

Experiential Expressivism and Two Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians

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FERGUS KERR justly remarks in the Preface to *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* that “the philosophical problems for theology raised during the modernist crisis in the first decade of the twentieth century seem as troublesome as ever.”¹ And in his first chapter, he says that “the history of twentieth-century Catholic theology is the history of the attempted elimination of theological modernism, by censorship, sackings and excommunication—and the resurgence of issues that could not be repressed by such methods.”² Theological Modernism, we understand, includes the view that religious experience gives rise to doctrinal statement,³ a view that shares important parts of the Liberal Protestant view of revelation and doctrine, a view George Lindbeck calls the experiential-expressivist view of dogma.⁴ “Experiential expressivism” is just a systematic term for what historically we know as the Liberal Protestant and Catholic Modernist view of dogma.

Kerr follows Lindbeck in raising the question of whether Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan are experiential-expressivists.⁵ The trouble with such a view, Kerr says, reporting Lindbeck, is that it is hard to see how

¹ Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), viii.

² *Ibid.*, 4–5.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 16–17. This would include the pragmatist view of dogma espoused by Edouard LeRoy; see Kerr, *Catholic Theologians*, 14.

⁵ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 16, 31–32.

there could be a pre-conceptual experience of the divine that we could then subsequently rightly identify as such.⁶ Lindbeck took it as obvious that Lonergan and Rahner are experiential expressivists, but he said also that their expressivism was combined with the recognition of a cognitive value for doctrines. This means that doctrines, while expressive of religious experience, nonetheless inform us about religious and divine reality, and so are capable of being true or false. Kerr does not report this part of Lindbeck's analysis, so it is hard to know whether he agrees with it or not. In the case of both Rahner and Lonergan, in any event, Kerr introduces the sub-section with a question: "Experiential Expressivism?" He presents evidence for and against Rahner, but ultimately acquits him. For Lonergan, however, the only evidence we see is for, and Kerr seems inclined to convict. I wish to suggest that this is to get things precisely reversed; namely, that Rahner did indeed end in a form—an unacceptable one—of experiential expressivism, and that Lonergan, appearances that Kerr reports to the contrary, did not.

Liberal Protestant and Modernist Dogma

For the sake of some clarity about what we are speaking of, let us recall if only too briefly the views of Auguste Sabatier (1839–1901) and George Tyrrell (1861–1909).

For Sabatier, a Liberal Protestant, revelation is strictly the experience of God that is both the answer to prayer and that elicits prayer,⁷ and whose principle function for Sabatier is to strengthen the sense of our freedom and moral agency in a world that the sciences tell us is deterministic.⁸ The criterion of the authenticity of a revelation, in fact, is precisely that it enrich and enhance and strengthen our spiritual and moral life.⁹ Dogmas for their part express the experience; they express the feeling of dependence on God (Schleiermacher).¹⁰ However, they do not really tell us anything about God; that would be the mistake of "intellectualism."¹¹ In this Sabatier expressly recognizes the strictures of the Kantian critique.¹²

⁶ Kerr, *Catholic Theologians*, 92–93; see Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 36–37. See also the discussion of private language in Kerr's *Theology after Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), 84–90.

⁷ Auguste Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion Based on Psychology and History*, trans. T. A. Seed (New York: Harper Torch, 1957 [French, 1897]), 25–29, 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12–13, 18–19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60–61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 137–38.

¹² *Ibid.*, 276–77, 326.

For Sabatier, the presence of God, which just is revelation considered in itself, evokes in us both the emotion, or feeling, of our dependence on him, and our response in prayer. This emotion, in turn—that is, religion—produces the idea of our relation to God, and indeed every religious form and rite and formulary.¹³ The expression of our relation to God in idea is dogma. Dogma considered as idea, in its theoretical aspect, is the envelope and expression of our relation to God, which is the implication of our religious feeling, which is the product of the presence of God.¹⁴ Or it is simply the envelope and expression of the feeling. It seems to be speaking about God; all it really expresses is the emotion, the relation.¹⁵

Dogma has at it were two faces: interiorly, its soul is piety, or consciousness of relation; exteriorly, its body is some intellectual or even philosophically formulated statement. For Kantian reasons, however, the intellectual form of dogma cannot really inform us about God. Still, such form is necessary in order to express the emotion, the consciousness of the relation, both so as to communicate it to others and to rekindle it in ourselves.¹⁶ Such forms are wholly the work of man, not God; they are not revealed; revelation is consciousness of the presence of God.¹⁷ Further, since the intellectual form is always constructed out of whatever intellectual or philosophical materials lie to hand in the culture of the time, they are also historically variable.¹⁸

For George Tyrrell, a Catholic Modernist, it is this last thing, the historical variability of dogma, that leads him to much the same position. According to Jan Walgrave, the germ of Tyrrell's position is captured in the following argument. Revelation is either propositional, and therefore the development of doctrine is dialectical, logical; or revelation is non-propositional, experiential. But development is not dialectical, logical; therefore revelation is not propositional. Therefore it is experiential; it is the ineffable experience of God.¹⁹

Not only does the non-dialectical, non-logical course of the development of doctrine demand that revelation be thought of as an experience rather than as a speech, but unacceptable consequences would follow if it

¹³ Ibid., 229.

