Rahner Retrospective

I — Rupturing Der Pianische Monolithismus

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In the preface to the thirteenth volume of his *Schriften zur Theologie*, which appeared in 1978, Karl Rahner speaks of a fourteenth volume as nearing readiness for the press and to be published in late 1979 (to the best of my knowledge it has not yet appeared), and, although he does not say so in so many words, his tone suggests that the fourteenth will be the last of the series which began in 1954. Since the appearance in 1961 of Cornelius Ernst's translation of the first volume, and the inauguration of Rahner's *Theological Investigations* (with an allusion to Wittgenstein in the title), the English version has kept pace very creditably, despite inexorably rising costs and perceptible decline in concern with systematic theology, not to mention the difficulty of finding competent translators. The publication of *Theological Investigations XVI*, admirably translated by David Morland of Ampleforth, giving us the first half of *Schriften XII* (1975), the volume which Rahner dedicated to his mother on her hundredth birthday, offers an opportunity to review the series so far, and perhaps to underline the author's most characteristic perspectives and concerns, or at any rate to outline pathways in this forbiddingly massive corpus of some 7000 pages of text.

It should be noted at the outset that the first six volumes of the English translation correspond exactly to the first six volumes of the original. As Rahner's productivity was released in the wake of the Vatican Council his collected essays became increasingly substantial. The densely printed German volumes proved too unwieldy for us, with the result that the next four volumes to appear were split in two and thus yielded eight volumes in the English edition. The eleventh volume of the *Schriften* is the only exception to the rule that the series is devoted to miscellanies of articles, lecture texts and so on, by being confined entirely to Rahner's work on the history of the sacrament of penance. This should appear in due course as *Investigations XV*, in a single volume. In the meantime, with *Investigations XVI*, as stated above, we have the first half of *Schriften XII* — which, counting the volume on penance, would seem to leave us with six volumes to come yet to complete in twenty-one volumes the whole series. We should thus

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have available in English the most essential work of the most important systematic theologian whom the Catholic Church has produced in the past hundred years, and certainly since the suppression of Catholic Modernism in the first decade of this century.

That the essential work of a systematic theologian should take the form of a set of miscellanies published at regular intervals over a period of twenty-five years may seem paradoxical. In fact, in the above mentioned preface to *Schriften XIII,* Karl Rahner himself reflects as follows: "After so many volumes of separate papers one might perhaps expect of the author two things: a systematic recapitulation and an explicit confrontation with the theologians – there is a whole host of sometimes illustrious names – who have concerned themselves with the author's theology and contradicted it on important points". For the latter task, however, he admits, without much sign of regret, that his physical energies no longer suffice: "But that is not so bad really: Catholic theology will go on in any case". As for the first desideratum, his *Grundkurs des Glaubens* of 1976 (entitled *Foundations of Christian Faith* in the English version of 1978), "although it was not intended as a systematic presentation of my theology, can nevertheless perhaps be taken as a modest response to such an expectation".

Karl Rahner has of course published much else besides the *Schriften:* in particular, numerous lengthy contributions to theological handbooks and encyclopedias as well as a great deal of spiritual and homiletic writing. As for the *Grundkurs,* as he says in the introduction (*Foundations,* p. 3), it is offered as a response to the request in the Vatican II Decree on Priestly Formation for an "introductory course" in which "the mystery of salvation should be presented in such a way that the students will see the meaning of ecclesiastical studies, their interrelationships, and their pastoral intent" (*Optatam totius,* par. 14). One is inevitably reminded that Thomas Aquinas hopefully designed his *Summa Theologiae* for "novices", and it may well be wondered how many senior students, on the verge of ordination, could make much headway against the intellectual demands of Rahner's "introductory course". But, just as one has to turn to the *Quaestiones disputatae* of St Thomas, it is to the *Investigations* that one needs to go to find the theologian at his most accessible, at his work-desk or in the thick of an argument.

That Karl Rahner has been concerned throughout his career to get argument going again in Catholic theology seems pretty clear. He began lecturing at Innsbruck in 1937, when he was thirty-three. He belonged, then, to the first generation of theologians and scholars who had no first-hand acquaintance with the brutal repression of Modernism. The worst of the heresy hunting may have been over by 1914, with the death of St Pius X, although the Sodality

of St Pius V (otherwise known as la Sapiniere) was not dissolved until 1921. By that time, however, the anti-Modernist reaction of the intégristes, supported by senior ecclesiastics in the Roman curia, had consigned Lagrange, Duchesne, Batiffol, the Fribourg Dominicans, the German Jesuits and scores of other scholars, if not always to the oblivion of the Index, at least to enveloping clouds of suspicion. Remote as his sympathies were for Modernism, the new pope's first encyclical, obviously getting at the Sodality of St Pius V, urged that, in matters left open to discussion by the Church, moderation should prevail and not suspicions of the orthodoxy of opponents. Benedict XV also pleads for an end of dissension among Catholics, in a spirit that anticipates that of Paul VI, some sixty years later. The two popes had in fact much in common. If saints are canonised for our edification Benedict XV would seem incomparably more worthy than his predecessor.

