

RAHNER'S PRESUPPOSITIONS ON THE UNITY OF THE SCIENCES

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DISCUSSION PAPER

on

Peter Phan's
CULTURAL PLURALISM AND THE UNITY OF THE SCIENCES

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Few would question the appropriateness of Peter Phan's choice of Karl Rahner as a thinker worthy of consideration as to the issue of the possibility and guidelines for dialogue between theology, philosophy, and the natural and human sciences. Phan meticulously traces the development of Rahner's thought from an initial acceptance of a Vatican sponsored position that neo-scholasticism held the key to the integration of philosophy and theology to his mature methodological reflections on his "transcendental method". Informed by his reading of Kant, Hegel, Marechal, and Heidegger, Rahner abandoned the conviction that St Thomas' Philosophy of knowledge provided an adequate foundation for the construction of a contemporary all-encompassing world view. Phan articulates next what may be the central thesis of section one of his paper namely that " pluralism is a completely new phenomenon, a peculiar characteristic of our times"(p4).

Theology as well as philosophy which purport to deal with all of reality are particularly confronted with the challenge of today's pluralism. Firstly, there is the abundance of differing theological systems and as well the plethora of competing philosophical systems. Secondly, a "knowledge explosion" has characterized the progress in the natural and historical sciences in our time. Rahner, the theologian suggests that that philosophy is no longer the only or even necessarily the most significant dialogue partner of theology but the key partner may be the "unphilosophical pluralistic sciences"(p7). Phan concludes that the present diversity makes the "unification of knowledge an unachievable dream, if not a crippling nightmare". Rahner coins the term "gnoseological concupiscence" to refer to

the epistemological limitations of the human integrating the available knowledge into a comprehensible and unified system as "rooted in our moral condition of self-alienation and division and ultimately in our plural metaphysical structure of spirit and matter, in spite of our fundamental and original unity". Phan, nevertheless, assures his reader that Rahner has not renounced the ideal of intellectual unity and integrity and rather has more modestly pursued some provisional order and unity in thought through his articulation of the transcendental method and the advocacy of dialogue among the various intellectual disciplines.

Phan tells us that at the center of Rahner's reflections concerning the dialogue between theology and the other scientific disciplines, and between Christianity and other religions lies the transcendental method. According to Rahner, this method is in application when, regardless of the subject matter, the question of the conditions in which knowledge of a specific object is possible in the knowing subject is at issue. In what Phan describes as the move from "moderate realism" to "critical realism", Rahner affirms that the object known and the knowing subject mutually condition each other such that investigation into the conditions of the possibility of knowledge in either subject or object contributes to an understanding of both. The first step of the method is questioning which searches for an a priori linkage between the knower and the known(p13). Rahner's transcendental Thomism espouses that theology and anthropology are intrinsically related to each other; the theological component (i.e. God) makes cognitional and volitional acts possible in the

subject and an anthropological component i.e. the knowing and loving subject. The human is termed "spirit in the world"; as spirit the human being can question being and as "spirit in the world" he must question being. This questioning aspect of the human suggests to Rahner that to human consciousness belongs "some kind of unthematic and implicit anticipation of the whole range of being" and thus perhaps also of absolute being. Rahner proposes the transcendental method which shifts the center of unity from the objective contents which are incapable of integration into a single system to the unity of consciousness in the knowing subject as appropriate to this age of pluralism and knowledge explosion.

In Rahner's method philosophy and theology are correlated for the first level reflection starts from the human as the philosophical question and secondly reflects upon the transcendental and historical conditions for divine revelation, and then examines the fundamental tenets of Christianity as the answer to the question which man is (p15-16). Rahner stretches the term Christian to its most universal concrete application in the present with his notion of the "anonymous Christian". Phan quotes Rahner to underscore the point: "To be a christian is simply to be a human being, and one who also knows that this life which he is living, and which he is consciously living, can also be lived even by a person who is not a Christian explicitly and does not know in a reflective way that he is a Christian"(p16). Rahner maintains that philosophy is always an inner moment of revelation and of theology. In his anthropology nature and grace are as well intrinsically related. The continuous self-communi-

cation of God creates a "permanent supernatural ontological modification in human nature" (the "supernatural existential"). Nature is conceived as both a moment within grace and as distinct from it as the condition of possibility for grace to be received. Rahner argues for the implications of this anthropology for the relationship between philosophy and theology; if philosophy is a critical reflection on human life in its concrete historicity and wholeness, then the philosopher cannot ignore the element of grace inherent in such life. The dialogue between philosophy and theology is one between two intrinsically related but methodologically independent moments of the process of critical reflection. Rahner preaches more to theologians than philosophers as he recommends that theology must be philosophizing as well as encouraging theology to be interreligious and intercultural. Further he insists on the importance of including the sciences in the proposed tria-logue.