¹⁴ Ibid., 240.

¹⁵ Ibid., 240–41, 298–99.

¹⁶ Ibid., 256–58, 318, 321.

¹⁷ Ibid., 242–43.

¹⁸ Ibid., 246–47.

¹⁹ Jan H. Walgrave, *Unfolding Revelation: The Nature of Doctrinal Development* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 178, 251. See for instance Tyrrell's "'Theologism'—A Reply," in *Through Scylla and Charybdis* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 346, 349.

were conceived of as propositional. For one thing, it would seem that later Christians would have a better purchase on revelation than earlier ones.²⁰ For another, it would seem that the Church would be wedded to antiquated and indeed falsified teachings of ancient science and philosophy.²¹

The experiential character of revelation means that strictly speaking it is non-cognitive, and does not inform us about the divine.²² What revelation chiefly does is install in us a way of life and religion, a moral and religious form of life.²³ What it really is, is *grace*, God's sharing of his life with us.²⁴ As for dogma, it is merely protective of the experience; but insofar as it can be taken as positively informative, positively cognitive, it is not binding. Cognitively, it has at most a symbolic value. It is to point us ever more back to the experience, and to the form of life the experience engenders.²⁵

With other Catholic Modernists, Tyrrell has a much greater sense than the Liberal Protestants of the role of the Church, and recognizes the revelatory experiences of prophets and apostles as in some way normative.²⁶ But there is no difference as to the expressive character of dogma, and no difference as to what it gives non-cognitive, non-informative expression of, namely, the experience of the divine.

We turn now first to Lonergan and then to Rahner.

Bernard Lonergan

Kerr's indictment of Lonergan is drawn from *Method in Theology*, chapter five, on "Religion."²⁷ Kerr reports that for Lonergan, different religions are "different expressions or objectifications of a common core experience."²⁸ This core experience is what Lonergan calls the experience of being unrestrictedly in love with God.²⁹ Theologically, this experience is the state of affairs named by saying that a person has received sanctifying grace,³⁰ but can be described in the more concrete terms of the New

²⁰ Tyrrell, "'Theologism,'" 322–24.

²¹ Tyrrell, "Semper Eadem II," in *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, 153.

²² Tyrrell, "Rights and Limits of Theology," in *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, 205–12; "Revelation," in *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, 282–83, 287–90.

²³ Tyrrell, "Revelation," 273, 275–76.

²⁴ Tyrrell, "Rights and Limits," 211–12.

²⁵ Ibid., 205–7. See also Tyrrell, "Semper Eadem I," in *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, 120, and "Semper Eadem II," 145.

²⁶ Tyrrell, "Revelation," 292.

²⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

²⁸ Kerr, *Catholic Theologians*, 118.

²⁹ Lonergan, *Method*, 105.

³⁰ Ibid., 107.

Testament as the fruits of the Holy Spirit such as are named in Galatians 5: "it is a conscious dynamic state of love, joy, peace, that manifests itself in acts of kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control."³¹ While it is in this sense conscious, however, it is not necessarily known—that is, one may not know propositionally, which is to say that one may not be able to say, that one is in love with God.³²

The experience is known only when expressed, where, doubtless, it functions as the norm of its expression.³³ Furthermore, Lonergan follows Friedrich Heiler in believing that it finds common expression in such things as the acknowledgement of the existence of something transcendent and the realization that to approach it one must love one's neighbors as oneself.³⁴ The expression of the experience occurs in as many forms as the sociology and psychology and history of religions report.³⁵

Now, since these expressions are incommensurable, do we not have as nice a liberal theological reduction of dogma and doctrine to the accidental as could be desired?³⁶ It is being in love with God that is important. There will necessarily be some expression of it, but what will the differences of its expression matter? Kerr pretty much leaves us with Lindbeck's worry that the experience of being in love with God precedes any expression of it in history and language and indeed draws the one who has it into a wordless world of mysticism.³⁷ The outward word is seemingly important only as an avowal of the love that is experienced.³⁸

Thus Kerr leaves us, about mid-way through the chapter. It is enough, I think, to finish the chapter to see that the invitation he has extended the reader to see Lonergan as an experiential expressivist is to view his position in a quite distorting light.

