

- 18 *Letter to a General Chapter*, in *Omnibus*, 104.
- 19 *Letter to a General Chapter*, in *Omnibus*, 105-106; *First Rule*, 23, Cf. *The Birth of a Movement*, 103.
- 20 St Bonaventure, *Major Life*, II.5. *Omnibus*, 643.
- 21 *Admonition I*, *Omnibus*, 78.
- 22 St Bonaventure, *Major Life*, XI. 1. *Omnibus*, 711-712.
- 23 Cf. C. Esser, OFM and E. Grau, OFM, *Love's Reply*; trans. by I. Brady, OFM, (Franciscan Herald Press sa[1963] esp. Ch. 11; also *ICelano* 89. *Omnibus*, 304.
- 24 Cf. Y. Congar, OP, *Faith and the spiritual Life*, (London sa[1969]) 43-44.
- 25 *Testament*, *Omnibus*, 68; and *Legend of the Three Companions* XII, 46. *Omnibus*, 932.
- 26 For example: Auspicious van Corstanje, *The Covenant with God's Poor*, (Chicago: F.H.P. 1966) especially ch 5. Also: Duane V. Lapsanski, *The Mission of St Francis within Salvation History*, in *The Cord* Vol 26 No 11 (December 1976) 351-356.
- 27 *Testament*. *Omnibus*, 67 *ICelano* 62. *Omnibus*, 280.
- 28 *ICelano* 115. *Omnibus*, 487.

Rahner's *Grundkurs* revisited once again

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Karl Rahner writes as follows (*Foundations of Christian Faith*, page 431): "In view of the mode in which eschatological statements are made in the Old and New Testaments, a Christian is always tempted to read and to interpret the eschatological statements of Christianity as anticipatory eyewitness accounts of a future which is still outstanding". The meaning of this sentence, according to Hugo Meynell (*New Blackfriars*, July/August 1980, page 348), is that Rahner is warning us against the temptation of thinking that eschatological statements tell us anything, or have any bearing upon, what is to happen to us when we die: "Perhaps it is stupid of me not to be able to see what is being denied here, unless it is that Christians have some kind of expectation for the future after the end of the present life". Dr Meynell thus reads the sentence as if it were stressed as follows: "In view of the mode in which eschatological statements are made in the Old and New Testaments, a Christian is always tempted to read and to interpret the eschatological statements of Christianity as anticipatory eye-

witness accounts of a *future which is still outstanding*". What we are being warned against, then, is the notion that eschatological statements refer to the future. This is the only sentence which Dr Meynell quotes to support his suspicions that Karl Rahner does not hold orthodox Catholic beliefs about the afterlife.

But this is an extraordinarily perverse and unnatural meaning to put upon that sentence. Even without consulting the context one takes the natural stress of the sentence as follows: "In view of the *mode (Wiese)* in which eschatological statements are made in the Old and New Testaments, a Christian is always tempted to read and to interpret the eschatological statements of Christianity as *anticipatory eyewitness accounts (antizipierende Reportagen)* of a future which is still outstanding". Neither in this sentence nor anywhere else in his works does Rahner seek to persuade us that eschatology has no bearing on any real future. He never says that there is no afterlife to be expected and it is intolerable to create the impression that he says anything of the sort. What he is doing in this sentence, as elsewhere, is to warn us against the temptation to take the biblical accounts of what is to happen to us after death as if they were descriptions of the sort that we find in the newspapers: "reportings in advance of a future ahead of us", as one might more accurately translate Rahner's text. It is entirely a question, as he says at the beginning of the sentence, of the *mode* of eschatological statements. His concern here is not to deliver us from the temptation to think that eschatology implies some expectation of an afterlife. That we have a future ahead of us when we die is the central thesis in Rahner's doctrine of man, reiterated on the page of the *Grundkurs* from which Dr Meynell has extracted the sentence which is supposed to deny any such thing. One may find the existentialist jargon distasteful but the meaning is quite plain: "man" is "a being who is open to the absolute future, i.e. to God himself", and "a being who exists (*sic*) from out of his present 'now' towards his future" (*Foundations*, page 431). In fact Rahner's famous transcendental anthropology becomes nonsense if his expectation for the future of man in God is denied. His concern in the sentence Dr Meynell quotes is purely and simply to warn us against the temptation of taking biblical accounts of our future in God literally or as fundamentalists do.

As becomes plain a couple of pages later (*Foundations*, page 433), Rahner is simply asking us always to distinguish between the form (*Vorstellungsweise*) and the content (*Inhalt*) of eschatological assertions. But he never says that eschatological assertions have *no* content, or that they have some content which has nothing to do with what happens when we die. On the contrary: "When we read in Paul that Christ will come again at the sound of the archangel's trumpet, or when the Synoptic apocalypse says that

men will be gathered together by the angels and divided into two groups, the good and the evil, the sheep and the goats, or when later tradition situated this event in the valley of Josaphat, it is obvious that these are images (*Bilder*: pictures, metaphors, figures of speech) which mean something absolutely essential and true – but simply what the Christian doctrine of man says about the last things and nothing more – so we can say that, at least in principle, whatever we cannot arrive at in this way about the last things belongs to the presentation (*Darstellungsmaterial*) or the metaphorical dimension (*bildhafte Sphäre*) of the eschatological statements and not to their content”. And the content of eschatological statements, as Rahner tirelessly insists, is our future, when we are dead, either in God or in hell.

