in its categorical expression, but cannot be reduced to the categorical expression. This systematic polarity between transcendental and categorical experience is central.

V. Personal Existence and Salvation: If transcendental freedom is the responsibility for creating ourselves in the concrete circumstances in which we are embedded, then an intrinsic connection exists between personal existence and salvation. For Rahner, salvation is the ultimate validity of our real self-understanding and free self-realization before God.

Rahner's theological anthropology appeals to the human personal experience of questioning and freedom; it does not rely on appeals to religious authority. Human freedom does not ultimately refer to the sum of good or bad deeds, but rather to the ultimate actualization of one's existence in its single totality. Therefore, freedom can only be conceived in relation to responsibility, for it is the capacity to give final and definitive validity to one's life.

Sin is possible because of our categorical freedom to say "yes" or "no" to God. Freedom implies the possibility of a decision against God, for it renders a "yes" or

a "no" with respect to one's ultimate horizon: the God of transcendental experience.

There is also present in every act of freedom (as a transcendental act) an unthematic "yes" to God, for God as the transcendental horizon of our freedom, is the condition of possibility for freedom, and its real object. Therefore, even when we say "no," God is affirmed at the same time. However, in saying "no" to God we intrinsically deny our very self by freely placing an act that negates freedom.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the aim of Karl Rahner's theology?
2. What is Rahner's starting point for doing theology in the modern context?
3. What does Rahner mean when he speaks of the human person as transcendent?
4. What is the significance of his calling human beings "hearers of the Word"?