Continuing the chapter, we learn that the word in which the experience of being in love with God is expressed is personal, social, and historical.³⁹ Now, the apprehension of the value of this divine fulfillment of our transcendentality Lonergan calls faith, "the knowledge born of religious love."⁴⁰ Among the other apprehensions of value that faith makes

³¹ Ibid., 106.

³² Ibid., 107.

³³ Kerr, *Catholic Theologians*, 112.

³⁴ Lonergan, *Method*, 109.

³⁵ Ibid., 108.

³⁶ See Walgrave's nice definition of theological Liberalism as any position that consigns doctrine to what is accidental to Christianity, *Unfolding Revelation*, 226.

³⁷ Kerr, *Catholic Theologians*, 119.

³⁸ Ibid., 119, reporting *Method*, 112–13.

³⁹ Lonergan, *Method*, 113.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 115.

possible, however, is that of belief, “of believing the word of religion, of accepting the judgments of fact and the judgments of value that the religion proposes.”⁴¹ The religious communities in which such judgments are made, moreover, perdure through time, acquire a history, become historical.⁴² So far, so may we continue to read Lonergan as a liberal. Then there is this:

But there is a further and far deeper sense in which a religion may be named historical. The dynamic state of being in love has the character of a response. It is an answer to a divine initiative. The divine initiative is not just creation. It is not just God’s gift of his love. There is a personal entrance of God himself into history, a communication of God to his people, the advent of God’s word into the world of religious expression. Such was the religion of Israel. Such has been Christianity.⁴³

With this stroke, all the positivity of Christianity and the Christian revelation that Lindbeck feared has been sold down the river returns. It is not the case that all expressions of being in love with God are human expressions. It is not the case that all objectivations of the experience are human products. Some are divine. And that is the claim of the Christian gospel.

One may say that in this matter, beyond the systematic precision with which he wishes to relate human subjectivity and transcendence, religious experience, religion, faith, and belief, Lonergan is concerned for two things. First, by making good what follows from the will of God for the salvation of all—the offer of grace and so the possibility of an experienced being in love if it is accepted—he makes the divine will to save more believable. Second, he is concerned to think out more concretely how the universal offer of grace should be described given the scope and detail of the modern knowledge of the religions of man.

But having mentioned these modern concerns, I should also say that what Lonergan is doing is quite traditional. In distinguishing being in love with God and the knowledge born of it from the exterior word of God spoken to his people through prophet and apostle, he does nothing except trade on St. Thomas’s observation that the gift of faith comes to us from God in two ways, from the interior light, the *lumen fidei* and the exterior proposition on the lips of prophet or apostle.

[I]n the faith by which we believe in God there is not only the accepting of the object of assent, but something moving us to the assent. This

⁴¹ Ibid., 118.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 118–19.

is a kind of light—the habit of faith—divinely imparted to the human mind. . . . It is clear, then, that faith comes from God in two ways: by way of an interior light that leads to assent, and by way of the realities that are proposed from without and that had as their source divine revelation.⁴⁴

Lonergan expressly identifies what he calls “faith,” the knowledge born of love, with the *lumen fidei*, just as previously he has identified the experience of being in love with God with sanctifying grace. All that he has done is connect the light of faith with the experience of grace: the light of faith is the knowledge born of love, the apprehension of the value of giving assent to the creed.⁴⁵

Karl Rahner

Kerr raises the question of whether Rahner is an experiential expressivist as follows: “Theologically, the charge is that Rahner’s heuristic strategy of returning us always to the self’s experience of transcending finitude diverts attention from allowing God’s unique self-revelation historically in Jesus Christ to shape Christian self-understanding.”⁴⁶

Kerr acquits Rahner on the ground that his anthropology is contained within the ecclesial context in which alone he thought theology was to be prosecuted.⁴⁷ This purportedly saves him from collapsing all talk about God into talk about us and our experience.⁴⁸

It might also be urged on behalf of Rahner that the obvious rejoinder to the charge of experiential expressivism is that the transcendental experience of God finds expression not in the consciousness of the individual as such, but in history, in the objectivation of historical event, including the words that in part constitute and interpret the event. To the question of how we identify the religious experience as religious, or the experience of God as really of God, Rahner could answer with Lonergan that the identification is made for us by prophet and apostle, which is to say by God, and that, moreover, doctrine bears also expressly on the historical, on the presence of God in history, and informs us of this presence. That is, we

⁴⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Faith, Reason and Theology: Questions I–IV of his Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, trans. Armand Mauer (Toronto: PIMS, 1987), 69: q. 3, a. 1, ad 4.

