

# Rahner's Searching Christology

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One of the topics to which Karl Rahner devoted a good deal of thought is what he called 'searching Christology'. He did not think that Jesus Christ comes to human beings as a 'bolt out of the blue', so to speak, as an event for which they are totally unprepared; rather, Jesus the Christ comes to a human being who is open, even disposed, to recognize his significance, who is already—indeed always—a being who is searching for the Christ. In this article I am outlining Rahner's searching christology, for I do not think it has received the attention it deserves, and then I am offering some of my own comments and critical reflections on the topic.

For Rahner, one of the things which precedes the human acceptance of Jesus Christ as God's revelation is a human search in which, as we shall see, human beings are enough aware of what they are looking for to be able to recognize it when they find it. It is the detailing of what human beings are searching for that interests him.

He attempts to verbalize (albeit in the Christian terms with which he is most familiar) what he takes to be universal human experience. As humans, according to Rahner, we are beings of transcendence who reach out beyond ourselves toward others and ultimately toward the one beyond all limits, the one whom Christians call God (even if we do not always articulate that explicitly).

Just as self-transcendence belongs to the human condition, so does anxiety. We want to be assured that our lives have meaning and purpose. We are driven to ask questions about the meaning of existence. How can I be sure that life has meaning and purpose, given all the evils I know of or experience? Why should I look to the present and future with hope and not despair?

Because the one whom Christians call God must, to be God, ground all of existence, and therefore all meaning, we hope that this God will show Godself, communicate Godself as the ground and goal of human hope, and as the assurance of life's meaning. This assurance is, in Rahner's understanding, the assurance of salvation, for salvation is not 'otherworldly', but is the acceptance of one's own humanity as it is offered to one by God, and the actualizing of that humanity in deeds of faith, hope and love.<sup>1</sup>

If one puts this search in christological terms, as Rahner does, when we are searching for something which will guarantee or assure us of that salvation, we are searching for a saviour, for the Christ. He avers that if one accepts God's offer of salvation, one is already pursuing, whether one is explicitly aware of it or not, a searching christology; one is looking for the Christ as a guarantee of that salvation.<sup>2</sup>

The question that is at issue in outlining the pursuit of a searching christology is: For what sort of Christ (saviour) is the human being searching? Or, to articulate this in terms of its implications, since to talk about christology is always to talk of God's saving relationship to us, and to talk about salvation is to talk about the human search for and discovery of ultimate meaning: What is the human being looking for from God as a guarantee of the meaning of human existence?

Rahner most often articulates his searching christology in a threefold form—what he calls 'three appeals' in searching christology. He points to three areas where the human being questions life's meaning and looks for an answer to that question.<sup>3</sup>

The first 'appeal' is what he calls 'the appeal to the absolute love of neighbour'.<sup>4</sup> He maintains that in each act of love which one human being directs toward another, the human being who loves seeks some kind of guarantee or justification for the absolute love that is offered and received. Human beings, according to Rahner, are looking for that which is deserving of their absolute love. The finite human being cannot, in this finitude, be the ground or justification for another human being to love absolutely and without reserve.

For a merely finite and ever unreliable person cannot by himself justify the sense of the absolute love which is given him, a love in which a person 'involves' and risks himself absolutely for the other person. By himself he could only be loved with reservations and in a 'love' in which the lover either makes reservations or risks himself absolutely on what is possibly meaningless.<sup>5</sup>

Human beings need some guarantee that their love is not in vain, is not worthless and meaningless, that their love can and should be absolute love, love without reserve.

Of course, God could be and is such a guarantee, but this would only yield a speculative and abstract concept of love, which remains transcendent to the human situation.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Rahner thinks that the human being seeks in history for a neighbour who can be loved with the same absoluteness of love that one can offer to God. To desire the assurance that such an absolute love is not misplaced is, for Rahner, to look for a particular sort of saviour figure, a figure both human and divine. One looks for a God-human being; one who can justifiably be loved with the absoluteness of love for God (for only God can guarantee

this love) but one who is human (for only a human being presents him- or herself to be loved concretely in the present).

The 'second appeal' in a searching christology is 'the appeal to readiness for death'.<sup>7</sup> Human beings see death as an absurdity, 'the absurd arch-contradiction of existence', and a threat.<sup>8</sup> We feel radical powerlessness in the face of death and yet, for Rahner, death is a human act to which the human being in freedom can decide how to respond.

To prevent the acceptance of death from being simply the acceptance of the absurd, Rahner thinks that

in a person who deeply affirms in his history not abstract ideas and norms but present or future reality as the ground of his existence, this acceptance implies the intimation or the expectation or the affirmation of an already present or future and hoped-for death which is of such a nature that it reconciles the permanent dialectic in us between doing and enduring in powerlessness.<sup>9</sup>

According to Rahner, this dialectic can only be reconciled by the reality of the one who is the final ground of the dialectic itself.

What the human being is looking for, therefore, is the death of one who can suffer and die as a human being and yet who can prevent this suffering and death and all suffering and death from being meaningless because this one is the ground of all meaning. Although he does not explicitly use the word in this connection, Rahner certainly implies that here too the human being is searching for a God-human being.