Perhaps Dr Meynell is unable to see what Rahner is warning us against because he cannot imagine that fundamentalism still exists or needs to be resisted. But the final paragraph of the whole section makes it clear beyond dispute that this is what Rahner has in mind (page 434): “In everything that man is and lives he passes through the zero point of death, and, for any Christian doctrine of man and hence for eschatology, God, who is supposed to be the absolute future of man, God and God alone, remains the incomprehensible mystery, to be worshipped in silence, so that, as Christians, we do not have to (must not) act as though we knew all about what happens in heaven. Perhaps Christian hope does often talk in the emphatic way of an initiate, of one who knows his way around in eternity with God better than in the dark dungeon of the present life. But in reality this absolute fulfilment remains the mystery which we have to reverence in silence, moving beyond all images into the ineffable”. Plainly, then, Rahner’s concern is with Christians who talk as though we know a great deal about what goes on in the afterlife and inside the divine mystery. But for Rahner, equally plainly, to expect eternal life is to expect, after death, a future in the ineffable mystery which is God.

Dr Meynell concedes that, for Rahner, “for Christians to expect eternal life is more than for them to have a particular kind of attitude to the present one” (op. cit. page 351). But this “more”, so Dr Meynell believes, is in danger of being qualified by Rahner into nothing, or anyway he does not “unequivocally” affirm its existence. Well, if Rahner’s repeated assertions that man’s future after death is to be forever in the absolute future which is the mystery of God are to be regarded as qualifying eternal life into nothing, or as equivocal affirmations of Catholic doctrine, I wonder what “more” Dr Meynell wants – other than what fundamentalist readings of Scripture envisage. The “more” which Karl Rahner offers is his whole theology.

That Karl Rahner would not be greatly impressed to learn that

“Jung listed nine salient features of hero-myths from all around the world, all of which are characteristic of the Gospel narratives” may be taken for granted. It seems to Dr Meynell, “as it did to Tolkien and C. S. Lewis among many others, that Christianity is the power in the world which it is largely because it is ... ‘myth’” – ‘myth’ in the sense of its being “a story which conveys something of deep significance for human life” (so Dr Meynell, *op. cit.* pages 348-9). Probably Rahner would prefer that Christianity should not be a “power in the world” at all if it were to be so largely on that sort of basis. But this does not mean that he thinks myths are always false. On the page which Dr Meynell quotes (*Foundations*, page 291) Rahner actually says that classical Christology is constantly in danger of being interpreted falsely since its formulations are “fraught with the danger of a monophysitic and hence a mythological misunderstanding”. That Catholics are, and always have been, strongly tempted by monophysite or at any rate Apollinarian doctrine is obvious.

But Rahner has not always identified myth with falsehood. Twenty years ago, in fact, he was on the bandwagon of theologians who have tried to cleanse the term “myth” from its normal associations with fiction, falsehood and the like. On one occasion, for example (*Theological Investigations* 4, page 344 footnote), he equates myth with imagery and goes on to discuss eschatological statements in these terms: “It is never then a matter of aiming at a language devoid of imagery and hence when dealing with eschatological assertions of trying to rid oneself of the picturesque diction to reach a sphere where the thing itself appears as it is in itself in its pure objectivity: there is no way of discarding the imagery, the indirect allusion, the mere convergence of diverse elements”. For Rahner, then, myth (like imagery and metaphor) may be the indispensable way of saying some things – but they need not be things “of deep significance for human life”. In Rahner’s sense, on the contrary, there is plenty of myth of trivial significance; there are poems and paintings which convey nothing of any importance (which is not necessarily a criticism). So far as I can see, however, Rahner has retreated from the attempt to clean up the word “myth” for Christian use. Surely it is just too difficult for us now ever to have much time for “true” myths? Jung, of course, was not interested in truth but only in significance: that is another question altogether.

As far as modern New Testament scholarship goes it seems to me that Karl Rahner has never shown much sign of wanting “to be seen to be abreast with trends” (to quote another of Dr Meynell’s assertions: *op. cit.* page 349). This accusation (or complaint) might be levelled at Edward Schillebeeckx and many others; but Wilhelm Thüsing surely showed pretty conclusively that Rahner

lags well behind in the race to keep up with “the assured results of modern New Testament scholarship”. In fact, like every Catholic dogmatic theologian of his generation, Rahner works with Denzinger and metaphysics and pays no attention to biblical scholarship at all. It is quite bizarre to suggest, as Dr Meynell insinuates, that Rahner tries to construct his theology so as to protect himself against the possibility that the gospels may not be substantially true as a matter of historical fact. When Rahner speaks of “honest exegesis” (*Foundations*, page 14) I imagine that he has non-fundamentalist work in mind; but nothing that he has written supports the suggestion that he might count it among the assured results of modern exegesis that the gospels offer nothing but what everyone would call myth.

On the other hand, Rahner would surely be astonished to hear that “in fact there is no great mystery” about how human beings have some notion of what it *would be* for a man to be God” (op. cit. page 350). But there, no doubt, once again, as Dr Meynell says, the conservative Christian (such as he understands himself to be) would be at one with the vast majority of unbelievers (including presumably Anthony Flew). Fundamentalists and rationalists usually hold exactly the same version of Christian beliefs, the former accepting them, the latter rejecting them, and neither party willing to tolerate questioning Christians. Grateful as I too am to Professor Flew, who set me to read then unpublished Wittgenstein texts when he was a lecturer at Aberdeen thirty years ago, I do not feel obliged to accept the version of Christianity which he rejects.