⁴⁵ Lonergan defends his freedom to use “faith” as he does, meaning the light of faith, and distinguishing it from “beliefs” (*Method*, 123–24).

⁴⁶ Kerr, *Catholic Theologians*, 93.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 93–94.

⁴⁸ The difference between Liberal Protestantism and Catholic Modernism was supposed to be the greater “ecclesiality” of the latter. This did not prevent Modernists from embracing an inadequate view of the cognitive character of doctrine.

could think that Rahner combines his expressivism with a straightforward cognitivism, by which I mean the mediation of the word of God in the human words of prophet and apostle.

In fact, Rahner's position bears closer examination. In a short essay entitled "Human Religion and the Religion of Jesus Christ," Hans Urs von Balthasar makes a strong case for taking Rahner as a liberal theologian in the classical sense; that is, as conforming Christianity to the demands of the Enlightenment and so transforming Christianity from "a positive, historical religion to a religion valid for man in general, who is essentially religious."⁴⁹ Balthasar makes his case mostly on the basis of two of Rahner's essays, "Yesterday's History of Dogma and Theology for Tomorrow" and "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation."⁵⁰ According to the former, the interpretation of doctrine with the help of modern historical methods will doubtless lead us to discard many things we once thought were part of revelation. According to the latter, Christ and his cross are but the objectivation of the transcendental and universal experience of the closeness of God (what Rahner otherwise called the supernatural *existentiale* as conditioning all of human consciousness universally). Liberal Protestantism and Catholic Modernism are, of course, just forms of the Enlightenment project.

Perhaps the first thing to be said about the idea that Rahner ended in experiential expressivism is how ironic, if true, that should be. For this, it is enough to recall the original version of *Hearer of the Word*, his foundational essay in what Rahner called the philosophy of religion.⁵¹ For *Hearer* aims at the (transcendental) vindication of the possibility of a positive revelation in history, wherein the "word" to be heard is the word of the prophets, of Christ, of Scripture.⁵²

It is therefore not surprising that it expressly, if rather casually and in a sort of goes-without-saying tone dismisses Lessing and Schleiermacher, and Liberal Protestantism and Modernism.⁵³ We are expressly informed, more-

⁴⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Human Religion and the Religion of Christ," in *New Elucidations*, trans. Sister Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986 [German, 1979]), 74–87, at 75.

⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, "Yesterday's History of Dogma and Theology for Tomorrow," in *Theological Investigations XVIII*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 3–34; "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," in *Theological Investigations XVI*, trans. David Morland (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 199–224. These articles appeared in German in 1977 and 1975, respectively.

⁵¹ Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, translation of the first edition by Joseph Donceel, ed. Andrew Tallon (New York: Continuum, 1994 [German, 1941]).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 40–41, 61, 132, 145–46.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15, 19, 154.

over, that the content of revelation cannot be thought of as determined by man's subjectivity and is "more than an objectivation of humanity's subjective state,"⁵⁴ and is not deducible from human transcendence.⁵⁵ Rather, revelation will find objectivation and necessarily so in a historical event that proceeds from a divine freedom whose decision cannot be anticipated or predicted.⁵⁶ As the event is unpredictable, so will be the human words of prophet and apostle, the content of their message, the message that in part constitutes and is comprised within the event.

Hearer ends with the deduction that, should God speak to us in history and in our words, that history and those words will necessarily be particular so as to be recognizable,⁵⁷ and will therefore comprise a deposit to be guarded by an institution that will be able to say something equivalent to what the Church in fact says, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.⁵⁸ Not a conclusion that suggests liberal theology. Could we be any further from experiential expressivism and Modernism? And how ever did Rahner come to the positions Balthasar takes him to task for in the above mentioned essay?

Let us stay with *Hearer* and first note the remarkable difference between the first and second editions. Recall that the second edition was prepared by J. B. Metz in 1963 and with Rahner's approval.⁵⁹ The additions Metz made importantly qualify the anti-Modernist tone of the first edition. In the first place, the transcendental revelation of God—that is, that revelation that consists in the offer of grace to every man, or, let us say, in the supernatural *existentiale*—is now repeatedly and insistently said to be the most important form of revelation, more important than that to be discovered in history and in word, therefore.⁶⁰ Of this basic or first form, historical event and word are the necessary objectivation, without which a revelation to man in his entire reality cannot be conceived. The transcendental is given only in and with the categorial. This does not or need not mean that doctrine has become the expression of the transcendental experience itself and alone—that would sound like Modernism

⁵⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 58, 92, 151.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 70–71.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 134–35.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 156.