The human being's hope for the future can also be a manifestation of a searching christology, and 'the appeal to hope in the future' is the third and final of Rahner's appeals in the searching christology he explicitly sets out. According to him, one hopes that the future will hold for oneself a reconciliation to lessen the distance between what one is and what one wants to be and should be, a reconciliation of self-alienation. The human being, then, searches for what the Christian thinks has already been found in Jesus Christ, that is, 'the irreversible beginning and the coming of God as the absolute future of the world and of history'.<sup>10</sup>

This third appeal is the most sketchily developed of the appeals in Rahner's searching christology. What he seems to imply here is that the human being is looking for some guarantee that both individual and collective alienation will be overcome in some sort of favourable consummation in God (the absolute future).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it seems that the human being is looking for some assurance that God as the absolute future is present now to guarantee this reconciliation as history proceeds to its consummation. Although he does not fill in the details, he clearly assumes that the absolute saviour would be such a guarantee.

Rahner's searching christology shows us that, for him, the human

search for salvation is the search for an absolute saviour, a God-human being, who can give us some reason to think that absolute love is possible in the face of human inconstancy; that life, despite its dilemmas and its ending in death, has meaning; and that history does have a final and favourable consummation in which reconciliation will be accomplished.

The person who really seeks his salvation and knows that he is responsible for it in his freedom looks in the history of the one humanity to which he belongs for a human being in whom this salvation has not only occurred as promise to himself, but also becomes *tangible* as victoriously achieved by God's power and permits him to hope for it concretely as more than a merely abstract possibility for himself.<sup>12</sup>

How should we evaluate Rahner's searching christology? Is the human being searching for the kind of saviour Rahner describes? While I think that Rahner has captured the human predicament quite well, I do not think that the God-human being he sets out as the goal of the human search is the only possible way to understand that for which the human being is searching. I think that the goal of the search must be characterized with less specificity than Rahner wishes to use. Because he has found the Christ (traditionally understood as a God-human being), he too easily characterizes the only possible goal of the human search as a person, and as a particular kind of person.

In the first appeal he thinks of the human being as one who seeks a God-human being, someone who can be loved concretely, with the absoluteness of a love for God. Now, although I would agree with Rahner that no merely finite human being can ground and justify an absolute love, I am not at all sure that human beings are first of all looking for one they can love with the absoluteness of love for God.

The human question about what justifies and grounds love is not at its base, I think, a question about whom *we can love* so much as it is a question about *who loves us*. What can, finally, ground all love, and in fact, all life as meaningful is not that we can be guaranteed that our love for God is justified, but rather, that we can be guaranteed that *God loves us*. Any human love, by virtue of its being human, no matter how justified it is in being absolute, is still a partial love that is bound by the limits of human finitude. God does not guarantee that love is ultimately justified and meaningful by being the object of love, but rather, by being its subject.

I would say that what the human being seeks is not someone in history who can be loved as God can be loved. By Rahner's own accounting, any human being can be so loved, for in loving any human being, we are also manifesting our love for God.

The act of love of neighbour is the only categorial and original act in which man attains the whole of the concretely

given reality, and finds the transcendental and supernatural, directly experienced experience of God.<sup>13</sup>

Every act of love towards the neighbour is an act that also takes place before God, who grounds the conditions of its possibility. Also, every act of love towards the neighbour is an act where the human being expresses a basic decision for or (if it is not an act of love, but its opposite) against God.<sup>14</sup>

Rahner's appeal to the absolute love of neighbour emphasizes the wrong side of the divine-human love relationship. In my opinion, this appeal would be better called the 'appeal to absolute love'. What the human being in actuality seeks is *God*, that is, some guarantee in history (which, conceivably, might or might not be a human being) of God's faithful and loving presence that would ground and give meaning to love and to existence as a whole.

Rahner is undoubtedly correct that human beings find death, on the face of it, meaningless or absurd, and in order that it not remain simply that, they look for some meaning in it. The analysis of the situation that he offers, however, is that human beings seek *someone else's* exemplary death wherein the one who suffers and dies is also the ground of all meaning and meets death in such a way that he or she prevents death from being absurd.

It is difficult to know, however, why seeing or expecting such an exemplary death will help one deal with the seeming meaninglessness of one's own impending death or the death of a loved one. Especially since we are not all God-human beings and cannot all, then, accept our deaths in an exemplary fashion, perhaps that death will instil in us even more a sense of life's meaninglessness than it will comfort us in our search for meaning.

Although Rahner has correctly understood the problem that the human being faces, he has not given the problem an adequate solution. What the human being seeks in the light of the seeming absurdity or meaninglessness of death—which also means, in light of the seeming absurdity or meaninglessness of a life that ends in death—is some assurance that life, even though it inevitably ends in death, is meaningful.