Rahner has no illusions concerning the ease of effecting worthwhile discussions between theologians or philosophers and scientists; the aims, methods, and objects of study differ emphatically. Both the data and modes of analysis of the scientist are so highly specialised that theologians and philosophers rarely understand the language and subject matter. the dialogue is not truly interdisciplinary because they converse not as practioners of their disciplines but as people concerned with the question of human existence. There is little doubt that theology has already benefited from the historical, literary, and archaeological sciences. Yet Rahner suggests that theology has a

service to render to the sciences. Theology should uphold the "hidden" element, the human factor which should be the concern of every science. As natural and social sciences implicitly contain an anthropology theology's task is to ensure that such anthropology is not reductionistic.

In his concluding remarks Phan points to the apparent irony that Rahner who was so insistent on the irreducible pluralism of systems of knowledge had created such a coherent system. He allows that there is a difference between the offer of a coherent system and the claim that there is only one valid system of thought. Further he notes that "logical self-consistency cannot be the only criterion for truth". Phan says two questions must be raised in this regard with respect to Rahner's admittedly self-consistent exposition namely whether his explication of Christian doctrines are adequate and faithful to the Christian sources and secondly whether his method is appropriate to the task. Phan leaves others on another occasion to adjudicate the former matter. As to the later, Phan allows that transcendental anthropology may rescue the science from academic imperialism and philosophical reductionism and also provide a basis for dialogue among religions. Phan rightly notes the inadequacy of the transcendental method to deal with the immanent and visible dimensions of reality with which the sciences are primarily if not exclusively concerned. Phan observes that Rahner, unlike Lonergan, has not made the sciences a source for his theological thinking and method. Phan, nevertheless, is convinced "that the transcendental method and its anthropology are a necessary, though not sufficient, bridge between theology and the other

sciences." From now on, Phan concludes that theology must get its hands dirty in grappling with the everyday dimensions of reality in the enterprise of discovering the meaning and purpose of human existence.

Phan provides his reader with a systematic presentation of Rahner's sundry reflections on the relationship between theology, philosophy and the natural and human sciences. Although in the final few pages, Phan offers his critique of Rahner's proposal along the way the theologian's premises have been ably presented but the author chooses not to break his stride by expressing his own judgments upon the same. One hesitatingly assumes that reported but unremarked presuppositions are amenable to Phan. The first such assertion is that today's pluralism in perspectives and systems of thought is a "totally new" phenomenon. This apparent verity is constructed as the foundation of Rahner's argument against the present prospects for any comprehensive unified system of thought. I am less convinced that pluralism is so totally new in spite of the extended references to the knowledge explosion. For one engaged in historical studies it is far less obvious that the mediterranean world of the classical and hellenistic world in comparison to contemporary North America when acknowledging the relative size of populations offered an appreciably less pluralistic intellectual scene -philosophically, theologically, or in the various sciences from astronomy to medicine. Moreover, apart from historical objections to this mode of argumentation it is made completely unnecessary in light of the fact that neither the classical or the hellenistic world

achieved a single compelling system of thought. Likewise the medieval church may claim not much more success than several totalitarian regimes of our own time in creating an all sufficient thought system; in both instances large segments of the world carry on their own social and thought systems in ignorance or opposition to the systems just mentioned. Thus rather than appealing to a totally new phenomenon to argue for the impossibility of a comprehensive, integrated system of thought one may perhaps more persuasively argue the case from historical experience.

Rahner himself, however, obviates the need and utility of any such historical argumentation by his introduction of the concept of gnoseological concupiscence to describe the human condition. Rahner hereby establishes both a moral and ontological rationale for the epistemological limitations of the human integrating all available knowledge--"in our moral condition and even in our plural metaphysical structure of spirit and matter". Let me register here my fundamental disagreement with Rahner's ontology; I do not affirm his dualism which seems to understand spirit and matter as inherently antithetical dimensions of reality. This ontological presupposition is raised by Phan and quite appropriately because it is directly relevant to Rahner's conceptualisation of the relationship between theology and the sciences. It seems to me that Rahner is on surer footing when he argues on pragmatic grounds as e.g. the complexity of scientific methodologies or the sheer number of different philosophies and theologies which would make it impossible for any one individual to understand all that there is

systematization of the same. Indeed, the implicit assumption of dialogue cannot be that one of the participants of such dialogue will emerge having shed all such limitations and thus able to create the universal and all encompassing thought system but rather that all will grow towards a better (more truthful) understanding of reality and thus closer to one another. Rahner passes more quickly over his assertion of a "fundamental and original unity" than I would prefer.