⁵⁹ Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, trans. Michael Richards (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969 [German, 1963]), hereafter *Hearers*, where the additions of Metz are referred to. All the notes are from Metz except the one on page 71. Andrew Tallon identifies the additions in "Spirit, Freedom, History: Karl Rahner's *Hörer des Wortes* (*Hearers of the Word*)," *The Thomist* 38 (1974): 908–36.

⁶⁰ Rahner, *Hearers*, 22, n. 6; 112–13, n. 2; 152–53, n. 2.

indeed. To the contrary, if the objectivations “express” the experience, it could be the case they are informative and, as statements, are true. The words of Scripture and doctrine would tell us of divine things, of divine things and divine action in history, the correlate of grace, and tell us truly. Who, after all, is doing the “objectifying” of the transcendental revelation? Presumably, it is God through his prophets and apostles, and we are to suppose some quite ordinary understanding of prophetic and scriptural inspiration.⁶¹

On the other hand, the more worrying step seems also to be taken in the Metz-Rahner text, according to which the objectivation is indeed nothing but the exegesis of the transcendental revelation.

One could therefore start with the concept of a gracious “transcendental revelation,” and it could probably be shown that the categorial factual revelation of Christianity is nothing but the reflexive thematization of this “transcendental revelation . . .”⁶²

The “categorial-reflexive and historical” can, it seems, be considered as nothing but the “coming to itself” of the transcendental, of grace.⁶³ Sayings like these seem to mean that what all the historical events and words *mean* is nothing more than “grace,” or that “God has come close.” If that is what they “thematize,” that is what they mean. If the first edition of the book was anti-Modernist, therefore, Metz’s version in some measure de-anti-modernizes it. Rahner and Tyrrell could talk.

It is certain that by the second edition of *Hearer*, Rahner had at least taken the step, seemingly forbidden by the first edition, of deducing the content of revelation from the idea of man’s supernaturally elevated subjectivity. This occurs in *The Trinity* (German 1965), where the Incarnation, Pentecost, and the doctrine of the Trinity itself are deduced from the idea that God communicates himself to us.⁶⁴

To be sure, this is not a deduction from man’s subjectivity or transcendence all by itself, and so in this way the strictures of the first

⁶¹ See for instance Rahner’s essay on inspiration, “Inspiration in the Bible,” in *Inquiries* (New York: Herder, 1964), the first of the *Quaestiones Disputatae* series, first published in German in 1958.

⁶² Rahner, *Hearers*, 153, n. 2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 149, n. 2.

⁶⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974 [German, 1965]). On page 100, note 18, Rahner says he is pursuing a middle way between an *a priori* proof of the Trinity and an “*a posteriori* gathering of random facts,” since he presupposes the truth of the Incarnation and Pentecost. Still, he aspires to see necessary relations between these events and the idea of a divine self-communication to man as historically self-realizing spirit.

edition of *Hearer* are maintained. It is a deduction from *graced* transcendental. More precisely, it is a deduction of grace, the grace of the Holy Spirit, from the idea that human transcendental is visited by God, and the deduction of the Incarnation from the companion idea that human historicity is likewise a locus of God's self-communication. The structure of human historical subjectivity and the content of revelation seem nonetheless to be more tightly connected than *Hearer* prepared us for. The ensuing controversy over the status of the immanent Trinity in Rahner is a sort of warning signal that, with the barest shake, the elaborate construction of the deduction reduces to the declaration that all the dogmas mean are "God has come close," even though I do not think a fair reading of *The Trinity* by itself supports that view.

This suggestion, that it is not only the case that all doctrine can be necessarily connected to the idea that God has come close, but that all that doctrine can mean is that God has come close hovers in the essays where Rahner directly addresses the topic of "experience." In "The Experience of God Today" (German 1969), the experience of God is in its "ultimate depths . . . the experience of an ineffable nearness of God to us such that . . . he bestows himself upon man with an immediacy that brings him forgiveness and a share in his divine life."⁶⁵ Furthermore, "in its pure form . . . it [the experience] is precisely this that we call Christianity."⁶⁶ This experience has an objectivation in history and word, therefore. In fact, Christianity is both the pure form of the experience and its "sheer objectivation in history."⁶⁷ Finally, in its pure form, the experience is said to be "related to Jesus Christ as [to] its seal of authenticity."⁶⁸ This might mean that the subsistence of the Logos in the humanity of Jesus authenticates the experience of God, telling us, as it were, that it is trustworthy. It might also mean that the intelligibility of Jesus Christ exhausts itself in the news that "God has come close to us." And this is all the more probable in that Christ guarantees the trustworthiness of the experience, not as causing grace efficiently, but only as signifying its presence sacramentally, announcing its presence in history.⁶⁹