And here I would say that this second appeal, although it is raised by a different problem, is not, in its solution, basically different from the first. Human beings seek some guarantee of meaning that transcends their finitude. They seek in history for some representation or some manifestation of God which gives assurance that there is something beyond the mere finitude of life, and which guarantees that finite life is unique and meaningful to God. It is not at all apparent that such a guarantee necessarily has to be a God-human being although it does (because of the human desire for concrete assurance) need to be some

manifestation or re-presentation of God in history.

The third appeal, 'to hope in the future', is also a search for life's meaningfulness, which can only be guaranteed by God. Now, Rahner in this third appeal is seeking some guarantee that history will come to a favourable conclusion and that, in this conclusion, alienation, both individual and collective, will be overcome. The human being looks, in history, for some sign of God's presence to the world as historical, alienated world that can guarantee that history—like life, death and love—is not devoid of meaning.

Although Rahner maintains that the human search as he outlines it in his searching christology can only be fulfilled by a God-human being who is the example of one in whom God is absolutely present, it would seem that there might be other possible historical manifestations or objectifications of God that would serve as an appropriate way in which a searching christology could be fulfilled. Certainly, other theistic world religions have claimed a variety of manifestations of the divine that would need to be explored as possible goals for the search as Rahner describes it. It does not seem, from the point of view of the search (prior to anything Christians might want to claim about Jesus Christ), that the goal of the search can be limited to one concrete historical instance. Basically the human search is for a guarantee *in history* of life's meaningfulness. In Jesus Christ, Christians (including Rahner) think they have found such a guarantee.

The danger to which Rahner succumbs is the temptation to move too quickly from search to discovery. To say that human beings search in their history for meaning is not necessarily to say that they search for a God-human being. To make the move too quickly is to pass over the opportunities presented for understanding one's own religious life in light of the religious lives of others who are not Christians. For, if Rahner is correct about the human search (as I think he is), then Christians may be helped first of all in their understanding of who the Christ is for them. The Christ (for Christians, Jesus the Christ) is the one who answers human questions of meaning. Jesus Christ does not come as one unknown, but as one expected and searched for. A searching christology also helps Christians to understand those who have found the answer to that search in other places, if we draw the parallels between that which Christians have discovered and that which others have discovered as the goal of their searching.

Now, I am mindful that I do not offer a universal panacea here, for both Rahner and I have begun with a theistic mind-set that I have neither questioned nor justified. A full treatment of this human search would have to deal with the question of interreligious dialogue about theism. Nonetheless, what Rahner offers is a useful starting point for *Christian* thought.

Rahner has provided a way for us to understand ourselves as humans and as Christian. As humans, we come to understand ourselves as beings who are searching and unsatisfied until we find an answer to our search. As Christians, we can see how Jesus Christ functions as an answer to our all-too-human questions. Rahner's searching christology can help Christian to understand the function of Jesus the Christ in their lives, not as a supernatural saviour who takes us out of this world and into another to save us, but as one who offers us salvation here and now, who offers us the possibility of understanding that what it means to be fully human is to accept ourselves and our world as meaningful; meaningful both to ourselves and to God.

And, if I am correct in my criticisms of Rahner, it is, first of all, the offer of salvation, the assurance of meaning concretely in our history, the presence of God in our midst as *sacramentum*—these things rather than the *example* of another human being (even one who is also divine)—that is the central goal for which we are searching. The example of another means nothing to me unless I am personally and concretely assured of God's love and care and concern. The Christ provides me with such assurance. Only after that assurance is mine do I turn myself to the question of conducting myself accordingly.

- 1 *Foundations of Christian Faith* trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 39.
- 2 *Ibid.* 295.
- 3 See 'Grundlinien einer systematischen Christologie', in Karl Rahner and Wilhelm Thüsing, *Christologie—systematisch und exegetisch*. *Questiones disputatae*, no. 55. (Freiburg: Herder, 1972), 60ff; *Foundations*, 295ff.; and 'The One Jesus Christ and the Universality of Salvation', in *Theological Investigations* 16, trans. David Morland (New York: Seabury, 1979) 222ff.
- 4 *Foundations* 295.
- 5 *Ibid.* 296.
- 6 'The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation', in *Theological Investigations* 16, 222—223; see also *Foundations* 296 and 'Grundlinien einer systematischen Christologie' 61.
- 7 *Foundations* 269.
- 8 'Ideas for a Theology of Death', in *Theological Investigations* 13, trans. David Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 1975) 180.
- 9 *Foundations* 297; see also 'Grundlinien einer systematischen Christologie' 62 and 'The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation', in *Theological Investigations* 16, 223—224.
- 10 *Foundations* 297—98.
- 11 'The Quest for Approaches Leading to an Understanding of the Mystery of the God-Man Jesus', in *Theological Investigations* 13, trans. David Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 1975) 199—200.
- 12 'What Does it Mean Today to Believe in Jesus Christ?', in *Theological Investigations* 18, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 146.
- 13 'Theology of Freedom', in *Theological Investigations* 6, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (New York: Seabury, 1974) 190.
- 14 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God', in *Theological Investigations* 6, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (New York: Seabury, 1974) 247.