But even when vigilant supervision of theological studies had settled down into a relatively sane and fair arrangement, a whole generation of scholars had emigrated into safe areas of uncontroversial or peripheral research. Let the voice of one stand for a thousand. In a letter to Baron Friedrich von Hügel at the end of 1922 Cuthbert Butler wrote as follows (see *Downside Review*, October 1979 p 298): "Publishing is impossible. Speaking to others in a way that could not be printed is not right; it is not right for a priest to give advice or suggest lines of thought to those that come to him that will bring them up against the pronouncements of authority. And even for one's own private study it is not good to have one's intellect in perpetual friction with one's sense of what is due to authority".

The Baron had been regretting that Butler, who was sixty-four by this time and had just completed sixteen years as abbot of Downside, was not giving himself up to "Early Christian things"; but Butler comments: "years ago I recognized that these things – Christian Origins, New Testament, History of Dogma etc – have been made impossible for a priest, except on the most narrow apologetic lines". In fact, of course, in his retirement, Cuthbert Butler, relying on the dossier of Ullathorne's letters (placed at his disposal by the Dominican Convent at Stone), wrote, in his book *The Vatican Council* (published in 1930), not only a classic but also a very clear refutation of the ultramontane interpretation so widely and persistently put upon the conciliar texts by those who fancied themselves the most loyal Catholics.

Benedict XV died in 1922. From 1922 to 1958 his two successors, Pius XI and Pius XII, created and sustained the form of Roman Catholicism with which the Church is still widely identified – what, somewhat wickedly, Rahner calls *der Pianische Monolithismus*. In retrospect, from 1980, although some of its chief adminis-

trators remain influential, and many of the children born during its last days seem to yearn for the restoration of what they can never have consciously known, that period of homogeneously ultramontane Catholicism is plainly over. Whatever its grandeur and attractiveness in other respects, no one could claim that the stagnation of theology in the pious conformism of the Pian era had much connection with the exhilarating conflict between ecclesiastical authority and critical reason which Newman saw as the dynamic interplay which characterised Catholicism. In an extraordinary passage in the last chapter of the *Apologia pro Vita Sua,* published in 1864, the year of the Syllabus Errorum, he wrote as follows: "It is the custom with Protestant writers to consider that, whereas there are two great principles in action in the history of religion, Authority and Private Judgment, they have all the Private Judgment to themselves, and we have the full inheritance and the superincumbent oppression of Authority. But this is not so; it is the vast Catholic body itself, and it only, which affords an arena for both combatants in that awful, never-dying duel. It is necessary for the very life of religion, viewed in its large operations and its history, that the warfare should be incessantly carried on. Every exercise of Infallibility is brought out into act by an intense and varied operation of the Reason, from within and without, and provokes again a reaction of Reason against it; and, as in a civil polity the State exists and endures by means of the rivalry and collision, the encroachments and defeats of its constituent parts, so in like manner Catholic Christendom is no simple exhibition of religious absolutism, but it presents a continuous picture of Authority and Private Judgment alternately advancing and retreating as the ebb and flow of the tide; it is a vast assemblage of human beings with wilful intellects and wild passions, brought together into one by the beauty and the majesty of a Superhuman Power – into what may be called a large reformatory or training-school, not to be sent to bed, not to be buried alive, but for the melting, refining, and moulding, as in some moral factory, by an incessant noisy process (if I may proceed to another metaphor) of the raw material of human nature, so excellent, so dangerous, so capable of divine purposes".