Evidence for taking it the second way is provided in *Foundations of Christian Faith* (German 1976), where the hollowing out of Christological dogma is quite explicit and where the Church's Christology is pretty

⁶⁵ Karl Rahner, "The Experience of God Today," in *Theological Investigations XI*, trans. David Bourke (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 164.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶⁹ Rahner, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," 207–8, 212–16.

much reduced to the declaration that “God has come close.”⁷⁰ It is all the more important that we find this in *Foundations*, moreover, which has some claim to be Rahner’s most considered and authoritative statement of things. We begin with the section on the “validity and limits” of classical Christological dogma.⁷¹ The Church’s Christology is a descending Christology, and therefore, Rahner tells us, hard to keep free from “mythological misunderstandings.”⁷² What constitutes a Christology as mythological? This is clarified in the immediately following remarks on what it does and does not mean for the Church to say that “Jesus is God.” The copula in such statements of the Church, Rahner says, the “is,” does not function as it ordinarily does to express “a real identification in the content of the subject and the predicate.”⁷³ The “is” does not function as it ordinarily does in affirmative statements, and so, what saying “Jesus is God” does not mean is that Jesus is God. For if it functioned in the ordinary way, Rahner says, there would be an incoherent identification of the divine and the human in such a way as to fall afoul of the Chalcedonian injunction to keep the natures “unmixed”; it would be to fall into monophysitism.⁷⁴

What we miss in Rahner’s analysis of Chalcedon, in other words, is the acknowledgement that “one and the same” is both God and man, human and divine; namely, the only-begotten Son. Rahner takes the Chalcedonian “unmixed” as permission to elide the subject of union, to make the hypostasis of the hypostatic union disappear. This is prepared for by the strange analysis, reported just above, of how the copula functions in ordinary statements. He says it expresses “a real identification in the content of the subject and the predicate.” But of course it does no such thing; no one takes the “is” of “the cat is white” to assert that the conceptual content of subject and predicate are the same, and that felinity is whiteness, but

⁷⁰ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978 [German 1976]).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 285ff.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 290.

⁷³ *Ibid.* The German will perhaps be welcome for this important passage; see *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 284: “[D]ieses ‘ist’ als Kopula in einem ganz anderen Sinn auftritt und verstanden werden will als in den uns sonst geläufigen Sätzen mit der (scheinbar) selben ‘ist’-Kopula. Denn wenn wir sagen: Petrus ist ein Mensch, besagt der Satz eine Realidentifikation der Inhaltlichkeit des Subjekts- und Prädikatsnomens. Der Sinn des ‘ist’ bei Sätzen der Idiomenkommunikation in der Christologie beruht aber gerade *nicht* auf einer solchen Realidentifikation, sondern auf einer einmaligen, sonst nicht vorkommenden und zutiefst Geheimnis bleibenden Einheit von real verschiedenen, einen unendlichen Abstand voneinander habenden Wirklichkeiten.”

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

only that the thing that is feline is also the thing that is truly characterized by the predicate and so is white.⁷⁵ So also at Ephesus and Chalcedon (not to mention Constantinople II), the one who is eternally divine is the same one who becomes man and is human. But for Rahner, if we take the Church's "is" statements literally, we fall into myth, and we burden the idea of incarnation "with a lot of mythological misunderstandings," among which, presumably, is that the eternal Son became man.⁷⁶ All we assert is an "unknown and deeply mysterious unity between realities [the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of God] which are really different and which are at an infinite distance from each other."⁷⁷ Why ever did the Church insist on the communication of idioms, once Nestorius challenged it? On Rahner's view, not because "one and same" is both God and man. Not because, granting the mysterious character of the union, it is known, contrary to Rahner's assertion, and known as hypostatic. Rather, it is only "faith's experience of the unique presence of God in Jesus" that requires the communication of idioms.⁷⁸ If that is all the communication of idioms commits us to, it is hard to see why Nestorius was condemned.

