

# Comment

*Karl Rahner S.J. (died 30 March 1984)*

When the news broke in the Dominican community at Oxford that Karl Rahner was dead it was as if somebody in the family had died.

That a group of young English Dominican theology teachers and students should react in this way, although few of them had ever even set eyes on that 80-year old German Jesuit theologian, is an indication of the stature of the man. They had, after all, certainly not been instructed to hold him in uncritical awe. Several had been taught by the now-dead Cornelius Ernst, translator of the first volume of Rahner's *Theological Investigations* (Fergus Kerr reviews the very last volumes in this issue) and collaborator on *Sacramentum Mundi*. And Ernst had once said to Rahner: "Wouldn't you agree that your most important work was done in the '40s?" And in his introduction to the *Investigations* he had said that the lynch-pin of Rahner's philosophical system (roughly, that to be was to be present to oneself) was "wholly unacceptable" and implied that "every entity is a more or less deficient angel"!

Rahner's writings were worth arguing about because of the magnitude of his achievement, and because of the size and seriousness of the questions which most occupied his mind. An early commentator on his work said the man-centred preoccupations of the modern world did not favour new developments in theology. If, today, that sounds a very odd thing to say, the person who deserves most credit of all for the change is Rahner, who based his massive theological enterprise on a modern philosophy of man— of the human being as questioning and question. In church on the day his death was reported Herbert McCabe, this journal's former editor, said: "We, here, have all learned important things from him."

The freeing of Catholic theology from its incongruous straitjacket was not, of course, the work of one man only. Perhaps the main reason why the news of Rahner's death was so sobering was that it was a sharp reminder to us that the outstanding group of theologians who so deeply influenced the Council and the immediate post-conciliar period will all, in a very few years' time, have gone. Arguably the most influential seven of them were (in alphabetical order) Hans Urs von Balthasar, who is Swiss; the French Dominican, Yves Congar; the Canadian Jesuit, Bernard Lonergan; the French Jesuit, Henri de Lubac; the now-dead Frenchman, Jacques Maritain; Rahner himself; and the Flemish Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx. On 14 November even the youngest, Schillebeeckx, will be a septuagenarian; Henri de Lubac, the only one to be made a cardinal, is a nonagenarian. They are profoundly different men, now spanning the theological spectrum from right to left. Nevertheless, all of them,

including Lonergan, were shaped by European culture and think like Europeans (as also does the now officially disapproved-of *enfant terrible* Hans Küng, who was at the Council but found his real voice as a successful writer later).

By the end of the century, however, two-thirds of the world's Catholics will be living in the third world and one out of every two Catholics will be Latin American. And, as we all know, so far the one really vital theology that has emerged in the third world is Latin America's "theology of liberation". The Cardinal-Prefect of the very powerful Roman Congregation of Bishops said to a friend of ours: "I am determined to smash this thing.", and at the very time Rahner was slipping to the end of his long life the Cardinal-Prefect and the Secretary of the almost equally powerful Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith were in Bogotá, busily engaged in trying to do just that.

These strong men of the Vatican have but one just reason for grouching about liberation theology: at the *theoretical* level quite a lot of it is not yet outstandingly good theology. (This, alas is not their main reason for wanting to see it stamped out.) Schillebeeckx possibly excepted, the eminent theologians of the generation of the Council have not wrestled much themselves with the questions which are so central in this new non-European theology. But the kind of attack which is being launched against it is making some of us much aware of the need for a new generation of theologians with something like the depth and span of learning of those older men, and their capacity for dialogue with the tradition. Of course, as Rahner said of himself in 1976, we "cannot work through the whole of theology today because it has become fragmented many times over and is contained within a pluralism of philosophies and other sciences". And the awesome output of words by some of those theologians (Rahner published over 3000 items, Congar has published over 1650) is not the ideal model for future communication. But we must have theologians who are more than either smart journalists or writers of monographs if we want to build up and protect a theology which is truly liberating. At Bogotá the CDF's Secretary said: "All theology is liberation theology. If it were not, the truth of Christ would no longer make us free." This unfortunately is not quite true. It is not clear that the old theology of the manuals liberated anybody. And there are some powerful people in the Church scared of every sort of liberation.

The defence and development of truly liberating theology cannot be done by slogans. It can only be done by people of prayer and sensitivity and prophetic courage who also have an aptitude for the fairly ascetic life of true scholarship, people with the qualities we saw in Karl Rahner.

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147