Newman's theory of the necessity of internal conflict in the Catholic Church was extended and formalised in the 1877 Preface to his *Lectures on the Prophetical Office.* The Church is presented there as an arena of permanent tension between the three forces of theological reason, popular religion, and episcopal and papal authority, with sometimes one and then another being in the ascendant, and each at times requiring to be resisted by the others: "reasoning tends to rationalism; devotion to superstition and enthusiasm; and power to ambition and tyranny" (p. xli). The same eccle-

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siology, explicitly traced to Newman, appears in Friedrich von Hügel's book *The Mystical Element of Religion,* published in 1908, at the height of the Modernist crisis: "this joint presence of three such disparate elements ever involves tension, of a fruitful or dangerous kind" (p. 53). That some such picture corresponds to what has happened throughout the greater part of the Church's history seems evident enough; but the Pian era of Roman Catholicism, with the virtual extinction of what von Hügel called the rational-critical element, produced an unparalleled conspiracy between institutional authority and various forms of enthusiasm which was challenged only at Vatican II. It is still difficult for most people, Catholics and otherwise, to realize that the Pian era was the departure from the Catholic norm, not the post-conciliar tensions. How many theologians even, let alone bishops, would accept Newman's doctrine of "warfare incessantly carried on" between Reason and Authority in the Catholic Church – "for the very life of religion"? Newman, of course, never questioned the function of ecclesiastical authority as "a working instrument, in the course of human affairs, for smiting hard and throwing back the immense energy of the aggressive intellect"; on the contrary, he seems actually to have relished the prospect of conflict: "The energy of the human intellect 'does from opposition grow'; it thrives and is joyous, with a tough elastic strength, under the terrible blows of the divinely-fashioned weapon, and is never so much itself as when it has lately been overthrown". But he presupposed, when he wrote of ecclesiastical authority as making "a stand against the wild living intellect of man" that "the energy of the intellect in the Catholic Church" would always be irrepressible (all quotations from the *Apologia,* Part VII). Newman would not have seen any contradiction between his doctrine of necessary conflict within the Church and his obedience to episcopal authority.

In all the congratulations and criticisms which Newman received no one seems to have questioned, or even mentioned, the doctrine of conflict in the Church. A year later, when preparing the second edition of the *Apologia,* which had been examined and passed by Jesuit theologians, he wrote to his friend Charles Russell, the President of Maynooth (*Letters* XXI, p. 447): "I have reason to know, that, after a severe, not to say hostile scrutiny, I have been found to be without matter of legitimate offence". Admittedly, he goes on as follows: "In a day like this, in which such serious efforts are made to narrow that liberty of thought and speech which is open to a Catholic, I am indisposed to suppress my own judgment in order to satisfy objectors". A year later again, in a letter to that extraordinary woman Emily Bowles (*Letters* XXII, p. 314), Newman made his most passionate outburst about the state of things in the Catholic Church: "We are sinking into a

sort of Novatianism, the heresy which the early Popes so strenuously resisted. Instead of aiming at being a world-wide power, we are shrinking into ourselves, narrowing the lines of communion, trembling at freedom of thought, and using the language of dismay and despair at the prospect before us, instead of, with the high spirit of the warrior, going out conquering and to conquer". That sketch of a closed and narrow ghetto-Catholicism, intolerant of internal dissent and fearful of critical reason, may be taken as a fair enough description of the post-Modernist Church of the Pian era.

From the very beginning of his career Karl Rahner sought to reintroduce questioning and critical reason into the practice of Catholic theology. But if he seemed ready and poised in 1937 to make his mark, by teaching and by writing, within the professional context of theological activity, events decreed that he should first spend almost ten years in pastoral work and doing a great deal of preaching and lecturing of a more informal kind. The Innsbruck theology faculty was suspended in 1938 and the Jesuit house itself closed by the government the following year. Rahner spent the war years mostly in Vienna. The Jesuits reopened their study-house in Munich in late 1945 and Rahner was invited there, to preach some memorable courses of sermons during that dreadful time as well as to begin to rebuild an intellectual tradition which had suffered from ten years of barbarism. He returned to Innsbruck in 1948, to become a full professor the year after, thus at the age of forty-five. Six years later, in 1954, he announced two volumes of collected papers, all but two or three of which had been written during these same six years, together with a third volume of "essays on the theology of the spiritual life". These were the first three volumes of the *Schriften*.