The disappearance of the hypostasis, of what, or rather who, the Church understands the hypostasis of the "hypostatic union" to be, is confirmed in the sub-section entitled "The Indetermination of the Point of Unity in the Hypostatic Union."⁷⁹ Here, we learn that if the point of unity of the natures, "person" or "hypostasis," is understood in its ancient sense as the "bearer" of the natures, then "the assertion . . . remains rather formal and abstract"—that is, I take it, useless and uninformative. On the other hand, if we take "person" in its modern sense, we fall into monophysitism or monothelitism—that is to say, myth. "For what is understood by this is a single center of activity, namely the divine center."⁸⁰ And this would "overlook" the human and created "center of activity" in Jesus that he exercised vis-à-vis God and indeed "in an absolute difference from him."⁸¹ So, in Christ we have a human subject free and obedient to God, but not a divine subject that has been "humanized" because of the assumed nature, a divine subject expressing his divine freedom in the obedience of the created freedom of the assumed humanity.

⁷⁵ See Henry Babcock Veatch, *Intentional Logic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), chapter 5, "The Proposition."

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 290. See note 70 for the German.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Why is Rahner's position not adoptionism pure and simple? He says it is not because Jesus is not being thought of merely as a prophet like one of the other prophets—not, that is, as a bringer of words only—but rather as being in his entire human reality the final and eschatological message of God.⁸² This is what the resurrection verifies, that he is the eschatological message of God.⁸³ And this, moreover, is all that we can mean by saying that Jesus is the Word, the Word who has become flesh. "He is the Word of God which is spoken to us in everything which he was and said."⁸⁴ Anything more will land us in myth. The assertion of the "pre-existence" of Christ, moreover, is sufficiently grasped in understanding that the God whose offer of himself to us he makes through Jesus is correctly understood as eternal and "pre-existent" relative to every created being, though here "in a radically different way than is the case when God is pre-existent to some other temporal creature," since this temporal creature, Christ, is God's own "self expression."⁸⁵ Rahner liberally sprinkles his conception of the presence of God in Christ with such modifiers as "unique" and "radically different," and such like, but they do not rescue it from psilanthropism. Rahner's Christology does not rise to the height of Nestorianism.

There is also in *Foundations* a nice expression of our transcendental religious experience as the principle of verification in Christology.⁸⁶ In its context in *Foundations*, it lets us see what the additions of Metz to *Hearer of the Word* mean. If transcendental revelation, our transcendental experience of God, is the basic form of revelation of which word and event are objectifications, then all it will verify in Christ is the existence of another man. We will not get more from historical event and prophetic and dominical and apostolic word than is in our criterion, and the criterion remains something human, the human experience of the God who is other, who is not us.

Foundations perfectly illustrates the methodological strictures on Christology Rahner lays out in "The Two Basic Types of Christology" (German 1971).⁸⁷ The first type, the Christology of saving history, takes Jesus in his humanity as God's final and eschatological revelation. The second is the Christology of descent, where the Word becomes flesh and

⁸² Ibid., 280.

⁸³ Ibid., 279–80.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 281.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 304.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 282.

⁸⁷ Karl Rahner, "The Two Basic Types of Christology," in *Theological Investigations* XIII, trans. David Bourke (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 213–23.

dwells among us, and whose official expression is to be found in the Chalcedonian settlement. Now, Christologies of the second type are founded in Christologies of the first. Therefore Chalcedon “need necessarily be saying [no] more than what was already clearly present at the starting-point: Jesus in his human lot is *the* (not *a*!) address of God to man, and as such is eschatologically unsurpassable.”⁸⁸ Moreover, Chalcedon cannot be saying anything more than that, for Christologies of the first type are the norm of Christologies of the second.⁸⁹ Therefore, if to say that Jesus is the eternal Son of God is to say more than that Jesus in his humanity is God’s last word to us, then Chalcedon is not saying that, and its statements are “intended merely as emphatic statements in the sense of the first basic type.”⁹⁰ On the other hand, if Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople II are saying that the Son of God became man, and if that is to say more than that God speaks to us (finally, irrevocably, etc.) through the humanity of Jesus, then Rahner’s analysis must be mistaken.

The manner in which Rahner handles Christological dogma in *Foundations* comes to nice expression—“reflexive expression”—in “Yesterday’s History of Dogma and Theology for Tomorrow” (German 1977), one of the essays Balthasar used to indict Rahner as having cast his lot with the liberal theology of the Enlightenment. Moreover, it links up dogma and the transcendental experience of God so closely that the former is reduced to meaning a declaration of the latter.

