

### **Topic 7: God as "Absolute and Self-Revealing Mystery"**

Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save their souls. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for us that they may help us in prosecuting the end for which we are created. From this it follows that we are to use them as much as they help us on to our end, and ought to rid ourselves of them so far as they hinder us as to it.

For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it; so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created. St. Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, "Principle and Foundation" #23

**I. Christianity and Christian Theology in the Modern Period:** The modern period arrives in concert with massive historical changes in politics, economics, and religion. At the very least, theology today must face the legacy of the reformation, the confrontation between revealed religion and modern science, fundamentalism, and the encounter with non-Christian cultures and religions. Elements in the intellectual situation facing religion in the 19th century included the loss of the medieval synthesis of self-cosmos God, the philosophical turn to the subject, and the rise of historical consciousness.

The fundamental theology of Vatican I seeks to respond to modernity in the 19th century. In the background there are several enormous historical disruptions: the Enlightenment; the Protestant Reformation; the French Revolution. Vatican I aimed to (1) provide an apologetic defense of the Catholic religion and (2) establish a scientific foundation for the academic disciplines of dogmatic theology. This theology was characterized by (1) the independence of fundamental theology as a theological discipline, (2) a reliance on historical demonstration, and (3) an emphasis on external signs of credibility.

The transcendental fundamental theology of Rahner and Vatican II faced a very different historical moment characterized by the collapse of traditional fundamental theology due to the rise of historical criticism, ecumenism, and democracy. This new situation gave rise to a theology that aims to preserve continuity with tradition while engaging modernity's so-called "turn to the subject."

The new emphasis on "method in theology" springs from this new intellectual-cultural context. The turn to the subject represents the philosophical shift from a primary focus on the objective truth of the known to the subjective processes involved in knowing. There emerges a new historical consciousness that the subjective processes involved in knowing are historically conditioned and constructed within particular social-linguistic-cultural situations. The need for criteria to evaluate truth- and value-claims in a pluralistic, historically conscious culture accounts for the importance of the question of method.

Descriptively, method functions as the way a theologian does theology. You can begin to discern a theologian's method by asking, what are the theologian's premises and presuppositions and what is his/her starting point? What constitutes "the relevant data" which the theologian studies and to which he/she appeals? How does the theologian proceed? What kind of argument does he/she use? What is the logic underlying his/her positions? Note: although the pluralism of methods cannot be eliminated, one can identify and ground one's own method and, in this way, open lines of communication with others on the level of presuppositions, key experiences, central values, etc.

**II. In the Presence of Absolute Mystery:** Rahner's theology can be read as a reworking of the fundamental theology of Vatican I. Vatican I appeals to "the mysteries of faith" to combat philosophical rationalism. Mystery functions as the property of a statement which we believe to be true without being able to explain it. Fundamental theology assumes there are numerous mysteries (plural) - truths that are presently obscured. The "silent presupposition" is that these mysteries are truths that reason can ultimately grasp. Once we "see God face to face," we will understand all the mysteries.

Rahner's theology reflects the vastly different intellectual world of 20th century philosophy. The word "God" points not to an object of our experience but the horizon of all human experiencing, questioning, and knowing. Insofar as it points to the horizon of our human living, this word "points" to an inescapable, incomprehensible mystery.

For Rahner, there is one absolute, incomprehensible Mystery: "God." With this claim, he shifts the meaning of the word "mystery" away from its 19th century context. Mystery is not "that which I cannot know" but that which I cannot exhaust, go beyond, transcend, or control. Although God as "mystery" cannot be comprehended, God can be encountered. We enter into ever more intimate relationship with Absolute Mystery.

From a meditation on the word "God" to an approach to the knowledge of God: "God" refers to the inescapable holy mystery that grounds the human person and all of reality and summons the person into wholeness. The word is inescapable; it arises in our questions, our experiences of wonder, and our longing for salvation. It is embedded in all our categorical experiences, but is reducible to none of them.

The knowledge of God is a transcendental knowledge. Our original orientation towards absolute mystery constitutes our fundamental experience of God. God is not an object of our knowing, but the horizon within which all knowing occurs. We can comprehend because we are grounded in the incomprehensible, absolute mystery.

The transcendent movement towards final coherence and love gives us God as subject. When we stretch our language to talk about God, we touch the radical mystery of ourselves as persons. Only in this context can we talk about God as person. This is not a projection of ourselves onto God. Rather, it involves the transcendental experience that God is the ground of all personal reality.

#### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the key shifts in the understanding of fundamental theology between Vatican I and Vatican II?
2. What is the significance of Rahner referring to God as the Absolute Holy Mystery?