The idea seems to have been suggested by the publishers, Benziger Verlag. In the preface to *Schriften I* (1954), Rahner says that essays which 'appear' in specialist journals simply disappear into obscurity, so that his are being disinterred in the hope that they will be more widely read in book form. His deeper intention, swathed in characteristically Swabian irony, comes out in the concluding sentence of the preface: "The presumptuous intention of this modest collection of theological studies will be achieved if they help just a little (before they are finally forgotten) to confirm young theologians in the conviction that Catholic theology has no reason to rest on its laurels, fine though these may be; that on the contrary it can and must advance, and in such a way that it remains true to its own laws and its tradition". The opening essay, reviewing the productions of Catholic theology in the preceding twenty or thirty years (the period, then, of the post-Modernist pause), concludes that a dangerous orthodoxy prevails. His judg-

ment on the standard textbooks is as follows (*Investigations I*, p. 7): "The fact that our textbooks are so little alive, serve proclamation and witness so little, is not due to their superabundance of scholastic and scientific theology but because they offer too little of it, precisely because as relics of the past they are unable even to preserve the past in its purity. For the past can only be preserved in its purity by someone who accepts responsibility for the future, who preserves in so far as he overcomes". His judgment on most studies in the history of Christian doctrine is little less severe (ibid): "They confine themselves to showing how what prevails today came into being; starting from today they simply go backwards". Historical theology is too much *Referat* and too little *syntheologein;* one must *do theology* with ancient theology and not be content just to chronicle it. And thirdly, where constructive theological work is certainly taking place, as in Mariology (the doctrine of the Assumption of Our Lady was proclaimed in 1954), the only objection is that nothing comparable is happening in so many other evidently more central theological areas (I, p. 11): "But how many themes, just as important in themselves, remain unexamined! Over how many questions does there reign the graveyard calm of weariness and boredom!"

Rahner sums up what he would like to see: "theological treatises which are not just mechanically repetitive textbooks (adorned with bibliographical data and historical notes); studies in the history of dogma which look backwards so as to go beyond the current position; specialized theological studies which have the courage to make investigations in the many dogmatic fields over which there prevails today more or less the stillness of a building site abandoned while building was still in progress" (ibid. p. 14).

It seems a fair enough description of the theological work of a generation who, in self-protection, against the anti-Modernist blizzard, either stopped asking questions or else backed away from the more central issues. Catholic theology, so Karl Rahner concludes (in 1954!), "is very orthodox", *sehr rechtgläubig*. But, in an important footnote to that observation (ibid. p. 13), Rahner points out that there is a certain kind of right-thinking conformity with what is 'orthodox' which is a *danger:* "Once the danger of explicit and theoretically formulated heresy appearing *within* the Church and seeking to spread *within* it has been largely excluded by a very high degree of reflective precision concerning the formal principles of faith and theology, then heresy (and there *must* always be heresies even in the Church) can appear in just two forms: as 'cryptogamic' heresy, merely lived out existentially and avoiding self-expression in a theoretical reflexive form, and as dead orthodoxy, *tote Orthodoxie,* which can be true to the letter simply because it is fundamentally uninterested in the whole thing".

Perhaps such heresies were more painfully obvious to a priest who had worked almost entirely in the context of the traditional Catholicism of Austria and Bavaria. But even in more recently established Catholic communities, where the faith is likely to be held more by personal conviction than merely by social custom, and where there will be less of a gap between real and notional assent to official teaching, it is not difficult to find, even and perhaps especially among professed religious and the clergy, sad representatives of such dead orthodoxy – dead because (as Karl Rahner likes to emphasize) the Christian message comes as an answer to a question, and if the question has never been raised the answer cannot be appropriated. Curiosity may have killed the cat; lack of it can kill the faith.

A cryptogam is a plant which, like ferns, lichen and fungi, having no stamens or pistils, never has any proper flowers. The anti-Modernists, than whom none was ever more unquestioningly 'orthodox', frequently spoke as if the Catholic Church was infested with 'secret' heretics. There cannot have been very many people who, having ceased to believe the central doctrines of the Catholic faith, ever wanted to remain in the Church as secret unbelievers. But, whether deliberately or not it is difficult to tell, Rahner here seems to be taking up the language of the Modernist period, agreeing as it were that disguised heresy is possible all right but arguing that it is more commonly found in the way that certain people (or communities) *live*, who do not, however, spell out the implications of their behaviour in any articulate form. What is 'unorthodox' in their practice, existentially, is never translated intellectually into statements which would reveal the implicit 'heresy'.