Doctrines, we learn, are sometimes composed and compounded with elements alien to their real and abiding import. When, under the press of Enlightenment historiography and hermeneutics, we can spot these encrustations for what they are, we can excise them.⁹¹ Just so, in *Foundations*, the Logos as the unique hypostasis subsisting in two natures, the pre-existence of the Son, the divinity of Jesus—all of these things are extraneous material, doubtless necessary at the time of doctrinal composition, and now all to be abandoned. What is left is that God has come close to us. Further, as Balthasar noted, according to Rahner’s exposition what once was not “erroneous” may be so today.⁹² And if one should ask whether such cleansing and re-interpretation might lead in the end “to the destruction of any real meaning of a religious statement,” Rahner replies that “a religious statement in the last resort points not to what is drained of meaning, but to the ineffable mystery that we call God, and

⁸⁸ Ibid., 216.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 222.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Rahner, “Yesterday’s History of Dogma,” 10–16.

⁹² Ibid., 15–16.

that it is this reference alone that makes a statement a religious one.”⁹³ Whatever we thought a doctrine meant, all it ever really means is “God,” and “God has come close.”⁹⁴ Our task today is to “derive” doctrine from “the basic substance of the event of revelation,” which basic event is the “one event of God’s most authentic self-communication, occurring everywhere in the world and in history in the Holy Spirit offered to every human being,” and which is also the correct norm of the teaching of the New Testament.⁹⁵

One notes the same structure of thought as in Tyrrell. Enlightenment hermeneutics gives us leave to criticize the history of dogma and to jettison what does not stand up to criticism. The cognitive character of dogma is thus untenable. All it can be is the expression of experience, and what the expression means is “the experience.”

It is to be wondered, however, whether we will any longer be able even to tell ourselves so much as that “God has come close.” For in the future, religious truth must be re-inscribed in many different horizons of understanding, cultural and linguistic. These horizons, moreover, are incommensurable with one another. Therefore also the religious statements made within them will be incommensurable and unsynthesizable.⁹⁶ So how can we tell they are true or not? And a statement which cannot be known to be true cannot inform us. At least, it cannot inform someone outside the cultural linguistic bailiwick within which it was made. So, my dogmas do not inform someone from another horizon and his do not inform me. To each his own, and we cannot know whether we are in communion with one another or not. The very point of dogma, one of the points, anyway, is lost. The work of the Holy Spirit is undone, and we are surrounded again with the cacophony of Babel. All that will be left is the one and same transcendental experience of God come close to us, revealing himself to us in this basic and foundational way, although it is hard to see how we shall ever talk even about it or know we are talking about the same thing. Kerr’s original worry about experiential expressivism returns.

Conclusion

Improbable and astounding as it seems—as indeed I think it is—Karl Rahner leads us back, not just to an expressivist view of doctrine wherein

⁹³ Ibid., 16.

⁹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 18.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 17–18.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 33. See earlier (German, 1969) Rahner’s “Theological Pluralism,” in *Theological Investigations* XI, trans. David Bourke (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 7.

religious experience is privileged as the locus of revelation, but also to a sort of non-cognitivism that was the most unbearable part of the Liberal Protestant and Catholic Modernist views of dogma. Lonergan does and Rahner does not uphold what Newman called the dogmatic principle.

Just two things remain to be said. First, there was what we can justifiably call a sort of imperialist streak in Rahner. In certain of his deliverances he can seem catholic and generous in admitting theological pluralism and many ways of doing theology, and of course he always said that the classical dogmatic expressions of the Church were “in themselves” justified. But also, he really did think things ought to be done his way. In “History of Dogma,” he lays down quite magisterially what is required for “our time,” and it turns out to be what he is doing.

Second, there is the significant title of one of the essays visited above, “The Experience of God Today.” *Today*. The experience has a history, and we must attend to the peculiar, unique contours of the experience in our own time and place. For Rahner himself, what was peculiar about “today” were things like a heightened sense of the transcendence of God. He was a tough old Jesuit who knew how to discern spirits. Other people, accepting Rahner’s invitation to do so, consulted their contemporary experience, something more quotidian than his, however, and marshaling such things as the experience of being a woman, of being Canadian, of suffering the threats of nuclear war and acid rain, of celebrating human interrelatedness, made them fonts of theology, whence are drawn new images, new symbols of God and Christ, suitable for our new situation.⁹⁷ From the high and serious transcendental deduction of the conditions of the possibility of revelation, we arrive at what Ernest Fortin in 1986 called “the theologically lean and impoverished literature of our time.”⁹⁸ N·V

⁹⁷ See Ellen Leonard, “Experience as a Source for Theology,” *CTSA Proceedings* 43 (1988): 44–61; see her appeal to Tyrrell and Rahner together on page 45.

⁹⁸ Ernest Fortin, “Faith and Reason in Contemporary Perspective: Apropos of a Recent Book,” in *Ernest Fortin: Collected Essays*, ed. J. Brian Benestad, vol. 1: *Classical Christianity and the Political Order* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 301.