In effect, Rahner's footnote tears apart the myth of solidly homogeneous orthodoxy that characterized the Pian era of Roman Catholicism. What he is saying is that the ecclesiastical police may have put a stop to overt and articulate heresy in the Catholic Church, but, if that was achieved at the price of putting a stop to all the questioning to which (as he has often said) Modernism was no doubt an inadequate or even wholly inappropriate sort of response, the effect in the end is simply to turn the habit of not asking questions itself into heresy: cryptogamic heresy or dead orthodoxy. His starting-point, of course, in the parenthesis which Cornelius Ernst, no doubt inadvertently, omitted from his translation of the passage, is, in the words of St Paul (1 Corinthians 11:19): "For there must be also heresies among you, that they who are approved may be made manifest among you". That 'must' (*dei*), elsewhere in the New Testament, usually refers to a necessity decreed by God; but exegetes disagree over how much weight to attach to that in this context. Is St Paul thinking, in some apocalyptic perspective, of the 'heresies' in the Corinthian community as some-

how predestined to 'reveal' those who are 'approved' (Conzelmann in the Hermeneia commentary thinks not, John Ruef in the Pelican commentary is inclined to think yes)? When he came to treat the question of heresy at greater length, in an extremely important essay which is in effect simply an expansion of the 1954 footnote (*Investigations V*, pp. 468-512), Rahner speaks, without actually quoting this text, of a 'must' of salvation history (p. 498); but he rejects such an a priori manner of deducing the nature of heresy in the Church and settles instead for an a posteriori and empirical approach in terms of insuperable pluralism and the ambiguity of faith (topics to which we must return at a later stage of this enquiry). For our present purposes, and to conclude this introduction to the stultified theological scene through which, with his *Schriften*, Karl Rahner drove coach and horses, some thirty years ago, it will suffice to cite, from that same essay, an explicit reference to Modernism and to the conduct of ecclesiastical authority in the aftermath (*Investigations V*, p. 508). The Magisterium of the Church may be tempted, so Rahner writes, "to suppress heretical lines of thought merely by its formal authority without seeing to it that they are also overcome from within the inner nature of the matter itself. Thus there arises the temptation to combat heresy, as it were, merely through administrative channels (by placing certain works on the Index, by removing suspect lecturers, etc.) instead of combating it in the proper manner of the *teaching* office, i.e. by a positive formulation of the true teaching ... letting it be said in such a way that it is not merely actually true but also enters into the understanding and heart of men".

The question of heresy has ramifications. In particular, for Karl Rahner, as we shall find in due course, it brings up the question of truth and error in the formulation of Christian doctrine, and the inevitability of a certain error in the amalgam (as he calls it) of any true statement. It also brings up the question of membership of the Church, and thus of the relationship between Lutherans (especially) and the Catholic Church, with which he has been engaged ecumenically for many years. He insists that heresy does not always have the same place or function in the Catholic Church. In the post-Modernist Church, so he is convinced, it is the evasion or suppression of necessary questioning that produces heresy: either "a verbal orthodoxy and a frightened, 'correct' care never to express 'views' which might come into conflict with the official norms of faith" (ibid. p. 503) or else a "dread of reflection" ("even educated people will nowadays frequently allow themselves to hold on to the most childish formulations of faith", p. 504). To get argument going, and to show that far more questions remain open for the Catholic theologian than was commonly admitted, has always been Rahner's driving desire. Even if one were to reject

his own theological 'system' root and branch, doing so with questions and arguments, one would be benefiting from the renewal of theological controversy and exploration in the Catholic Church for which he more than anyone is responsible. Even if nothing else of his work endures (an unlikely supposition), he would be content to have renewed interest in, and to have excited courage to deal with, the central questions of theology.

Looking back, in a lecture given in 1967 (*Investigations IX*, p. 58), Karl Rahner allows that, measured at least by nineteenth-century neo-scholasticism and by the situation before the First World War, there seems to have been a great new departure in Catholic theology: "This is the case right enough, and all praise to it; but it comes, at least for the moment, simply from the fact that there was an almost immeasurable amount to *catch up with*, in terms of modern philosophy as well as with historical scholarship". As he goes on to say: "The true state of things will appear only when this task has been completed". We may find, for example (p. 39), that the modern philosophy with which we are catching up is already a thing of the past – to which he counters that "if neo-scholastic philosophy, and theology with it, have mostly slept during the modern period, they cannot be spared the task set by modern philosophy just because it *might* be in decline: the lost ground must at least be made up if theology is to do justice to the spirit of the age which comes *after* 'the modern age'". And he refers to Left Hegelianism and *Ideologiekritik*. He thus seems to suspect that Catholic theology may actually be catching up all too late. Over the page, however, in this same essay, he allows that it may be said, and in part justly, that Bultmannian demythologization theology is a new version of theological liberalism – "But have we satisfactorily met the real concerns of liberal theology? That is a real question. Protestant theology, and we too, have been far too quickly satisfied with the thought that the Barthians have disposed of the Liberals. However much of Barth and his great work will endure, it is on the whole Bultmann who has triumphed over Barth, and this is not merely a gruesomely unfair accident in the history of ideas".

(To be continued)

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